Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	**VAR2688 & VAR2689**
Admission Authority:	**Reading Borough Council for Thameside Primary School**
Local Authority:	**Reading Borough Council**
Date of decision:	**20 March 2026**

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Reading Borough Council for Thameside Primary School for 2026/27. I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28.

I determine that the published admission number for Thameside Primary School for 2026/27 will remain at 60 and that the published admission number for 2027/28 will be 30.

The referral

1. Reading Borough Council (the Admission Authority, the Local Authority) has referred to the adjudicator two proposals for a variation to the admission arrangements for Thameside Primary School (the School, Thameside) for 2026/27 and 2027/28.

2. The School is a community school for children aged 5 to 11 in Caversham, Reading. It is a co-educational school with a capacity of 420 pupils. There were 334 pupils on roll as at 17 November 2025 according to the website 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS). The School is located in the Reading Borough Council area.

3. Parties to the request are the School and the Admission Authority which is also the Local Authority.

4. The proposed variations are that the published admission number (the PAN) for admission to Reception Year in the academic years 2026/27 and 2027/28 is reduced from 60 to 30.

Jurisdiction and procedure

5. Section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the 1998 Act) makes provision for variations to determined arrangements. Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the School Admissions Code (the Code) say (insofar as is relevant here):

> "3.6 Once admission arrangements have been determined for a particular school year, they cannot be revised by the admission authority unless such revision is necessary to give effect to a mandatory requirement of this Code, admissions law, a determination of the Adjudicator or any misprint in the admission arrangements. Admission authorities may propose other variations where they consider such changes to be necessary in view of a major change in circumstances. Such proposals **must** be referred to the Schools Adjudicator for approval, and the appropriate bodies notified. Where the local authority is the admission authority for a community or voluntary controlled school, it **must** consult the governing body of the school before making any reference.
>
> 3.7 Admission authorities **must** notify the appropriate bodies of all variations".

6. The Arrangements for 2026/27 were determined by the Admission Authority on 15 January 2025 and for 2027/28 on 14 January 2026.

7. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variations in line with the Code. The School has confirmed that its governing body has also been consulted on the proposed variations.

8. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variations are within my jurisdiction.

9. In the interests of dealing speedily with these variation requests, I have not exercised my powers to consider other aspects of the admission arrangements under section 88I(5) of the 1998 Act. Therefore, nothing in this determination should be taken as indicating that other aspects of the arrangements do or do not conform with the requirements relating to admissions.

10. In considering the variation requests, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.

11. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:

- the referral from the Admission Authority dated 19 February 2026 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and 2027/28 and the proposed variations to those Arrangements;
- responses from the Local Authority and the School to my requests for further information;

- maps, including Google Maps, and those showing the location of the School;
- information available on GOV.UK websites including GIAS; and,
- information on the websites of the School and the Local Authority.

I have referred only to that which has a bearing on my determination.

12. I would like to extend my thanks to the Local Authority and the School for their rapid and comprehensive responses to my requests for further information.

13. There is no formal consultation required for a variation and so parents and others do not have the opportunity to express their views. Clearly it is desirable that changes to arrangements are made via the process of determination following consultation as the consultation process allows those with an interest to express their views. It also allows for objections to the adjudicator. None of this is afforded by the variation process.

14. It is noted that for 2027/28, the Local Authority had already started the consultation process for determination of admission arrangements for September 2027 entry when Thameside approached the Local Authority to reduce the PAN at the School. The Local Authority has told me that this was too late in the process to add this proposal into the consultation for the 2027/28 arrangements based on the date (14 January 2026) on which the relevant Local Authority committee (the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee) were determining the arrangements.

15. I note here that if I agree to the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27, this will be for one year only. If, however, I approve the variation to reduce the PAN for 2027/28, this will form the baseline for subsequent years.

16. Any determination to reduce the PAN to 30, or to leave it at 60, has no effect on any cohort of pupils other than those in Reception Year. The allocation of places in other year groups depends on the number of pupils in each cohort, the organisation of classes and the degree to which admitting an additional pupil would prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources or breach the School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 (the Infant Class Sizes Regulations).

Consideration of proposed variation

17. Paragraph 3.6 of the Code (as above) requires that admission arrangements, once determined, may only be revised, that is changed or varied, if there is a major change of circumstance or certain other limited and specified circumstances. I will consider below whether the proposed variations are justified by the change in circumstances.

18. The Admission Authority has proposed that the School's PAN be reduced from 60 to 30. The Code at paragraph 1.2 sets out a requirement that "as part of determining their admission arrangements, all admission authorities must set an admission number for each 'relevant age group'". This is known as the PAN. The relevant age group is the age group at

which pupils are or will normally be admitted to the School, for example, Reception, year 7 and year 12 where the school admits external applicants to the sixth form (see section 142 of the 1998 Act). In this case the PAN applies to Reception. The PAN must be determined annually, and schools must admit up to the PAN where there is demand.

19. There are two separate referrals, one for September 2026 admission and the second for September 2027 admission. The applications to reduce the PAN for 2026/27 and 2027/28 were received by the Office of the Schools Adjudicator on 19 February 2026. This date has no relevance for the 2027/28 application, but for 2026/27, I note that this is five weeks after the 15 January national closing date for primary school applications for 2026/27. Parents expressing a preference for Thameside would, therefore, have been unaware of the proposed reduction in PAN for 2026/27 when considering and submitting their preferences.

20. The School supports the requests for both 2026/27 and 2027/28. This was confirmed at an extraordinary general meeting of the Governing Body (which the Local Authority attended) on 10 December 2025, where it was unanimously agreed that variations should be sought to reduce the School's PAN from 60 to 30 for 2026/27 and 2027/28. Notably, it has taken the Local Authority more than two months from the date of this meeting to seek the variations requested.

21. The Admission Authority has told me that the reasons for it seeking variations to reduce the PAN for the School are two-fold:

- Firstly, falling pupil numbers and demographic shift. I am told birth rates in the planning area of North Reading have declined, leading to a sustained contraction in Reception demand and a continuing trend of underfilled cohorts across the primary phase.

- Secondly, financial sustainability impact. Persistently low admissions against a two-form entry structure are resulting in increasing year on year financial deficits and a surplus of places.

22. As stated above, the School's Governing Body supports the reduction in the PAN from 60 to 30 for both years: it is concerned in particular about the impact of falling pupil numbers and rising financial deficits.

<u>VAR2688 – PAN reduction for 2026/27</u>

23. Although I am told the birth rate is falling along with the demand in places, this is not the case for September 2026 admission. The Local Authority has confirmed the data shows there are not only more preferences for Reception entry in the planning area where the School is situated for September 2026 than for September 2025 (1160 for 2026 as opposed to 1088 in 2025, higher by 72 for 2026), but first preferences for the School are also higher for September 2026 (50 compared to 38 in 2025). I note that 43 places were allocated at the School on National Offer Day in April 2025.

24. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the Local Authority assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The Local Authority uses planning areas, which are geographical areas each containing a number of schools, for this purpose.

25. There are nine primary phase schools in the North Reading planning area where the School is situated. The schools have a combined total PAN of 410. The annual school capacity survey (known as SCAP) figures suggest that the Reception capacity needed for the planning area is 355 pupils for 2026 and 345 for 2027, leaving a surplus of 55 and 65 places respectively. This is well over the percentage operating margin of 2% set out in the DfE's "Basic need allocations 2026-27 and 2027-28 Explanatory Note" meaning that the Local Authority can be assured that there are sufficient places available for the children in the local area and sufficient surplus places available across the planning area. This means that there would be sufficient places for displaced children if the variations were to be agreed.

26. Preferences for places for September 2026 had to be submitted by parents by 15 January 2026. At the time these preferences would have been submitted, parents were unaware of the proposal to reduce Thameside's PAN for September 2026 entry (and, non-materially, for September 2027 entry) from 60 to 30. These preferences were made in good faith on the understanding that the School's PAN for September 2026 would be 60. The Local Authority has confirmed that, based on a mock allocation exercise and a PAN of 30, 22 children whose parents have named Thameside as their first preference would not get a place. Out of those 22 children, five live in the catchment area for the School, seven are out of catchment but with siblings at the School, leaving ten others who, all but one, do not live in the planning area, but elsewhere in the borough.

27. The Local Authority could not give me figures for the number of out of catchment children offered places at Thameside on the last three National Offer Days (2023, 2024 and 2025). Figures given instead for 31 August 2025 (which the Local Authority say are not guaranteed to be accurate) suggest that seven out of catchment siblings and seven other children living out of catchment were offered and accepted places at the School in 2025. Given 50 parents have listed Thameside as their first preference for 2026/27 (including out of catchment first preferences), it is reasonable to suggest that these parents had significant confidence, based upon the PAN and the information available to them, that their child would be offered a place at the School for September 2026.

28. **Table 1** below summarises the data supplied to me by the Local Authority for each of the primary schools in the planning area that admit children into Reception Year, the number of children admitted in each of the previous three years and the approximate forecast numbers for September 2026, 2027, 2028 and 2029.

Table 1: School places in the planning area and allocation to Reception Year

	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
The total PAN	440	440	410	410	380*	380**	380**
The number of children admitted to YR or forecast to be admitted	341	357	336	between 355 & 371	345	325	340
The number of vacant places	99	83	74	55 / 39	35	55	40
The proportion of vacant places as a percentage of the total number of places	22.5	18.9	18.0	13.4 / 9.5	9.2	14.5	10.5

* Assuming I agree to the proposed reduction in PAN for 2027

** Assuming no further changes to PAN

29. **Table 1** shows that there were a large number of vacant places for Reception Year children in the planning area between 2023 and 2025. The Local Authority has already taken action to address this by reducing the PAN at another school in the planning area by 30 places from September 2025.

30. Schools are largely funded on the number of pupils on roll and the highest cost to a school budget is its staff. Most infant and primary schools aim to have close to 30 pupils to a class. If a school has several classes that are many less than 30, this can mean that the income from the number of pupils is less than the costs of providing a class. If this happens over several classes, a school can face financial challenges. The School is required to comply with the Infant Class Sizes Regulations (which impose a maximum requirement of 30 children to a class at Key Stage 1). Retaining the PAN at 60 could result in the School requiring more than one Reception Year class in order to meet the requirements of the Infant Class Sizes Regulations. The financial impact of this will, however, depend on the number of pupils on roll and the consequent per pupil funding received.

31. I asked the School for details of the impact the current surplus in places is having on the School's finances and was told that:

"Thameside has become known across Reading for strong inclusive practice. Parents, nurseries, and even other schools frequently direct families with complex SEND [special educational needs and/or disabilities] to Thameside. As a result, the school receives disproportionately high numbers of children with acute needs, many requiring EHCP [Education, Health and Care Plan] assessments soon after joining. This self-reinforcing pattern has sustained high SEN numbers despite falling overall roll.

SEN pressures have become the single most significant driver of Thameside's long-term budget deficit.

Key financial effects include:

Staffing costs

• Support staff for SEN children typically cost £18–19k each, exceeding funding from banding + inclusion allowances by £3–5k per child.

• SENCO [Special Educational Needs Coordinator] capacity increased to 2.2 FTE, necessary due to workload but well beyond typical levels.

• Additional costs for EP [Educational Psychologist] sessions (12 per term) and AP [Alternative Provision] placements add pressure.

• Buy in support for specific children requiring bespoke support to remain in school.

Revenue impact

• For years, the school used its reserves to subsidise SEN provision. These reserves are now fully depleted.

• The cumulative deficit (mainly SEN-driven cumulative over time) now exceeds £280k and is forecast 25/26 end of year deficit to rise to around £600k+.

Interaction with Falling Roll

• Despite rising SEN need, pupil roll has fallen for the last 5 years, reducing core funding.

• This creates a "double pressure": Higher staffing demand due to SEN, but lower per-pupil income due to falling admissions.

• The [S]chool is now seeking to reduce PAN to 30 to stabilise class structures long-term."

32. The deficit is large but it is also acknowledged in the 10 December 2025 meeting minutes to be less than forecast at the beginning of the 2025/26 school year. It has not been said that the School will not be viable on future forecasts but it is said that a reduction in the PAN going forward will assist the School in partially reducing its deficit for future years. I am told by the School that with a PAN of 30 going forward, the cumulative deficit is still projected to rise in the next five years to 2030/31, though a PAN reduction to 30 compared with maintaining a PAN of 60 would see a saving of 14.59%. The School say: "By 2030/31, the School would be able to operate as a coherent single-form entry structure, reducing the number of class teachers required from 13 to 9. This also enables a proportionate reduction in support staff and non-staffing expenditure, aligning overall staffing levels more closely with pupil-led income. Reducing the PAN does not eliminate the deficit; however, it significantly slows its rate…..".

33. The School have also said it would be difficult to accommodate mixed age classes (children from more than one-year group within the same classroom) because of statutory requirements relating to space for early years education. However, lots of schools have this arrangement in place and, up until now, the School were expecting more than 30 children in Reception for 2026. It is reasonable to assume that it must have a plan to accommodate these children.

34. I accept the financial deficit arguments are strong and the deficit is considerable. However, 50 parents have expressed a first preference for the School for 2026/27 entry. Funding will follow those pupils. It is clear from the Local Authority's figures that 22 children are likely to be displaced should the PAN be reduced to 30 for 2026 and seven siblings of children already at the School would be separated causing potentially significant concerns and disruption for them and their parents. It is immaterial that some of these 22 children are out of catchment. Figures show that at least 14 out-of-catchment children received places at the School last year. Crucially, these parents have all listed the School as their first preference in good faith, based on a PAN of 60 and previous likely allocations. Parents have not been given an opportunity to express their views or be consulted since expressing their preferences. There is nothing in the evidence to suggest that the issues raised are new and were not known last Summer/ Autumn.

35. I have considered the impact of decreasing admission numbers on the School's finances balanced against the impact that reducing the School's PAN will have on meeting parental preference in 2026/27. I have tried to ensure that I have considered the competing needs of providing the school places that parents want for their children and the financial viability of the School. Balancing those two factors, I find making a decision to reduce the PAN to 30 for 2026/27, less than four weeks prior to National Offer Day allocations, which would frustrate the first preferences of 22 parents, is not justified. Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that any children admitted bring with them funding. Whilst it is likely that funding two class teachers and classroom assistants for 43 pupils will result in financial loss, as was the case for Reception 2025, the position is different where the School admits 52 children. The School has assumed an ongoing loss for 2026 whereas this might not be the case, and disappointing 22 children and families who have listed the School as their first preference in good faith believing they would be offered a place is not justified in the prevailing circumstances and in the light of the evidence given.

36. In respect of the application for a proposed variation to the 2026/27 admission arrangements, I, therefore, do not find that the proposed variation is justified by any change of circumstances, and I do not approve it. The PAN for September 2026 will remain at 60.

<u>VAR2689 – PAN reduction for 2027/28</u>

37. The balance of the arguments set out above however shifts for 2027/28 entry. It is clearly sensible for the Local Authority and the School to take constructive action to reduce the ongoing in-year and cumulative deficits afforded by falling pupil numbers going forward. Pupil numbers and demand for places have increased for 2026/27 entry compared to 2025/26. The figures in **Table 1** above show that the forecasted demand for places in the

planning area for September 2027 is somewhere between 10 and 26 places less than the places required for September 2026. For September 2028, the forecasted demand will be between 30 and 46 places less than required for September 2026. A decision to reduce the PAN to 30 at Thameside for September 2027 entry will also provide parents significant advance notice of the change, unlike the position for 2026/27.

38. In respect of the application for a proposed variation to the 2027/28 admission arrangements, I find that the proposed variation is justified and I approve it. The PAN for 2027/28 will be reduced to 30.

39. I note here that reducing the PAN does not reduce the overall capacity of the School unless accommodation is being removed from the premises. It is not being suggested that accommodation is being removed and so the physical capacity of the School remains the same. Reducing the PAN for 2027/28 will not change that. What this means is that should there be a need for the School to increase its PAN and / or admit more children in 2028/29 than it or the Local Authority currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the building for it to do so.

Determination

40. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Reading Borough Council for Thameside Primary School for 2026/27. I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28.

41. I determine that the published admission number for Thameside Primary School for 2026/27 will remain at 60. I determine that the published admission number for 2027/28 for Thameside Primary School will be 30.

Dated: **20 March 2026**

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Emma Harrison