



Determination

Case reference: VAR2709

Admission Authority: Surrey County Council for Cranmere Primary School

Date of decision: 28 April 2026

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Surrey County Council for Cranmere Primary School, for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the Published Admission Number (PAN) for entry to Reception Year will be 30.

The referral

1. Surrey County Council (the Admission Authority; the Local Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for Cranmere Primary School (the School) for 2026/27 (the Arrangements).
2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged two to eleven years old in Esher. It is a co-educational school for children of all abilities.
3. The School has a current capacity of 502 children, with a current number on roll of 368 children.
4. The proposed variation is that for 2026 entry the Published Admission Number (PAN) for the School should be 30 children.

Jurisdiction and procedure

5. Section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the 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 were determined by the Admission Authority on 28 January 2025.

7. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the governing body of the School has been consulted on the proposed variation and supports it. The Admission Authority has confirmed that the submission has also been notified to relevant bodies.

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

9. In the interests of dealing speedily with this and the many other requests for variations at this time, I have not considered other aspects of the admission arrangements. 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 request 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 13 March 2026 and supporting documents; and
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements; and
- responses from the Admission Authority and the School to my requests for further information;
- maps, including Google Maps and those showing the location of the School; and

- information available on the websites of the parties and gov.uk, including the 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS) and 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT) websites.

12. I have been provided with a substantial amount of information / data by the Admission Authority and the School. I have referred only to that which has a bearing on my determination.

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. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027/28 have been determined, and the PAN for admission to Reception for September 2027 is 30 children.

Consideration of proposed variation

15. 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 variation is justified by the change in circumstances.

16. 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 and the schools within those areas, for this purpose. The School is in the Esher and Weston Green planning area. There is one other school in this area which admits children to Reception, Esher Church Primary School, which is its own admissions authority. The planning area is semi-rural, which has potential consequences in terms of alternative school allocation if a Reception aged child is not able to secure a place at either the School or Esher Church Primary School.

17. A first preference is made for the school that a parent most wants their child to attend. The number of first preferences across a planning area gives an indication of demand for places at the time of application. In the planning area of the School, a reduction in the PAN to thirty would mean there would be almost exactly the same need for places as first preferences made. In other words, there would be an almost exact balance between supply of places and demand for them. A key role for the adjudicator is to consider the impact of changes to school admissions on fairness: this means both parents chances of securing their first preference, but also to what degree they might secure a high preference if their first choice is unavailable. It also involves considering if any detriment suffered is fair and reasonable and justifiable within the Admissions Code.

18. I have given careful consideration to the latest available data in order to form a view about the sufficiency of school places in the local area if the PAN is reduced as proposed. I

have also considered the demand for places at the School, the reasons given for the changes in demand, the potential effect on parental preference of the proposed PAN reduction and whether the proposed reduction is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

19. The Arrangements set out the following oversubscription criteria for 2026 entry:

“Over-subscription criteria

If there are more than 60 applicants, after the admission of any children with an Education, Health and Care Plan which names this school, places will be allocated according to the criteria set out below. These are stated in order of priority:

1. Looked after children or previously looked after children, including children who appear (to the admission authority) to have been in state care outside of England and ceased to be in state care as a result of being adopted.
 2. Children with an exceptional and professionally supported medical or social need for a place at this school.
 3. Children of members of staff.
 4. Children who will have brothers and/or sister, living at the same address, in the school at the date of application.
 5. Any other applicant.
- In the event of over-subscription in any of the above criteria, distance will be used to determine between applicants. In the event that two or more applicants live the same distance from the school, priority will be determined by drawing lots.”

20. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN for the admission of children into Reception class should be reduced from 60 to 30. The reason for it seeking a variation is to better match the demand for places at the School to the declining need in the area for such places. In 2025 the School admitted only 34 children to Reception. The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 (the Infant Class Sizes Regulations) forced the school to set up an unaffordable school organisation, with class sizes well below a figure in the high twenties which are generally needed to be cost-effective.

21. The Admission Authority has stated:

“Nationally, the pattern of demand for pupil places in England is changing. The population attending primary school peaked in 2019 and the numbers have been dropping since then. This is primarily due to the continued reduction in the birth rate since 2013, although there was a larger drop in the national population in 2021 which may have been connected to the pandemic. The primary population is expected to continue to decrease until the end of the projection period.

Cranmere Primary School falls within Surrey's Esher and Weston Green planning area. The Education Place Planning team have recently altered how they approach their forecasts and this has reduced the projected number of pupils expected to need a school place in the Esher and Weston Green planning area moving forward. In reality, the fall in the number of applications for Reception places in this area has been unprecedented, falling faster than projections were suggesting. The Local Authority considers this to be a major change in circumstances."

22. The Admission Authority considers that Office for National Statistics estimates of predicted need for places have tended to over-exaggerate likely demand. The Admission Authority is now using data from NHS sources which it believes is more realistic. At the time of the submission of the request for variation, the Admission Authority stated:

"For 2026 entry, these schools have only received 78 first preference applications for September 2026 and pupil projections suggest that demand for 2nd-4th preference offers in this area will be minimal, with an anticipated maximum of 89 places in Reception being required by September 2026 to accommodate all pupils. This change has been demonstrated this academic year where current Reception classes in this planning area only have 90 children on roll across both schools. This 1FE surplus of places is expected to continue throughout the planning area, subject to demographic trends remaining consistent."

To be clear, the 90 children currently on roll in Reception is aligned with a PAN across the two schools of 60+60. The requested variation would align available places and required places almost exactly, with potential implications for families seeking places for their child in this planning area.

23. As Adjudicator I consider these to be a legitimate ground for seeking a variation to the PAN for 2026/27.

24. The Admission Authority has worked diligently to consider the impact on demand for places at the School resulting from 2nd, 3rd and 4th preferences. In particular, it has reviewed the pattern of preferences expressed for Esher Church School, and the degree to which those preferences have been met between 2022 and 2026. I note here that the admissions arrangements of Esher Church School are not being reviewed in this determination. There are some features of those arrangements which the Authority may want to discuss in due course with the Esher Church School Trust because they have the net effect of making allocation of places to local children slightly less likely. Thus far, this has not occurred, but if the PAN for the school is reduced to 30 this broader picture becomes more relevant.

25. The Local Authority has also looked at allocation of places to Reception classes to the north-east of Esher, at schools such as St Pauls Catholic Primary, Thames Ditton Infants, and Hinchley Wood Primary. The Local Authority has made a case that these schools could provide viable alternative places to children who fail to achieve admission to the School or Esher Church School in the future. In their 2023, 2024, and 2025 intakes, these schools have all had sufficient capacity within their PAN to allocate places to all families for whom they were first preference. It is predicted that with a collective PAN of 330

in these schools through to 2028/2029, there would be in the region of 50 available Reception places each September.

26. The DfE document, “Basic need allocations 2026-27: Explanatory note on methodology”, refers to the need for two per cent surplus capacity “to provide an operating margin for local authorities. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system”. The spare capacity in these schools provides this margin, albeit it might require a longer journey to school.

27. Having established that a reduction in the PAN at the School in 2026/27 has some potential adverse effect on parents having their preferences met, I shall consider whether the current PAN at the School is sustainable.

28. The School is very clear that its current set up is not viable. The Admission Authority has provided figures making clear why the School’s finances are not sustainable:

Table one: Number of children on roll in each year group at the School, Admission Authority’s figures

Reception (currently 2 classes) - 33 (16 & 17)
Year 1 (currently 2 classes) - 40 (21 & 19)
Year 2 (1 class) - 30
Year 3 (2 classes) - 43 (20 & 23)
Year 4 (2 classes) - 39 (20 & 19)
Year 5 (2 classes) - 51 (25 & 26)
Year 6 (2 classes) - 45 (22 & 23)

29. It is generally considered that a class size in the high twenties is the minimum size needed for financial viability. In Key Stage 1 (Reception, Year 1, and Year 2) the maximum class size for a single qualified teacher is thirty. There are therefore only two year-groups where income will be adequate.

30. In its referral, the Admission Authority has set out its case for the proposed variation. In short, the proposal will allow the School to operate its revised teaching model in 2026/27, with all Reception Year children in one single-aged class. The School would adhere to the provisions of the Infant Class Sizes Regulations, which apply to the School and require that infant classes (those where the majority of children will reach the age of five, six or seven during the school year) must not contain more than 30 pupils with a single qualified school teacher, except in specific exceptional circumstances.

31. The Admission Authority has pointed out that should the intake not be reduced, the School's financial position will rapidly deteriorate:

Table Two: end of year School budget position, as per current School three-year plan, assuming two classes in Reception

2025/26	£5,700 Surplus
2026/27	£376,722 Deficit
2027/28	£849,015 Deficit

32. Such a rapid and significant escalation in deficit is not sustainable. Having considered and rejected mixed age teaching as a solution and having considered the lack of likely future housing development in the area, the Admission Authority considers transitioning Cranmere into a 1FE school as the necessary next step. The Admission Authority considers that the school roll and projected demand figures show a sustained demographic change requiring action.

33. This is evidenced by the places allocated on April 16 2026 by the School for September 2026 entry. A total of 25 children have been offered places under the determined PAN of 60. 23 of these children had the School as first preference. One child is from out of Surrey.

34. This is markedly lower than the forecast need for Reception places of 42. No children would be clearly disadvantaged by the adjudicator agreeing a lower PAN of 30.

35. At the same time, the evidence presented regarding school finance is compelling. I accept that the Admission Authority has provided convincing evidence that it will be able to manage school places by reducing the PAN at the School for 2026/27. There is a possible effect on parental satisfaction with places allocated, but not an impact sufficient to outweigh the adverse effects of inaction.

Overall findings:

36. Having considered all the matters above, my reasoning can be summarised as follows:

- a. The proposed variation does not give rise to concerns about the sufficiency of Reception Year places in Surrey in 2026/27 for those seeking September Admission.
- b. There is a possibility of frustration for families looking to find a Reception place for their child mid-year in 2026/27, as both the School and Esher Church School may exhaust capacity. However, the Local Authority has made a viable case that appropriate other places would be likely to be available.

c. By enabling the School to plan with certainty for a specific teaching model in 2026/27, the proposed variation removes the financial and organisational risk of having to plan for more. If funding has to be diverted to pay for the provision of an extra class for 2026/27, there will be a significantly negative financial and organisational impact on the School, with detriment to those children already at the School and to other necessary areas of expenditure.

37. After carefully weighing the above factors, I conclude that the proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances, and I approve it.

Determination

38. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Surrey County Council for Cranmere Primary School, for 2026/27.

39. I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the Published Admission Number (PAN) for entry to Reception Year will be 30.

Dated: 28 April 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Patrick Storrie