



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2740

Admission Authority: London Borough of Merton for Joseph Hood School

Date of decision: 11 June 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 the London Borough of Merton for Joseph Hood School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 30.

The referral

1. The London Borough of Merton (the Admission Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for Joseph Hood School (the School) for 2026/27 (the Arrangements).
2. The School is a community school for children aged three to eleven in Raynes Park in London. It is a co-educational, non-selective school with no designated religious character. It is federated with Hatfeild School and together the two schools form the Cherrywood Federation. The School is located in the London Borough of Merton.
3. The Admission Authority for the School is the local authority (LA). As the LA is the Admission Authority, both terms are used throughout this determination.
4. The proposed variation is to reduce the published admissions number (PAN) from 60 to 30 for 2026/27.

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 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.

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

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

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

- the referral from the Admission Authority dated 27 May 2026 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- responses from the LA 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 gov.uk websites (including the ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS) and ‘Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool’ (FBIT) websites) and the websites of the LA and the School;

11. I would like to extend my thanks to the LA and the School for their responses to my requests for further information.

12. 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.

13. The Admission Authority appears to have misunderstood the way that a change in the PAN for 2026/27, by way of the proposed variation being agreed, would work in future years. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027/28 have been determined and the PAN for the School has been set at 60. This means that if I agree to the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27 by reducing the PAN for the School from 60 to 30 as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years.

Consideration of proposed variation

14. 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.

15. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN for the School for 2026/27 be reduced from 60 to 30 to reflect an ongoing reduction in the number of applications in Merton generally and, in particular, at the School. The School supports the request for the variation.

16. The Admission Authority told me that the School has not had its full complement of 60 in Reception Year (YR) for the last five years and that the numbers dropped significantly in 2023. There was a small upturn to 41 in 2025 and whilst similar numbers were expected for September 2026, in fact only 29 pupils were allocated to the School on National Offer Day (NOD) on 16 April 2026 and the number of children expected to be admitted in September 2026 has already dropped to 26 as places at other schools (for which parents expressed a higher preference) became available. I asked the LA if it could explain this trend in order to see whether it might be temporary. The LA has told me that if the reduction in parental preferences for the School "are connected to changing parental views on which schools are best to apply for, and combined with the ongoing drop in application numbers, it is unlikely the situation will change over the next two years".

17. The LA has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the LA assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The LA uses planning areas, which are geographical areas and the schools within those areas, for this purpose. The LA has six planning areas and the School is situated in the northern corner of the LA's Planning Area 2 (PA2). There are five other schools in PA2. However, because of the position of the School, there are several schools in Planning Area 3 (PA3) which are closer to the School than those in PA2. As a

result, applicants to the School may also apply to PA3 rather than other schools in PA2. Accordingly, I have asked for and been provided with data for the schools in PA3 as well.

18. Reception numbers for the LA as a whole (as per Merton’s 2025 School Capacity (SCAP) return) are forecast to reduce from 1851 in 26/27 to 1680 in 27/28. This reduction is reflected in both PA2 (including at the School) and PA3. Tables 1 and 2 below show, for PA2 and PA3 respectively, the data provided by the LA for the sum of the PANs in each planning area, the first preferences expressed by applicants, offers made, the number of children in Reception Year (YR) on census date, vacant places and surplus percentages (my calculations). It is noteworthy that in each of these planning areas and for each year for which data is provided, there is a significant reduction in numbers between offer date and the date of census (October).

Table 1: demand for places in YR in PA2

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Sum of PANs of schools for YR	390	360	360 (330)*
Number of first preferences	282	269	238
Number of offers made	320	313	290
Number of children in YR in schools for the relevant October census	255	277	N/A
Vacant places in YR	135	83	70** (40)*
Surplus places as a percentage of the PANs	34.6%	23.1%	19.4%** (12.1%)*

*if the PAN for the School is reduced to 30

** this figure is based on the offers made as no census data is yet available but the trend shows that this is likely to be higher.

Table 2: demand for places in YR in PA3

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Sum of PANs of schools for YR	750	750	720
Number of first preferences	703	747	711
Number of offers made	714	731	693
Number of children in YR in schools for the relevant October census	644	653	N/A
Vacant places in YR	106	97	27**

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Surplus places as a percentage of the PANs	14.1%	12.9%	3.75%**

** this figure is based on the offers made as no census data is yet available but the trend shows that this is likely to be higher.

19. Tables 1 and 2 show that there is a continuing decrease in the number of first preferences and offers made. The decrease in the number of children in schools on census date also shows a reduction each year from the number of offers to the number of places taken up, such that offer figures should be treated as highly likely to be in excess of places actually taken up and, indeed, funded.

20. The DfE document, “Basic need allocations 2026-27 and 2027-28: Explanatory note on methodology”, refers to the need for two per cent surplus capacity “to provide an operating margin for local authorities ... to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system”. I note that the proportion of vacant places in both planning areas has been considerably higher than two per cent in recent years and would continue to be if I agree to the proposed reduction in PAN (which would only affect the percentage for PA2).

21. Table 3 shows the same data for the School. Surplus percentages are not shown as the DfE document referred to above operates at LA level. However, it is clear that there have been significant numbers of vacant places at the School over the last few years.

Table 3: demand for places in YR in the School

	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
PAN for YR	60	60	60	60 (30)*
Number of first preferences	-	28	29	13
Number of offers made	60	53	57	29
Number of children in YR for the relevant October census	50	38	41	N/A
Vacant places in YR	10	22	19	31 (1)*

*if the PAN for the School is reduced to 30.

22. On their own, the School’s numbers for the years 2023-2025 would not support a reduction in PAN. Infant class sizes (which include Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) are limited to 30 (as set out in The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 and in paragraph 2.16 of the Code). The data in Table 3 shows that there were significantly more than 30 pupils admitted for each of those years and so more than one class has been required. I have been provided with the current (2025/26) and projected (2026/27) class structures for the School. In the current cohort there are two classes for

each group. The projected structure is for one class in YR and one class of 35 at Year 6 and all other year groups will have two classes.

23. Notwithstanding previous numbers in YR, the preference and offer data for 2026 shows a significant decline in the number of offers made on National Offer Day this year. I am told that the projected numbers for YR in September 2026 have already dropped from the number of offers made. The historic data on the reduction in numbers between NOD and the date of census means it is very likely that the numbers will reduce further and will, therefore, not require a second class for YR in September. In fact, it is likely that there will be fewer than 30 children admitted to YR and, therefore, if I agree to reduce the PAN to 30 there would still be places available at the School for any in-year admissions.

24. Parents have a right to express a preference as to where their children go to school. However, admission authorities cannot give any guarantee that preferences will be met. The data for the School in Table 3 shows that since 2024 there have been fewer than 30 first preferences expressed for the School and so if I were to agree to reduce the PAN this would be highly unlikely to have any negative impact on parental preference especially given the fact that the great majority of families looking for a YR place in September 2026 will have already applied and been offered a place. I accept that the LA has provided compelling evidence that it will be able to manage school places in the planning area if I agree to reducing the PAN to 30 for 2026/27.

25. The cost of a teacher and the resources necessary for an infant class, when compared to, say, a junior or secondary school teacher / class (where numbers are not limited), has to be borne by proportionately smaller income from the children admitted to infant classes. If left with a PAN of 60, the School will be significantly undersubscribed. The School has planned for only one class but should numbers increase to anything above 30 the School would be obliged to employ a second teacher and operate with two classes or other arrangement which would have a significant financial and organisational impact on the School.

26. I have been provided with full budgeting figures for the School for the current and next two financial years. I will not reproduce the full data here. It appears from the data that the School is planning for one form entry for the next two years which is supported by the pupil data cited above. It is clear from the financial data that the School will carry forward a deficit for the foreseeable future although it appears that the level of this deficit will reduce: the basis for the calculations is not explicit but it can be deduced that this reduction in deficit is partly due to budgeting for one full class in YR as opposed to two smaller classes.

27. Taking everything into consideration, I am of the view that the variation is justified by the circumstances, and I approve the proposed variation to reduce the PAN for 2026/27 to 30.

28. 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 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 2026/27 than it currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the building for it to do so.

Determination

29. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by the London Borough of Merton for Joseph Hood School for 2026/27.
30. I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 30.

Dated: 11 June 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Miranda Barnett