



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2738

Admission Authority: Hampshire County Council for Shipton Bellinger Primary School, Tidworth

Date of decision: 17 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 Hampshire County Council for Shipton Bellinger Primary School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 20.

The referral

1. Hampshire County Council (the Local Authority (LA)) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for Shipton Bellinger Primary School (the School) for 2026/27.
2. The School is a community school for children aged four to eleven years. It is a co-educational, non-selective school with no designated religious character. The School is located near Tidworth, Hampshire.
3. Parties to the request are the Local Authority and the Governing Body of the School.
4. The proposed variation is to reduce the published admission number (PAN) from 30 to 20 for admissions to Reception Year (YR) in September 2026.

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 Local Authority, which is the Admission Authority, on 12 February 2025.

7. The Local 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 Local Authority dated 22 May 2026 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- VAR2618 dated 25 July 2025;
- Maps showing the location of the School; and
- information available on gov.uk websites (including ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS) and ‘Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool’ (FBIT)) and the websites of the LA and the School.

11. I have not needed to seek any information from the LA further to that already provided to me.

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. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027/28 have been determined. This means that if I agree to the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27 by reducing the PAN as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years. The PAN determined for 2027/28 is 17.

Consideration of proposed variation

14. The Local Authority, as the Admission Authority, has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 30 to 20 for entry to YR in September 2026. The proposed variation has the support of the School's Governing Body.

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 told me that the reasons for it seeking a variation are:

"An application to reduce the school's Published Admission Number (PAN) was agreed by the OSA to take Shipton Bellinger Primary School from 30 to 17 from September 2025 (see VAR2620)¹. The PAN for the school for the 2026/27 academic year is currently set at 30. However, on national offer day, only 19 places were offered for Year R. Reducing the PAN to 20 would better reflect actual demand, help safeguard the school against potential financial pressures and provide greater certainty for future staffing and resource planning.

Across the Andover Rural Primary planning area, a total of 142 Year R places were offered against an overall capacity of 166 leaving 24 unfilled places across the planning area. In addition, offers were also below PAN at several other schools, including Grateley Primary (15 PAN, 10 offers), Kimpton, Thruxton and Fyfield CofE Primary (30 PAN, 27 offers) and Vernham Dean Gillum's CofE Primary (15 PAN, 10 offers). Taken together, this data demonstrates clear surplus capacity within the planning area and indicates that there is sufficient flexibility within the system to accommodate additional pupils should the proposed PAN reduction be approved.

Due to the offers being below the PAN, the school is no longer able to viably operate 5 classes, and maintaining the current PAN would place significant and ongoing financial pressure on the school. Implementing the proposed PAN reduction would enable the school to reduce to 4 classes, creating a financially

¹ This determination was published under the reference VAR2618.

sustainable and educationally coherent structure that more accurately reflects the demand for places.”

17. In its response to me, the Governing Body said:

“...governors have carefully considered the proposed reduction and are supportive of this course of action. We recognise the financial challenges currently facing the school and the necessity of taking measured, strategic steps to address the in-year deficit and support longer-term financial sustainability.

Governors are of the view that the proposed reduction represents a prudent and proportionate response to declining pupil numbers and will help ensure that resources are aligned more effectively to demand. This will enable the school to maintain the quality of education and provision for all pupils while working towards a more stable financial position.

If the variation is not agreed, the Governing Body anticipates that the school would face continued financial pressure, requiring difficult decisions around staffing and provision, which may in turn risk impacting the breadth of the curriculum and the quality of pupil experience.”

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 of the School is reduced from 30 to 20 for 2026/27. I have also considered the demand for places at the School, the reasons given for the change in demand, the potential effect of the proposed PAN reduction on meeting parental preference, and whether the proposed reduction is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

19. 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. The School is part of the Andover Rural planning area. There are eight schools in the planning area that admit children into YR.

20. Table 1 summarises the data supplied to me by the Local Authority for the schools in the planning area; the number of children admitted in each of the previous three years and the number of places offered for 2026/27.

Table 1: School places in the planning area and admission to YR

-	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
The total PAN	165	166	153	166
The number of children admitted to YR or forecast to be admitted	137	130	138	142*
The number of vacant places	28	36	15	24

-	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
The number of vacant places as a percentage of the total number of places	17.0	21.7	9.8	14.5

* Number of places offered as of 22 May 2026.

21. Table 1 shows that there has been a high number of vacant places for children entering YR in the planning area since at least 2023/24. This is forecast to remain the case for children starting YR in September 2026. 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 the planning area has been considerably higher than two per cent in recent years, even taking into consideration the reduction in the School’s PAN agreed for 2025/26 (VAR2618).

22. If I were to agree to the proposed variation for September 2026, there would be 14 YR places available in the planning area, or the equivalent of 9.0 per cent surplus capacity.

23. Based on the information shown in Table 1, I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 20 for 2026/27, there would be sufficient places available in the planning area for any parents seeking a YR place for their child.

24. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. Table 2 summarises admissions to the School.

Table 2: The number of children admitted to YR at the School

-	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
The PAN for the School	30	30	17	30
The number of first preferences	34	26	18	18
The number of children admitted to YR (places offered for 2026)	28	23	17	19
The number of vacant places	2	7	0	11
The number of vacant places as a percentage	6.7	23.3	0	36.7

25. Table 2 shows that all the children whose parents identified the School as their first preference have been offered a place there for September 2026. The proposed variation will, therefore, have no effect on parental preference in respect of applications received as part of the normal admissions process for 2026/27.

26. If the PAN were to be reduced to 20, there would be one vacant place at the School. However, as set out earlier, there are places in other schools within the planning area for any late or in-year applications to YR.

27. The School is affected by the provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 (the Infant Class Sizes Regulations) which 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. The Infant Class Sizes Regulations apply to YR, Year 1 (Y1) and Year 2 (Y2). As schools are largely funded based on the number of pupils on their rolls, it is more efficient financially for primary schools to have classes of 30 or near to 30. Classes that are significantly smaller than 30 can create financial strain upon a school.

28. The School currently operates with five classes, four are mixed-age classes with between 24 and 26 pupils and one is a single-age Year 6 class with 18 pupils.

29. The LA tells me that reducing the PAN to 20 would enable the School to operate with four mixed-age classes from September 2026. An organisation that “more accurately reflects current and projected pupil numbers, supporting a more sustainable staffing and resource model.” There would be two classes subject to the Infant Class Sizes Regulations, each will contain 30 or fewer pupils.

30. If the PAN remains at 30, the School will be required to admit any child during the academic year whose parents request a YR place at the School until 30 children have been admitted. This could mean that classes would need to be reorganised and additional staff recruited during the year. This creates uncertainty as the School would not know if or when an additional class would be required. As well as being potentially disruptive and unsettling for both children and staff, it would also be financially inefficient. If the number of children in YR is limited to 20, then the School can be certain that for the 2026/27 academic year it will need staffing for only four classes.

31. As set out earlier in the determination, the School’s financial situation is one of the main reasons for the LA and the Governing Body seeking a reduction in PAN. To support the application, the LA provided the following information in relation to the School’s finances:

“In terms of the financial impact of the change in PAN, the original class structure leaves the school with an increasing deficit from £56k in 2025/26 to £170k by 2027/28, resulting in a cumulative deficit approaching £493k. In contrast, reducing the PAN to 20 and 4 classes significantly improves the financial position with much smaller deficits of £9k, £32k, and £67k over the same period and a cumulative deficit of around £248k by 2027/28. While both scenarios remain in deficit, the reduced PAN effectively halves the overall financial shortfall and slows the rate of deterioration, indicating that the original 5-class structure is not financially sustainable at projected pupil levels.”

32. 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 20.

33. 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

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

35. I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 20.

Dated: 17 June 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Catherine Crooks