Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: **VAR2725**

Admission Authority: **Cambridgeshire County Council for Bassingbourn Primary School**

Date of decision: **23 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 Cambridgeshire County Council for Bassingbourn Primary School for 2027/28.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the Reception Year in 2027/28 shall be 45.

The referral

1. Cambridgeshire County Council (the Admission Authority; the Local Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for Bassingbourn Primary School (the School) for 2027/28.

2. The School is a community school for children aged five to eleven in the village of Bassingbourn, 14 miles south-west of Cambridge. It is a co-educational school with no designated religious character.

3. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) of the School, which applies to admissions to the Reception Year (Year R), be reduced from 60, as determined, to 45 for 2027/28.

Jurisdiction and procedure

4. 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".

5. The Arrangements were determined by the Local Authority on 20 January 2026.

6. The Local Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code, and that the governing body of the School has been consulted on the proposed variation. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.

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

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

- the referral from the Local Authority dated 12 May 2026, and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- responses from the Local Authority and the governing body of 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 on the websites of the Local Authority and the School.

9. There is no formal consultation required for a variation and so parents and others do not have the opportunity to express their view. 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 view. It also allows for objections to the adjudicator. None of this is afforded by the variation process.

10. I note here that the Arrangements for 2028/29 have not yet been determined. This means that if I agree to the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2027/28 by reducing the PAN as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years.

11. In the interest of dealing speedily with this and other requests for variations for schools, I have not considered other aspects of the 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.

Consideration of proposed variation

12. 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.

13. The Local Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School be reduced from 60 to 45 in 2027/28. The proposed variation has the support of the School's governing body.

14. The referral mentioned declining birth rates and admissions to Year R in recent years in justifying the proposed variation. This could have been envisaged or considered by the Local Authority before consulting on any proposed change to the previous admission arrangements and determining those for 2027/28.

15. It was unusual for the Local Authority to have determined the 2027 Arrangements in January 2026, and then shortly after that to seek a variation to the determined Arrangements. This gives the impression of the Local Authority seeking to bypass the due consultation process, as required under paragraph 1.45 of the Code, when not consulting on the proposed reduction of the School's PAN for 2027/28.

16. The Local Authority explained this in response to my request for further information:

> "The Local Authority had not consulted on a reduction to the PAN prior to determining the 2027/28 admission arrangements on 20 January 2026 because the request from the school was received after its consultation had closed.
>
> Bassingbourn Primary School first contacted the Local Authority on 6 January 2026 to explore a possible reduction in PAN.
>
> As a result, there was no opportunity within the prescribed admissions timetable to undertake a compliant consultation on a reduced PAN for 2027/28.

The earliest point at which a PAN reduction could have been implemented through the standard process would therefore have been September 2028.

In these circumstances and given the emerging concerns regarding pupil numbers and financial sustainability, the Local Authority determined the PAN at 60 in January 2026 but subsequently supported the school in bringing forward a request for a variation under paragraph 3.6 of the Code."

17. The Local Authority added:

"[Latest forecast] represents a clear and consistent downward trajectory in expected pupil numbers over successive forecasting cycles.

The updated forecasts now align much more closely with the actual numbers currently on roll and the recent low Reception intakes and demonstrate that the numbers are unlikely to recover.

Demand at entry point remains consistently below PAN. Forecasts of Reception demand continue to indicate cohorts well below the current PAN of 60, typically in the range of mid-30s to around 40 pupils, as reflected in both SCAP [School Capacity Survey] and planning area forecasts.

Planning area data also shows:

- A decline in total Reception demand from 87 to 66 across the planning area between 2026/27 and 2027/28
- No planned housing growth that would materially increase demand.

This reinforces that the reduction in numbers is systemic rather than short-term fluctuation."

18. It suffices for me to say that the lack of consultation is still not desirable from a procedural point of view (see paragraph 9 above). To mitigate this, in April and May 2026 the Admission Authority contacted parents who might be potentially affected by the PAN reduction to explain the rationale for this application. Having considered the explanation given by the Admission Authority and the governing body of the School, I am satisfied, on balance, that this request is within the remit of paragraph 3.6 of the Code (as above) which permits admission authorities to propose variations "where they consider such changes to be necessary in view of a major change in circumstances".

19. I have therefore considered the latest available data to form a view about the sufficiency of school places in the local area if the PAN of the School is reduced from 60 to 45 in 2027/28. 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 parental preference, and whether the proposed reduction is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

20. 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 located in 'Bassingbourn rural planning area' (the planning area), and I have considered the data that the Local Authority has provided for that area.

21. In the planning area, there are four schools, including the School, for which the usual year of entry is Year R. The data set out in Table 1 show the number of Year R places and the number of children admitted or offered a place to, or forecast to require a place at, those schools within the planning area. Table 1 also demonstrates the effect of the proposed PAN reduction for the School on surplus places in the planning area.

Table 1: Year R places available at schools within the planning area, and the number of children admitted or offered a place to, or forecast to require a place at, those schools.

-	2025	2026	2027
Number of places in Year R at the schools in the planning area (with a PAN of 60 at the School)	135	135	135
Number of children admitted (2025), offered a place (2026), and forecast to require Year R places (2027)	83	83	66
Vacant places	52	52	69
Vacant places as a percentage	38.5	38.5	51.1
Number of places in Year R if variation approved (with a PAN of 45 at the School in 2027)	NA	NA	120
Forecast vacant places if variation approved	NA	NA	54
Forecast vacant places as a percentage if variation approved	NA	NA	45.0

22. 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. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system". From the data above, there would be a huge surplus of Year R places for

September 2027, which is well above the suggested two per cent, if I agreed the proposed variation to reduce the School's PAN by 15 places.

23. I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 45 for 2027/28, there would be sufficient places in the planning area for any parents seeking a Year R place for their child for September 2027.

24. I turn now to the demand for places at the School. Table 2 shows the number of children admitted to the School in 2025, and the preferences data in recent years. The Table uses the proposed PAN of 45 for 2027.

Table 2: The number of children admitted to the School in 2025, offered a place in 2026, and the forecast number of places required in 2027.

-	2025	2026	2027
The PAN for the School	60	60	45
Number of first preferences	39	37	NA
Number of children admitted to Year R (2025), offered a place (2026), and forecast to require places (2027)	42	40	35
Vacant places	18	20	10

25. I am satisfied that there is unlikely to be any substantial frustration of parental preference if the variation were to be agreed for September 2027.

26. I will now consider the impact on the School of my approving, or not approving, the proposed variation.

27. The School is one 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 (paragraph 2.16 of the Code). The Infant Class Sizes Regulations apply to Year R, Year 1, and Year 2.

28. At present, the School is operating 13 classes, with two classes in year R (each has fewer than 20 pupils).

29. As schools are largely funded on the number of pupils on roll and the most expensive element of a school budget is staff, it is generally considered financially efficient to have infant classes that have 30 pupils or close to, but below, 30 pupils. If a school has classes that are many fewer than 30, then 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 have severe financial challenges.

30. The governing body of the School indicated that, should the variation to the Arrangements be approved, the School would restructure from the 13 classes currently to 11 classes (by introducing mixed-age teaching across some year groups as appropriate) this September, and would continue to do so thereafter.

31. The FBIT website shows that for the financial year ending March 2025, the School had an in-year deficit of about £169,000, and a revenue reserve around £80,000. Both the Local Authority and the School have shown me budgetary information to demonstrate that maintaining 13 classes is financially unsustainable for the School, and that a move to a 11-class structure would enable the School to reduce staff cost and improve its long-term financial viability.

32. In response to my request for further information, the School stressed that:

> "The Governing Body is in full agreement with the School on the need to reduce the PAN from 60 to 45, noting the need to more closely match the school's intake numbers to match the actual and forecast pupil intake. The governing body agrees that reducing the PAN to 45 would enable the school to align its class structure more closely with actual and forecast pupil numbers, allowing for more efficient staffing deployment and reducing ongoing expenditure, while maintaining appropriate class sizes through a combination of single-year and mixed-age classes.
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> Were the PAN variation not to be agreed, the governing body supports the position of the school outlined above, that the school would be required to retain additional classes based on a theoretical intake of 60 pupils, despite actual cohorts consistently falling well below this level. The governing body agrees that this would result in continued financial inefficiency, with underfilled classes and staffing costs that cannot be sustained through available funding, and that over time, this would further exacerbate the school's deficit position, limiting the school's ability to invest in teaching, curriculum development, and wider pupil support, and potentially impact the overall quality of provision."

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

- If the proposed variation is approved, it will be unlikely to give rise to any concern about the sufficiency of Year R places in the planning area. The reduction in the School's PAN will be unlikely to result in a substantial frustration of parental preference. There is compelling evidence that a reduction in the PAN to 45 will allow the School to plan with more certainty knowing the number of classes and staff members that will be required for 2027/28. This will enable the School to make the best use of its resources, thereby benefitting the School financially in the longer term.

- If the proposed variation is not approved, there would be a negative financial and organisational impact on the School, as it would be obliged to offer a Year R place up to the existing PAN of 60 for any applicant in 2027/28. There is a risk that up to that number could be admitted, thus preventing the switch to the planned 11-class structure for the School in the near future.

34. Taking everything into consideration, I find that the variation is justified by the circumstances and approve it.

Determination

35. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Cambridgeshire County Council for Bassingbourn Primary School for 2027/28.

36. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the Reception Year in 2027/28 shall be 45.

Dated: 23 June 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jackie Liu