



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2769

Admission Authority: Hampshire County Council for Southwood Infant School

Date of decision: 20 July 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 Southwood Infant School, for 2026.

I determine that for admission in 2026 the published admission number will be 36.

The referral

1. Hampshire County Council (the Local Authority or LA) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for Southwood Infant School (the School or SIS) for 2026 (the Arrangements).
2. SIS is a community school for children aged four to seven years. It is a co-educational, non-selective school without a religious character. The Admission Authority for the School is the Local Authority. As the LA is the Admission Authority, both terms are used throughout this determination.
3. Parties to the request are the LA and the School.
4. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN), which applies to the Reception Year (Year R), be reduced from 45 to 36.

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 12 February 2025. 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 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 the interests of dealing speedily with this request for a variation, 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.

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

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

- the referral from the Admission Authority dated 26 June 2026 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026 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;
- information available on the government website ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS); and
- information available on the website of the LA, including the arrangements for 2027.

10. I would like to extend my thanks to the LA for the clarity and completeness of the information supplied with the referral.

11. 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.

12. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027 have been determined, and a PAN of 45 has been set. Consequently, if I agree to the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2026 by reducing the PAN as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years.

Consideration of proposed variation

13. 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.

14. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 45 to 36 for entry to Year R in September 2026. The proposal has the support of the School. The referral gave the reason for seeking a variation as follows:

"This proposed reduction is necessary to better align the PAN with current and projected pupil numbers and to support the school's ongoing financial sustainability and effective organisation. . .

Due to offers being below the PAN, Southwood Infant 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 move to 4 classes, creating a financially sustainable structure that more accurately reflects the demand for places."

15. 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 45 to 36. I have also considered the demand for places at the School, 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.

16. The Local Authority has a duty to make sure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. It uses planning areas, which are geographical areas each containing a number of schools, for this purpose. In the planning area to which the School belongs, there are eleven schools (including the School) which admit pupils to Year R. Table 1, below, shows: the sum of the PANs at those schools; and the number of children admitted in each of 2023, 2024 and 2025. Table 1 also shows the number of children offered a place for 2026 (as of 23 June) and demonstrates the effect on surplus places of reducing the PAN of the School as has been proposed.

Table 1: School places in the planning area, and the number of children admitted or offered a place.

	2023	2024	2025	2026
Number of places in Year R in schools in the planning area (with a PAN of 45 for the School)	515	518	510	510
Number of children admitted (2023 – 2025) or offered a place (2026)	493	446	471	431
Vacant places	22	72	39	79
Vacant places as a percentage of total places	4.3	13.9	7.6	15.5
Number of places in Year R if variation approved (with a PAN of 36 for the School)	N/A	N/A	N/A	501
Vacant places if variation approved	N/A	N/A	N/A	70
Vacant places as a percentage of total places if variation approved	N/A	N/A	N/A	14.0

17. The Department for Education 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 in table 1, I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 36 for 2026, there would be sufficient places available in the area for any children who might be seeking a Year R place.

18. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. Table 2 shows: the number of first preference applications received in each of 2024, 2025 and 2026; the number of offers made for 2026; and the number of children admitted in the previous two years.

Table 2: The number of first preference applications for the School for each of 2024, 2025 and 2026; and the number of children admitted or offered a place.

	2024	2025	2026
The PAN for the School	45	45	45
Number of first preferences	32	30	29
Number of children admitted or offered	36	44	35

19. The data in table 2 show that all the children whose parents wanted their child to be admitted to SIS have been offered a place for September 2026; the number of offers is below the PAN by some margin.

20. The proposed variation would have no effect on parental preference in respect of applications received as part of the normal admissions process for September 2026. If the proposed variation is approved, then only one vacant place will remain at the School. However, there are Year R places available within the planning area. As of 23 June, four of the other ten schools in the planning area each had vacant spaces for September 2026.

21. The School is affected by the provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 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 schoolteacher except in specific exceptional circumstances. The Infant Class Sizes Regulations apply to Year R, Year 1 and Year 2. Children at the School are currently organised into two, single-age classes for Year R. The children in Year 1 and Year 2 are organised into three mixed-age classes, giving a total of five classes in the School. If the variation was agreed then there could be four total classes, with associated financial savings, as described by the LA:

“All three-year groups are undersubscribed, with cohort numbers also fluctuating and this is creating financial pressure for the school. As such, the current class structure shows that the school is operating 5 classes with mostly small class sizes. .

This structure has resulted in inefficient class sizes with the school currently required to staff and resource 5 classes despite declining pupil numbers. Reducing the PAN to 36 from 45 for September 2026 would enable the school to align its class structure more closely with current and projected demand, supporting a more sustainable and efficient use of staffing and resources.

Under this proposed change, a PAN of 36 would enable the school to operate 4 fuller classes of a more appropriate size, helping to improve overall efficiency.”

22. The planned class structure for September 2026, if the proposed variation is agreed, is as set out in table 3, below.

Table 3: planned class structure from September 2026.

Class	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Total
1	30			30
2	5	21		26
3		22	6	28
4			27	27
Total	35	43	33	111

23. If the PAN remained at 45, this would apply to Year R for the entirety of the 2026/27 academic year and the School would also be required to admit any child whose parents requested a Year R place until 45 children had been admitted. If, say, 45 Year R pupils were admitted then five classes would be required. However, up to 44 Year R pupils could be accommodated in the planned structure of four classes without breaching the Infant Class Sizes Regulations. I have modelled this in table 4.

Table 4: possible class structure from September 2026, providing the greatest number of Year R places without breaching Infant Class Size Regulations.

Class	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Total
1	30			30
2	14	16		30
3		27	3	30
4			30	30
Total	44	43	33	120

24. The LA described the School's financial situation as follows:

"An analysis of the school's financial position shows a stark contrast between the two scenarios. Under a PAN of 45, the school is projected to run significant in-year deficits from £191,941 in 2025/26 to £308,307 by 2027/28. Although annual deficits are forecast to reduce over this period, they remain substantial and continue to place sustained pressure on the school's budget. In contrast, reducing the PAN to 36 results in a much more stable financial outlook, leading to a comparatively contained cumulative deficit of £119,833 by 2027/28. This represents a far more sustainable and manageable financial trajectory."

25. The modelling set out in table 4 suggests that it may be in the best interests of the School and its finances to vary the PAN to 44 rather than 45. In short, this would mean the maximum number of possible pupils, with the funding each attracts, whilst operating one class fewer than is currently the case. However, the LA explained to me that the proposed variation is part of a longer term plan for the School:

“From 2028, the school has requested the Local Authority’s support for a reduction in its PAN to 30. This proposed reduction is expected to closer align with updated pupil forecasts, particularly once the full impact of cohorts entering from September 2026 is reflected in the data and the wider capacity that would remain across the planning area. . . Therefore, there is a planned pathway for this school moving forward to move from a 1.5FE [forms of entry] school to a 1FE school.

A review of Year R application preferences and offers for September 2027 will be undertaken at appropriate times to understand whether any additional action for September 2027 cohort will be required.”

26. After carefully weighing the above factors, and taking into account the longer term plans for the School, I consider that it is reasonable to conclude that the proposed variation is justified by the circumstances. I approve the proposed variation to reduce the PAN for 2026 to 36.

27. 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 admit more children than it currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the building for it to do so.

Determination

28. 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 Southwood Infant School, for 2026.

29. I determine that for admission in 2026 the published admission number will be 36.

Dated: 20 July 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jennifer Gamble