



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2784

Admission Authority: Reading Borough Council for Southcote Primary School

Date of decision: 10 August 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 Reading Borough Council for Southcote Primary School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admissions in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 60.

The referral

1. Reading Borough Council is the local authority and admission authority for Southcote Primary School (the School). Reading Borough Council has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for the School for 2026/27 (the 2026 arrangements).
2. The School is a community school for children aged four to eleven years. I shall refer to Reading Borough Council as the local authority. The local authority has requested that the 2026 arrangements are varied so that the published admission number (PAN) is reduced from 90 to 60 for admissions in 2026/27.

Jurisdiction and procedure

3. 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”.

4. The 2026 arrangements were determined by the local authority on 15 January 2025. The local authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code. The local authority also provided confirmation that the governing body of the School was consulted on the proposed variation and supports it. I note that the School is part of a federation, The Kennet Federation of Katesgrove and Southcote Primary Schools and Blagrove Nursery School.

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

6. In the interest of dealing speedily with this and other cases, 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.

7. In considering the variation request, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:

- a) the referral from the local authority received 16 July 2026 (the request form) and supporting documents;
- b) the determined 2026 arrangements and the proposed variation to those arrangements; and
- c) information available on the government website: ‘Get Information About Schools’.

8. 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.

9. I note here that the arrangements for 2027/28 have been determined. This means that if I agree to the local authority’s request to vary the 2026 arrangements as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years. The local

authority has proposed a variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28, which I will consider separately.

Consideration of proposed variation

10. 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.

11. The local authority said in the request form:

“There has been a sustained decline in pupil numbers across several primary planning areas within Reading, resulting in a growing surplus of school places across the borough. The Central West planning area [in which the School is situated] continues to have sufficient capacity to meet forecast demand, with pupil projections indicating that there will remain enough places available across local schools should this variation be approved...

Southcote Primary School has experienced a sustained reduction in demand in recent years...[with] the school... facing increasing financial pressures linked to falling rolls and operating below capacity. The school's budget position is forecast to be challenging, with an overspend of £17,273 budgeted for 2026/27, and the forecast overspend for 2027/28 is anticipated to be significantly higher. Reducing the PAN would therefore help to align admission arrangements with current and projected demand, while supporting the school's longer-term financial sustainability.

12. The School is one subject to 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 reception year, year 1 and year 2.

13. I will first consider applications and admissions overall, including whether there would be sufficient school places in the area if I were to agree the variation. I will then consider demand for places at the School and the reasons for the variation requested.

14. The local authority has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient school 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 a planning area with eight other schools which admit children to reception year. One of these schools is E P Collier Primary School (E P Collier) and the local authority has also requested a variation to reduce the PAN for E P Collier for admissions in 2026/27. I was the adjudicator for that request and approved that reduction in my determination previously published (case reference VAR2792).

Table 1: number of school places, and the number of children offered places in reception year in the planning area

	September 2026
Sum of PANs of schools for reception year	470
Number of first preferences	389
Number of children offered a place	382
Vacant places based on offers	88

15. Table 1 shows that there are 88 vacancies expected for September 2026. If the PAN for the School were to be reduced by 30, there would be 58 vacancies. This would be around 13 per cent of the total which is a high proportion. However, as I have agreed the variation for E P Collier, the number of vacant places would be 18. This would still be over four per cent surplus at this stage in the admission year with about four weeks to the beginning of the school year.

16. I also note that the School is in an urban area with six schools within one mile that admit children to reception year. I am assured that if the PAN were to be reduced by 30 to 60, there would be sufficient places in the area to meet any in-year applications.

17. I will now consider demand for the School and parental preference. Table 2 shows forecast admissions to reception year for 2026 based on data from the local authority provided on 4 August 2026.

Table 2: the number of first preferences and the number of children offered places at the School for September 2026

	September 2026
The PAN for the School	90
The number of first preferences	50
The number of admissions anticipated	58
Vacant places	32

18. At this stage in the school year, it is urgent that the School arranges its classes for the children joining reception year in September 2026. As currently 58 children are expected, this could be two classes of 29 children each. If the PAN is not reduced, then the local authority would have to admit any child seeking a place at the School until the PAN of 90 is reached. While this is unlikely, it is possible that the number admitted could creep over 60 if the PAN were to remain at 90, and then the School would have to make arrangements to meet the Infant Class Sizes Regulations. Such arrangements are likely to include the employment of an additional school teacher and the costs of doing so will probably escalate the financial deficit already described by the local authority.

19. A financial deficit causes considerable problems for a school and can have implications for the quality of education at a school as its leaders struggle to address such a deficit through reductions in resources including staffing.

20. In summary, there is unlikely to be any effect on parental preference if the PAN for 2026/27 is reduced to 60. There are school places in the local area if additional places were to be needed. The School already has a forecast financial deficit and this is likely to increase if over 60 children were admitted. I, therefore, agree that the variation is justified by the circumstances and agree the variation.

Determination

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

22. I determine that for admissions in 2026/27 the published admission number shall be 60.

Dated: 10 August 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Deborah Pritchard