



Determination

Case references:	VAR2791 and VAR2795
Admission Authority:	The governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome
Local Authority:	Somerset Council
Date of decision:	18 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 for 2026/27 determined by the governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome.

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

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28 determined by the governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the Reception Year in 2027/28 shall be 30.

The referral

1. The governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome (the Admission Authority; the School) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for variations to its admission arrangements for the respective school years 2026/27 (the 2026 arrangements), and 2027/28 (the 2027 arrangements).
2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged four to nine years in Frome. The relevant local authority is Somerset Council (the Local Authority). It is a co-

educational school with a Church of England religious character. The Diocese of Bath and Wells (the Diocese) is the religious authority for the School.

3. The proposed variations are that the published admission number (PAN) of the School, which applies to admissions to the reception year (Year R), be reduced from 45, as determined, to 30 for each of 2026/27 and 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 2026 arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 20 January 2025. The 2027 arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 26 January 2026.
6. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variations in line with the Code. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variations are within my jurisdiction.
7. The School and the Diocese have confirmed that the School will join The Bath and Wells Diocesan Academies Trust, subject to the execution of the relevant official documents in due course. I proceeded with this case on the basis that I would complete my determination before the conversion. Consequently, my jurisdiction is unaffected by the School’s forthcoming change of status from a voluntary aided school to an academy.
8. In considering the variation requests, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.
9. The information I have considered in reaching my decisions includes:

- the referral from the Admission Authority dated 27 July 2026, and supporting documents;
 - the determined arrangements for the two school entry years in question and the proposed variations to those arrangements;
 - responses from the Local Authority, the Admission Authority, and the Diocese 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 that on the websites of the Local Authority and the School.
10. 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.
11. I note here that the admission arrangements for the School for 2028/29 have not yet been determined. This means that if I decide to vary the 2027 arrangements by reducing the School's PAN from 45 to 30 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years.
12. In the interest of dealing speedily with this and other requests for variations for schools, I have not considered other aspects of the 2026 arrangements and the 2027 arrangements. Therefore, nothing in this determination should be taken as indicating that other aspects of those arrangements do or do not conform with the requirements relating to admissions.

Consideration of proposed variations

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.
14. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School be reduced from 45 to 30 in each of 2026/27 and 2027/28. The Local Authority and the Diocese support the proposed variations.
15. Having regard to the declining birth rates and Year R admissions in recent years, the Admission Authority told me the following reason for seeking variations to the PAN for the School:

“Although our PAN is 45 and we were initially allocated 25 pupils, we have had additional pupils placed with us and the pure Reception class is now full for September 2026. On 15.07.2026 we were informed by the LA that we had two more children admitted (twins) taking us to 32. We have since been informed that a pupil is leaving our intake to move to a different school. This will take us to 31 in the Reception class which [should not] be an illegal breach of class size as the last two admitted are twins. We really need to keep the class at this size and not have any further admitted as the school cannot fund the additional teacher that more pupils in Reception would require. The school has a deficit budget and this will be made significantly worse if the school was to take in more Reception pupils requiring another full-time teacher to be funded for that class.”

16. I have 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 45 to 30 in each of 2026/27 and 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 reductions on parental preference, and whether the proposed reductions are justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.
17. 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. I have considered the data that the Local Authority has provided for the relevant planning area in which the School is located.
18. In the planning area, there are seven 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 same planning area. Table 1 also demonstrates the effect of the proposed PAN reductions 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 45 at the School)	326	326	300
Number of children on roll (2025), offered a place (2026), and forecast to require Year R places (2027)	249	284	275
Vacant places	77	42	25
Vacant places as a percentage	23.6	12.9	8.3
Number of places in Year R if variations approved (with a PAN of 30 at the School)	NA	311	285
Forecast vacant places if variations approved	NA	27	10
Forecast vacant places as a percentage if variations approved	NA	8.7	3.5

19. In addition, the Department for Education's 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 I note that the proportion of vacant places in the planning area would remain above the suggested two per cent if I agreed to the proposed variations for each of 2026/27 and 2027/28.
20. The Local Authority stated in its reply of 5 August 2026 to my request for further information:

"The Local Authority would support the variation request to reduce the Published Admission Number (PAN) to 30 for September 2026 and September 2027. Current and forecast pupil numbers indicate that there are sufficient school places available within the planning area to accommodate local demand, and projections suggest that numbers at St John's First School are likely to continue to reduce over this period. As a result, the proposed reduction is not expected to have an adverse impact on the Local Authority's ability to fulfil its statutory duty to secure sufficient school places for children in the area.

The Local Authority has also recently undertaken a consultation on a proposed reorganisation of education provision across the Frome area, with implementation currently being considered for 2027. The proposal would see a transition from the existing first, middle and upper school structure to a primary and secondary school model. While no final decision has yet been made regarding the future of these

proposals or the timing of any implementation, the current assessment is that the proposed PAN reduction would remain manageable within the context of anticipated place demand and would not be expected to affect the availability of starting school places for local families.

Taking these factors into account, the Local Authority is satisfied that the requested variation is reasonable and supports the application for both September 2026 and September 2027.”

21. Most parents seeking a Year R place for their child for admissions in 2026/27 would have been offered a place on National Offer Day in April. Also given the declining admissions in recent years, I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 30 for each of 2026/27 and 2027/28, there would be sufficient places for children living in the planning area and seeking a Year R place.
22. I turn now to the demand for places at the School. Table 2 shows the number of children on roll in Year R in 2025, and the preferences data in recent years. The Table uses the proposed PAN of 30.

Table 2: The number of children on roll in Year R at 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	45	30	30
Number of first preferences	18	23	NA
Number of children on roll in Year R (2025), offered a place (2026), and forecast to require places (2027)	20	31	31
Vacant places	25	-1	-1

23. 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.
24. For September 2026, the Admission Authority has confirmed that 31 pupils will be admitted to Year R where two such pupils are twins from a multiple birth. In accordance with paragraph 2.16 of the Code, infant classes must not contain more than 30 pupils with a single school teacher, but additional children may be admitted under limited exceptional circumstances. One of the twins is therefore to be admitted as an ‘excepted pupil’ for the time they will be in an infant class or until the class numbers fall back to the current infant class size limit. While the School will not have

any Year R vacancy after the proposed PAN reduction (if approved) for 2026/27, any parent who is not successful in securing a place for their child at the School will likely be able to secure a place at a nearby school in the area. The Local Authority advised me that the nearest first school with vacant Year R places is Vallis First School, which is 0.5 mile away from the School (about 10 minutes of walking distance).

25. For September 2027, the proposed PAN reduction seems to align with the forecast number of children requiring Year R places at the School. If the proposed variation to the 2027 arrangements is approved, parents and other relevant parties would not have been able to express their view on the reduction of the School's PAN, but they may still consider preferences and make their applications for 2027/28 in the knowledge that the PAN of the School is reduced to 30. As noted in Table 1 above, such a variation will be unlikely to give rise to any concern about the sufficiency of Year R places in the planning area.
26. I am satisfied that there is unlikely to be any substantial frustration of parental preference if the proposed variations were to be agreed for both September 2026 and September 2027.
27. I will now consider the impact on the School of my approving, or not approving, the proposed variations.
28. The Admission Authority told me that it is planning to run one class to accommodate all 31 pupils admitted to Year R in September 2026 (as explained above). In addition, there are one class each in Year 1 and Year 2, and three mixed-aged classes for both Years 3 and 4.
29. As schools are largely funded on the number of pupils, and the highest costs to a school budget are staff, it is generally considered financially efficient to have classes that have 30 pupils or close to, but below, that number. If a school has classes that have many fewer than 30 pupils, 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 FBIT website shows that for financial year ending March 2025, the School had an in-year surplus of about £15,000, and a revenue reserve of about £138,000. The Admission Authority have shown me budgetary information to demonstrate that maintaining an additional Year R class is financially unsustainable for the School.
31. The Admission Authority added:

“The school has been asked by the LA to write a deficit recovery plan. The 2026-27 Month 3 report is indicating a much higher deficit than previously known about. The deficit recovery plan needs to be written ... The main overspend is in staffing. If the school was to require an additional teacher to enable the Reception intake to go above 30 (31 this year), this cost would have

significant implications on the budget and future budgets of the school. The Month 3 report ... currently anticipates an end of year deficit of £144,319. The school has invoked redundancy proceedings in the years 2025 and 2024 to reduce the school by one class in these years due to lower intake numbers. This year we have made these savings and a class reduction without redundancies due to having fixed term contracts coming to an end.”

32. The Diocese stated in its reply of 30 July 2026 to my request for further information:

“With the significant changes like to occur in the town (a reorganisation from 3 tier to 2 tier) and with St John’s likely to become a primary school rather than a first school, alongside the significant drop in the local birth rate and the number of existing places in local schools, as well as financial pressures facing the school, this makes a lot of sense and we support the school in their proposal.”

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

- If the proposed variation to the 2026 arrangements is approved (**VAR2791**), the reduction in the School’s PAN will be unlikely to result in a substantial frustration of parental preference. The demand arising from all first-preference applications for the School is met under the normal admission round. The Local Authority is confident in ensuring that there are sufficient school places for the children in its area. There is compelling evidence that a reduction in the PAN to 30 would allow the School to plan with more certainty knowing the number of classes and staff members that will be required for 2026/27. This will enable the School to make the best use of its resources in the forthcoming school year.
- If the proposed variation to the 2027 arrangements is approved (**VAR2795**), parents and other relevant parties would not have been able to express their view on the reduction of the School’s PAN. However, from the data given by the Local Authority, such a variation 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 30 will allow the School to plan on the basis of restructuring itself into six or fewer classes for 2027/28, in the wider context of its forthcoming conversion to an academy and the proposed changes to the school structure in Frome. This will benefit the School financially in the longer term.
- If the proposed variations are not approved, the School would be obliged to offer Year R places up to the existing PAN of 45 for any applicants in 2026/27 and 2027/28. If just over 30 children were to be admitted to the School, then the School could have to rearrange its classes to meet the requirements of the Infant Class Sizes Regulations, and this would require a substantial cost to employ an

additional teacher unless mixed-aged teaching is adopted for Year R (and Year 1).

34. Taking everything into consideration, I find that the variations are justified by the circumstances and I approve both variations.

Determination

35. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements for 2026/27 determined by the governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome.
36. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the Reception Year in 2026/27 shall be 30.
37. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28 determined by the governing body of St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School, Frome.
38. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the Reception Year in 2027/28 shall be 30.

Dated: 18 August 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jackie Liu