



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2793

Admission Authority: Reading Borough Council for E P Collier Primary School

Date of decision: 17 September 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 E P Collier Primary School for 2027/28.

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

The referral

1. Reading Borough Council is the local authority and admission authority for E P Collier 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 2027/28 (the 2027 arrangements).
2. The School is a community school for children aged three to eleven. I shall refer to Reading Borough Council as the local authority. The local authority has requested that the 2027 arrangements are varied so that the published admission number (PAN) is reduced from 60 to 30 for admissions in 2027/28.

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 2027 arrangements were determined by the local authority on 14 January 2026. 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 and supports it.

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 29 July 2026 and supporting documents and further information provided at my request, including data on admissions for the whole of the local authority area;
- b) the determined 2027 arrangements and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
- c) previous determinations for variations requested for the School and Southcote Primary School (Southcote) for 2026/27 (case references VAR2792 and VAR2784 respectively);
- d) information provided by the governing body; and
- e) information available on the government websites:
 - ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS); and
 - ‘Find and compare schools and colleges in England’ (the DfE website).

8. The previous determinations were following requests for variations to reduce the PAN for the School from 60 to 30 for 2026/27 and to reduce the PAN for Southcote from 90 to 60, also for 2026/27. Both variations requested were agreed.

9. 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.

10. I note here that the arrangements for 2028/29 have not been determined. This means that if I agree to the local authority's request to vary the 2027 arrangements as proposed, it will have the effect of setting a baseline for subsequent years. The local authority has said that it intends to consult on setting the PAN at 30 for admissions in 2028/29, which is welcomed.

11. The local authority proposed a variation to the admission arrangements for 2026/27, which I have considered separately and agreed (case reference VAR2792 as above). The local authority is also seeking variations to other schools which admit children to reception year in its area and I will take this into account. These other schools are Southcote and St Michael's Primary School.

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. I will consider below whether the proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances.

13. The local authority said in the request form:

"This request is being made in response to sustained low demand for places at the school, declining pupil numbers across the local area and the need to ensure that the school's admission arrangements better reflect current and projected need...The school is also facing significant financial challenges as a result of falling pupil numbers. Budget forecasts indicate an in-year deficit of £163,731 in 2026/27, increasing to £220,387 in 2027/28. Maintaining a PAN that is considerably higher than actual demand would further increase financial pressures and contribute to the school operating inefficiently below capacity."

14. 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.

15. Schools are largely funded on the basis of the number of pupils and the largest cost to a school budget is staffing. If a school has several small classes then the income from the pupils in those classes is unlikely to meet the costs of providing them. This can have serious implications for school budgets. Most affected are schools with infant classes and many such schools seek to have 30 or just under 30 pupils to a class.

16. I will first consider the applications and admissions overall including whether there would be sufficient school places in the area if I were to agree the variation. My consideration will be for the whole of the local authority area initially, then the planning area for the School, followed by demand for places at the School. Table 1 summarises the overall picture regarding admissions to reception year for the whole local authority area.

Table 1: admissions data for reception year for the local authority's area

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Sum of PANs of schools for reception year	2110	2020	1975
Number of children on roll at time of October census or offered a place for 2026	1800	1676	1760
Vacant places based on number on roll or anticipated admissions	310	344	215

17. Table 1 shows an overall reduction in demand of 40 places between 2024 and 2026 and the number of places available reduced by 135. Therefore, in 2024/25, nearly 15 per cent of all places in reception year were vacant. For 2026/27, it is anticipated that nearly 11 per cent of places will be vacant. 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 "to provide an operating margin for local authorities. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system." Clearly the proportion of vacant places in the local authority's area is considerably higher than two per cent.

18. I asked the local authority for its forecasts for future years and it provided the following forecast demand for reception year:

- 2027: 1745
- 2028: 1640
- 2029: 1720.

19. These figures provide no consistent pattern and the local authority said that actual admissions have been consistently below forecasts. The forecasts for future years are all below the numbers expected to be admitted in September 2026 where the PANs for the School and for Southcote, have already been reduced by 60 places overall (30 school places each) as I have described above. This would indicate that over the local authority's area, there would be sufficient school places in 2027 and for future years, if the PAN for the School and Southcote were to be reduced. I will now consider the more local situation.

20. 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.

21. The School is in a planning area with eight other schools which admit children to reception year; one of the other schools is Southcote. Table 2 provides a summary of data provided by the local authority on 4 August 2026. I have included the reduced PANs previously agreed for the School and Southcote, so a reduction of 60 places from those determined for 2026/27 from a sum of PANs of 470 to 410.

Table 2: number of school places, and the number of children offered places in reception year in the planning area

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Sum of PANs of schools for reception year	470	470	410
Number of first preferences	470	406	389
Number of children admitted or offered a place for 2026	434	395	394
Vacant places based on admissions or offers	36	75	16

22. Table 2 shows a reduction in demand of 40 places between 2024 and 2026. The sixteen vacant places are nearly four per cent of the total, so still higher than the minimum advised in DfE guidance.

23. As I have said above, the local authority is seeking variations for two other schools for 2027/28 for which it is the admissions authority. One, Southcote, is in the same planning area and nearly two miles from the School.

24. According to the DfE website, which measures distances in straight lines, there are eight schools within one mile of the School and a further 18 within two miles. Parents have many reasons for their preferences including convenience, family connections and reputation. Planning areas are bureaucratic constructs and parents will not take account of them when making their preferences for schools. However, most local authorities use them to help fulfil their duty to make sure that there are sufficient school places for the children in their area. There appear to be sufficient places to meet forecast demand locally if the PAN for the School were to be reduced to 30.

25. I will now consider demand for the School and parental preference. Table 3 shows admissions to reception year in previous years and forecast admissions for 2026 from the data provided by the local authority on 4 August 2026. It also takes into account the variation agreed to lower the PAN to 30 for admissions in 2026.

Table 3: information on admissions and anticipated admissions to the school

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
The PAN for the School	60	60	30
The number of first preferences	42	39	23
The number of children admitted or, for 2026, offered a place	58	44	30

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
The number of vacant places based on admissions or offers	2	16	0

26. This shows a reduction in demand between 2024 and 2026. Demand for schools in the planning area and across the local authority area is forecast to be lower in 2027 than in 2026. As referred to above, the School is subject to the Infant Class Sizes Regulations and if it admits more than 30 children, then it will have to take measures to make sure that the Regulations are not breached. As the Infant Class Sizes Regulations require a qualified teacher to 30 pupils, the admission of a child so that the numbers are over 30 is likely to cause the School financial difficulties.

27. The School's class structure for September 2026 is one class of 30 for reception year, made possible by a PAN of 30, two classes of 20 for year 1, and two classes of around 23/24 for year 2. Years 3 and 4 groups have mixed aged classes and this has allowed larger groups. The financial implications of such small classes can be seen in the in-year deficit at the School. This had been met by a carry forward from previous years but this is now exhausted. Financial difficulties can affect the standards of education at a school as all areas of investment will be constrained.

28. In summary, there will be sufficient school places across the local authority area, and in the planning area, if the PAN is reduced from 60 to 30. Demand for the School has reduced and it is in financial difficulties which will be exacerbated if it must admit more than 30 children in 2027/28. I therefore conclude that any potential frustration of parental preference is outweighed by the need for the School to be able to organise its classes in a cost effective way. I agree that the variation is justified by the circumstances.

Determination

29. 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 E P Collier Primary School for 2027/28.

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

Dated: 17 September 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Deborah Pritchard