



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2785

Admission Authority: Reading Borough Council for Southcote 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 Southcote Primary School for 2027/28.

I determine that for admissions in 2027/28 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 2027/28 (the 2027 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 2027 arrangements are varied so that the published admission number (PAN) is reduced from 90 to 60 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. The local authority also provided confirmation that the governing body of the School was 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 16 July 2026 (the request form) and supporting documents;
- b) the determined 2027 arrangements and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
- c) previous determinations for variations requested for the School and E P Collier Primary School (E P Collier) (case references VAR2784 and VAR2792 respectively); and
- a) 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 to reduce the PAN from 90 to 60 for admissions in 2026/27 for the School and to reduce the PAN for E P Collier from 60 to 30, which is in the same area, and both variations 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 set a baseline for subsequent years. The local authority told me that it intends to consult on the arrangements for 2028/29 which is welcomed.

11. The local authority is also seeking variations to other schools which admit children to reception year in its area for 2027/28 and I will take this into account. These other schools are E P Collier 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:

"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."

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 commonly affected are schools with infant classes where there are challenges to achieving classes with 30 or just under 30 pupils.

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, as this is a small, urban area, and then the planning area for the School. I will then consider demand for places at the School.

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. There are five planning areas in the local authority's area and table 1 summarises the overall picture regarding admissions to reception year using the local authority's data provided on 4 August 2026.

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 September 2026	1800	1676	1760
Vacant places based on number on roll or anticipated admissions	310	344	215

18. Table 1 shows an overall reduction in demand of 40 places between 2024 and 2026 and the number of places available has reduced by 135. In 2024/25, nearly 15 per cent of all places in reception year were vacant. In 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 despite the reductions in the number of school places.

19. 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.

20. There is not a 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 (1760) where the PANs for the

School and for E P Collier, have already been reduced by 60 places overall (30 school places each). This would indicate that over the local authority's area, there would be sufficient school places in 2027/28 and for future years, if the PAN for the School and E P Collier were to be reduced. I will now consider the more local situation.

21. According to the DfE website, there are six schools that admit children to reception year within one mile of the School and around 22 within two miles. The School is in a planning area with eight other schools which admit children to reception year; these will not necessarily be the nearest schools to the School. Table 2 provides a summary of data provided by the local authority on 4 August 2026. I have included the reduced PANs I agreed for the School and E P Collier, 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 for 2026/27 are nearly four per cent of the total, so still higher than the minimum advised in DfE guidance. The forecast demand for 2026/27 was 415 places needed and it is anticipated that 394 will have been admitted. The forecast demand for 2027/28 is 405 places, ten places lower than for 2026/27. I am therefore assured that if the PAN for the School for 2027/28 were also to be set at 60, that there would be sufficient places in the planning area to meet demand.

23. I will now consider demand for the School and parental preference. Table 3 shows admissions to reception year in recent years based on data from the local authority provided on 4 August 2026.

Table 3: the number of first preferences and the number of children admitted or offered places at the School in recent years

	2024	2025	2026
The PAN for the School	90	90	60
The number of first preferences	84	69	50

	2024	2025	2026
The number of pupils admitted or anticipated	90	75	58
Vacant places	0	15	2

24. The evidence provided supports the view that there will be sufficient school places in the area to meet demand if the PAN for the School is reduced to 60 from 90. The pattern of demand indicates that there is unlikely to be much, if any, frustration of parental preference if such a reduction took place. I have taken into consideration the proposed reductions to PANs at other schools in the local authority's area. The School is likely to have financial problems if just over 60 children were admitted to reception year for 2027/28, as it would have to take measures to meet the Infant Class Sizes Regulations. 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. Setting the PAN at 60 now, allows parents to apply in the knowledge of the places available and the School to plan ahead.

25. I, therefore, agree that the variation is justified by the circumstances and agree the variation.

Determination

26. 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 2027/28.

27. I determine that for admissions in 2027/28 the published admission number shall be 60.

Dated: 17 September 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Deborah Pritchard