



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2794

Admission Authority: Reading Borough Council for St Michael's Primary School

Date of decision: 30 September 2026

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Reading Borough Council for St Michael's Primary School, for 2027/28.

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

The referral

1. Reading Borough Council is the admission authority for St Michael's Primary School (the School or St Michael's) and has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for 2027/28 (the 2027 arrangements).
2. The School is a community school for children aged five to eleven years in Tilehurst, Reading. It is a co-educational, non-selective school with no designated religious character.
3. Reading Borough Council is the admission authority for the School and is the local authority for the area in which the School is located. I will refer to Reading Borough Council as the local authority.
4. The governing body for the School and the local authority are the parties to the request for a variation. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) of the School, which applies to the reception year, be reduced from 60 to 30 for admission during 2027/28.

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 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.

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

8. 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.

9. 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 on 29 July 2026 (the request form) and supporting documents;
- b. the 2027 arrangements and evidence of their determination;
- c. responses from the local authority including data on admissions for September 2026 provided on 4 August 2026;
- d. information from the governing body to my requests for further information including information on class organisation provided on 16 September 2026;
- e. maps provided by the local authority showing the location of the School and other relevant schools;

- f. previous determinations following recent requests for variations to PANs to other primary schools in the area (case references VAR2792, VAR2793, VAR2784 and VAR2785);
- g. information available on the government websites:
 - o 'Get Information About Schools'; and
 - o 'Find and compare schools and colleges in England' (the DfE website).

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 arrangements for 2028 have not been determined. This means that if I were to 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 told me that it intends to consult on the PAN for admissions to the School in 2028/29.

12. I will also take into account that the local authority requested variations for two other schools, Southcote Primary School (Southcote) and E P Collier Primary School (E P Collier). Two of these variations were also for 2027/28 and that the PANs of Southcote and E P Collier would be reduced by 30 places each. These were agreed (see case references above). If this variation were also to be agreed there would be an overall a reduction of 90 places for reception year for 2027/28 in the local authority's area.

13. The School is in an urban area and the DfE website records nine other schools which admit children to reception year within one mile and another 13 such schools within two miles.

Consideration of proposed variation

14. 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.

15. The local authority said in the request form:

"This request is being made in response to sustained lower demand for places at the school and the need to ensure that admission arrangements reflect both current and projected pupil numbers within the West planning area. St Michael's Primary School has experienced a continued pattern of admissions below its current PAN of 60... The school is also experiencing significant financial pressures associated with falling

pupil numbers. Current budget forecasts indicate an in-year deficit of £241,605 in 2026/27, increasing to £359,463 in 2027/28. Maintaining a PAN that is substantially above actual demand would place further pressure on the school's finances and result in inefficient use of resources and accommodation.”

16. Following three requests for variations to reduce the PAN of schools in the local authority's area, with one, Southcote around one mile from the School, I asked the local authority for further information on admissions to reception year across its area. A summary is shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: admissions to reception year in 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

17. Table 1 shows an overall reduction in demand of 40 places between 2024 and 2026 and the number of places available (based on the sum of the PANs) has reduced by 135. In 2024/25, nearly 15 per cent of all places in reception year were vacant. For admissions 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 overall number of school places for reception year. The local authority's forecasts for future admissions are:

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

18. The forecast for reception year for 2027/28 is 1745, which is 30 fewer children than were expected to be admitted in 2026/27. The local authority also told me that the forecasts have been higher than the actual number of children admitted. I am therefore assured that if the PAN for the School were to be reduced to 30, that there would be sufficient school places to meet demand in the local authority's area.

19. The local authority has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient 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 schools that admit children to reception year. Table 2 provides a summary of the data provided by the local authority for admissions to schools in the planning area for reception year.

Table 2: summary information on admissions to reception year to schools in the planning area

	2024	2025	2026
Sum of PANs for the schools in the planning area	405	405	405
Number of first preferences	295	251	294
Number of admissions to reception year or expected admissions for 2026 as provided on 4 August 2026	333	291	352
Number of vacant places or expected number	72	114	53

20. Table 2 does not indicate a reduction in demand for places at the schools in the planning area since 2024. However, if the same pattern seen in admissions for September 2026 were to be repeated in 2027, leaving 53 vacant places, and the variation were to be agreed, there would still be 23 vacant places, which would be six per cent of the whole. Six per cent would be a generous proportion of vacant places. Again, I am assured that there would be sufficient school places in the area if the reduction to the PAN were to be agreed.

21. I turn now to demand for the School and table 3 provides information on the number of admissions to the School.

Table 3: admissions to the School

	2024	2025	2026
The PAN for the School	60	60	60
The number of first preferences	50	36	36
The number of admissions to reception year	54	37	43
The number of vacant places	6	23	17

22. The number of first preferences in recent years has been above the PAN requested and the number admitted above the number of first preferences. This means that the School has been the highest preference that can be achieved for some families. This makes it likely that if I agree the proposed variation that parental preference will be frustrated.

23. The governing body provided the following information on its financial situation:

“• 2024-25: In-year balance -£87,107, revenue reserve £244,705

- 2025-26: In-year balance -£197,360, revenue reserve £47,344
- 2026-27: Forecast in-year balance -£241,606, forecast revenue balance -£198,273”

24. I note here that three years of in-year financial deficits has considerably reduced the School’s reserves and it is anticipated that the School will have an overall deficit by the end of this financial year. Financial deficits can affect every aspect of the education a school provides and it is very hard to address them once created. It is clear that the School will have to take steps to address its forecast financial deficit.

25. The governing body also provided on 16 September 2026 the number of pupils in the School by year group and class organisation. This is shown below in table 4.

Table 4: number of pupils at the School and class organisation in September 2026

Year Group	Class 1	Class 2	Total
Reception year	21	22	43
Year 1	18	18	36
Year 2	26	28	54
Year 3	25	24	49
Year 4	25	23	48
Year 5	28	29	57
Year 6	27	28	55
Total			342

26. Table 4 shows that the School has continued to arrange its classes by year groups. Class teachers tend to be the most expensive aspect of a school budget and so reducing the PAN to 30 so that there is only one class in reception year, and then onwards through the School, would be one approach.

27. Mixed year group classes can be more cost effective. The older year groups, such as years 5 and 6, have approaching 30 to a class and so single year classes make sense. It is not until the current reception year and year 1 that there are very low numbers. The combined numbers, 43 and 36 respectively, make 79 pupils which could make three classes of 26 or 27. However, some schools do not like to blend reception year with year 1. The number of children in years 1 and 2 is 88; this could make three classes of 29 or 30 and so also meet the requirements of The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012.

28. The School has not chosen to take these steps which would have required adapting the curriculum, thus creating more work for staff, and which are often not popular with parents who may not understand the benefits that can accrue. On the other hand, if there is

a similar demand in 2027 to 2026, then 13 families are likely to be disappointed if the PAN is reduced to 30.

29. I know that there will be sufficient school places in the area if the PAN is reduced to 30. However, I have to balance the high likelihood of frustrating parental preference against the problems created by the financial deficit which is developing at the School. I think that the School can take other steps, rather than reducing the PAN to 30, to address the financial problem. I do not think the variation is justified given the demand for the School. I therefore do not agree the variation.

30. If further information becomes available, such as lower numbers seeking a place at the School when such information becomes available after the closing date for applications, then it remains open to the local authority to apply again for a variation for the School.

Determination

31. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Reading Borough Council for St Michael's Primary School, for 2027/28.

32. I determine that the published admission number for admissions in 2027/28 shall remain at 60.

Dated: 30 September 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Deborah Pritchard