Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: **VAR2818**

Admission Authority: **Norfolk County Council for Catton Grove Primary School**

Date of decision: **10 November 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 Norfolk County Council for Catton Grove Primary School for 2027/28.

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

The referral

1. Norfolk County Council, which is the admission authority for Catton Grove Primary School (the School), has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for the School for 2027/28 (the 2027 arrangements). Norfolk County Council (the local authority) is also the local authority for the area in which the School is situated.

2. The School is a community school for children aged two to eleven years in Norwich.

3. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) for the School is reduced from 70 to 60 in the 2027 arrangements.

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 2027 arrangements were determined by the local authority on 5 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.

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

7. 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.

8. 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 9 October 2026 (the request form) and supporting documents;

b) the determined 2027 arrangements and the proposed variation to those arrangements;

c) responses from the local authority and the governing body to my requests for further information;

d) maps showing the location of the School; and

e) information available on government websites including:
   a. 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS);
   b. 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT); and
   c. 'Find and compare schools and colleges in England' (the DfE website).

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. The admission arrangements for 2028/29 have not been determined. This means that if I agree the proposed variation for 2027/28, a baseline will be set which could continue for 2028/29 without consultation. The local authority is consulting on setting the PAN at 45 for 2028/29. This is a further reduction of 15 places from the reduction to 60 requested for 2027/28. This does not align with some of the matters raised in the request form and I asked the local authority to clarify. The local authority said that the:

> "proposal for a PAN of 45 for 2028/29 reflects the revised forecasts and preference modelling now available and represents an updated position for the subsequent admission year."

11. I will consider this request for a variation as having the potential for setting the baseline of 60 for 2028/29; the consultation process taking place is separate to my considerations.

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 explained in the request form that its reasons for seeking to reduce the PAN for the School from 70 to 60 included:

a. the demand for reception year places in the area is decreasing;

b. a PAN of 60 would allow the School to plan for two classes for each year group going forward; and

c. another school admitted approaching 30 children above its PAN in 2026 and this pattern is expected to continue.

14. Clearly the original proposal for two classes going forward for each year group will not be met if, following the current consultation, the PAN for 2028/29 will be set at 45 so this justification is possibly irrelevant now and so I set this aside. I will consider the demand for places in the area and then the demand for the School and the reasons why the variation is requested in more detail.

15. 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.

16. According to the DfE website, there are four other schools which admit children to reception year within one mile of the School and another 12 within two miles. The School is therefore located in an urban area where there are many schools in close proximity. This means that data on admissions is more complicated. Parents do not take account of

planning areas when they apply for schools. Other factors such as family connections, routes to work and a school's reputation will affect their preferences. Parents will make their first preference the school that they most want their child to attend; this may not be their nearest school. Given the proximity of several schools, the local authority said:

> "Catton Grove Primary School sits within a wider urban school network that is influenced by parental preference across both the Norwich North and Sprowston planning areas."

17. In other words, parental preferences have made planning areas less meaningful in forecasting demand for places in this context. There has been a history of significant numbers of parents preferring schools in planning areas in which they do not live. The local authority has therefore considered admissions not just in the planning area in which the School is situated. Patterns of admissions to schools have also changed as demand for places in reception year has reduced. This is because parents can access schools where previously their children would not have been admitted due to higher demand.

18. Given these circumstances the local authority has provided information on what might be called a bespoke planning area. This has 14 schools that admit children to reception year and covers two planning areas.

19. The local authority provided considerable data with the request form, including projections for the next decade taking planned housing developments into account. My jurisdiction is only for admissions in 2027/28, although it is reasonable for me to take future years into account particularly as the arrangements for 2028/29 have not been determined (as discussed above). Table 1 summarises the information provided.

Table 1: demand for places in the two planning areas for reception year

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Sum of the PANs of the schools in the two planning areas	880	880	745	745	N/A
Number of admissions with forecasts for 2027/28 and 2028/29	722	683	671	653	632
Number of vacant places and forecasts for 2027/28 and 2028/29	158	197	74	92	N/A
Proportion of vacant places as a percentage	18%	22%	10%	12%	N/A

20. Table 1 illustrates the reduction in demand and a growing proportion of vacant places. However, it does obscure the fact that one school, Garrick Green Infant School

(Garrick Green) admitted almost 30 children over its PAN in September 2026. This is entirely lawful and was in response to parental preference. However, the decision to do so affects the admissions of other schools and makes table 1 misleading. In other words, for admissions in 2026/27 there were an additional 30 places made available so the sum of the PANs is 30 places lower than the practice as 775 places were made available rather than 745. This would leave around 104 places vacant which is approaching 13 per cent of the total number of places.

21. 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 provide an operating margin for local authorities. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system". Clearly the proportions of vacant places in the two planning areas are considerably above two per cent, despite the reduced numbers of places made available from September 2026.

22. As the forecasts for 2027/28 are lower than for admissions in previous years, I am assured that if the PAN for the School were to reduce by ten places, from 70 to 60, then there would be sufficient places to meet demand for admissions in 2027/28 and 2028/29.

23. I will now consider demand for the School. Table 2 provides information on previous and forecast demand for admissions to reception year at the School provided with the request form on 9 October 2026.

Table 2: demand for reception year at the School

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
PAN for the School	70	70	70	70	N/A
Number of first preferences	61	64	57	N/A	N/A
Admission numbers with forecasts for 2027/28 and 2028/29	71	68	60	62	55

24. Table 2 shows the number of children admitted reduces between September 2024 and September 2026. The School has had more admissions than first preferences so in some instances it was the highest preference that could be achieved. I note that there are now 56 pupils in reception year so a reduction from the number admitted (60) and fewer than the PAN requested for 2027/28.

25. The School is one subject to the School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 (the Infant Class Sizes Regulations). These 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 schoolteacher except in specific exceptional circumstances. It is more economical to provide classes that have 30 or close to 30 pupils. If the class size is significantly smaller, then the costs of providing the class can be higher than the income derived from the pupils. In other words, if

a class has around 23 pupils, for example, then the costs of providing the class are likely to be higher than the income derived from the pupils within it. This can lead to financial deficit over time if not addressed.

26. FBIT records that at the end of the financial year in March 2026, the School had a revenue reserve of £196,453 and an in-year balance of £36,818. However, the local authority said:

> "the forecast balance [for the School] reduces from a surplus of £286,264 in 2026/27 to £141,622 in 2027/28 before moving to a deficit of £245,347 in 2028/29".

27. The local authority explained that the differences in the financial figures are because the local authority data: "is from our latest Norfolk local budget software which will be different to the financial year end data submitted at the end of 2025/26."

28. The financial data from both sources shows a deteriorating situation financially; the local authority and the governing body will want to take steps to avoid the School going into a deficit situation, which can harm the education of pupils in the School. The governing body has monitored the situation over recent years and said:

> "The Headteacher has developed and shared a detailed seven-year financial and organisational plan with Governors…The emphasis has always been on planning ahead, preserving educational quality and avoiding reactive decisions, ultimately to provide the best possible educational experience for the children and families in our catchment.
>
> Whilst Governors were aware that pupil numbers were expected to decline, the recent fall in demand has been greater than had originally been forecast by local catchment area data. Actual numbers have also fallen below earlier local authority predictions."

29. The current class organisation illustrates some of the challenges for the School and is shown in table 3 from information provided on 6 November 2026 by the governing body.

Table 3: current class organisation

	Number of pupils	**Class organisation**
Reception year	56	28 28
Year 1	67	28 30 9 in Y1/ Y2 class
Year 2	65	29 30

	Number of pupils	Class organisation
		6 in Y1/Y2 class
Year 3	64	21 22 21
Year 4	77	23 26 28
Year 5	88	30 28 30
Year 6	88	30 30 28

30. Table 3 shows that in years 5 and 6, when the PAN was 90 for the School, the School had three classes of 30 or close to 30 pupils. This is very cost effective. The numbers start to reduce and year 3, for example, has 64 pupils and three small classes which will not be cost effective.

31. The 56 pupils in reception year are organised into two classes, which is possible as there are fewer than 60 pupils even though the PAN was 70 for admission to that year group. Years 1 and 2 have two classes of near to 30 each and then one small, combined class of 15. This may be to give some children additional help in a very small class but also indicates the challenges of a PAN of 70 for the School.

32. The evidence provided by the local authority shows that there will be ample school places in the area to meet demand if the PAN is reduced to 60. There are other schools within a short distance of the School that admit children to reception year and minimal evidence that parental preference will be frustrated if the PAN is reduced to 60.

33. The governing body has demonstrated that it will aid efficiency and effectiveness of education if the PAN is set at 60 for admissions to reception year for 2027/28. In these circumstances I believe that the variation is justified by the circumstances and I agree the variation.

Determination

34. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Norfolk County Council for Catton Grove Primary School for 2027/28.

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

Dated: 10 November 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Deborah Pritchard