

Extended Schools Programme Annual Report 2024-2025



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Executive Summary

This report provides summary information and an evaluation of the 2024-25 financial year which is the 19th year that the Extended Schools (ES) Programme has supported schools in the most disadvantaged contexts across Northern Ireland. Funded schools are identified using deprivation criteria, applied by DE on an annual basis, including specified levels of pupils with a Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) and residing in areas classified as disadvantaged. Further background information on the programme can be obtained on the [DE website here](#) and a full list of the schools funded for the Programme can be viewed at [List of Extended Schools 24/25](#).

In 2024/25 the Department of Education (DE) provided £8.085m to a total of 456 schools and 143 clusters to deliver on 2,249 school and cluster action plans during the financial year. The allocation for 2024/25 matched the allocation for the previous financial year.

Chapter 3 provides a summary of programme delivery and highlights the scale and breadth of the programme with 41% of all schools in NI receiving ES funding. As in previous years, the flexibility of the ES programmes ensures a wide range of activities are delivered. This flexibility allows schools and clusters to respond to the changing needs of pupils (and families) which are a result of wider societal issues.

Chapter 4 provides a summary of the benefits of the programme including the numbers of pupils and parents who participated in ES programmes. This chapter also provides details of the support provided by the Education Authority's Community and Schools Team. In 2024/25 the EA delivered six cluster development sessions aimed at Developing Collaborative Networks.

Summary information and examples of current practice contained in Chapter 5 demonstrate how the ES programme delivers improved outcomes against the 4 main policy objective areas. These examples are taken from the annual evaluation reports submitted by schools and clusters.

Clustering has been a core element of the programme since its inception in 2006 and additional funding strands have been added to the cluster programmes since then. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of how Extended Schools clusters operated during 2024/25 as well as the main benefits and development areas for Extended Schools Clusters.

The report concludes with affirmation that the ES programme continues to provide much needed support to schools serving areas of disadvantage and, if anything, the need for such support to tackle educational underachievement is greater than ever. As a non-statutory provision the Extended Schools programme funding faces uncertainty on an annual basis and this uncertainty presents a challenge for schools.

Recommendations for development of the programme include the need to provide some certainty for schools to allow for more effective planning as well as a number of recommendations on how schools can be supported to maximise the impact of the programme.

Since its launch in 2006 the Extended Schools Programme has been a core element of the Dept of Education's Tackling Educational Disadvantage policy. As set out in the Extended Schools policy document "[Extended Schools: schools, families communities – working together](#)" *the programme aims to "... reduce underachievement and improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health well-being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of the support and services necessary to ensure every child has the best start in life"*. Further background information on the programme can be obtained on the [DE website here](#).

A full list of the schools funded for the Extended Schools Programme can be viewed at: Extended Schools Programme - [Eligible Schools & Funding 2024/25](#)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview, analysis and evaluation of the Extended Schools Programme across Northern Ireland (NI) for the year 2024/25 and to make recommendations for the continued development of the Extended Schools Programme.

2. Context

Policy

The Extended Schools Programme must be considered in the context of a range of government strategies, policies and programmes which also seek to address educational underachievement. These include:

- [Every Schools a Good Schools \(ESaGS\)](#) - policy for school improvement
- [A Fair Start](#) - A programme to address persistent educational underachievement
- [Dept of Education Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team](#) policies and funded programmes including
 - Full Service Schools Programme;
 - Targeting Social Need funding;
 - WRAP (DoJ/Tackling Paramilitarism)
- [RAISE Programme – a whole community, placed approach to raising achievement and addressing education disadvantage in 18 localities across Northern Ireland](#)



Methodology

Methodology

The report draws together information gathered from the Annual Attendance Monitoring and Annual Reports submitted by each school and cluster in the programme. The annual report comprises school context data, activity monitoring reports and summative self-evaluation of the programme in each school and cluster.

Following the submission of annual reports, EA Community and Schools Team review the reports and analyse the data provided. The outcome of this review and analysis forms the basis for this Regional Annual Report for the Extended Schools Programme across the Education Authority. The EA Community and Schools Team are in regular contact with schools and clusters throughout the year. As well as informal advice through phone and email, officers also attend cluster meetings and undertake induction meetings and monitoring visits to schools in the programme. Feedback from the Community and Schools Team also contributes to this report.

Schools were required to submit their annual reports by 30 June 2025 to report on the previous financial year. Given the pressures schools face at this time of year not all reports were completed.

This report is based on the number of schools and clusters that have been submitted by 8 November 2025 as follows:

- School Annual Reports: 92% of schools have completed an Annual Report
- Cluster Annual Reports: 84% of clusters have completed an Annual Report

The number of Annual Reports returned has increased compared to the same time last year (Schools: 86 % and Clusters: 79%). It should be noted that uncertainty of funding in the 2023/24 programme is very likely to have delayed school reports.

Measuring Impact

This evaluation report recognises the complexity of the policy context in which the Extended Schools Programme operates and, rather than attempt to attribute systemic improvements solely to the Extended Schools Programme, it will reference evidence of outcomes from local examples to demonstrate the positive impact of the Programme. These are included in the “Outcomes” Section.

Schools are encouraged to ensure robust monitoring is in place to capture quantitative data but it is equally important that schools are able to clearly articulate positive outcomes through qualitative information including attitude surveys, pupil and parent questionnaires and teacher observations.

Independent Review of Extended Schools Programme

In 2024/25 the Dept of Education commissioned Stranmillis University College (Centre for Educational Research) to undertake an independent review of the Extended Schools Programme. The review continued into the 2025/26 financial year and has been submitted to the Department.



3 Programme Delivery

What is an Extended School?

What does the Extended Schools Programme provide?

School and Cluster Programme Delivery



Eligibility Criteria - $\geq 37\%$ FSM or $>50\%$ of pupils with a postcode in a disadvantaged area

What is an Extended School?

“An Extended School provides a range of services and activities sometimes during or beyond the school day to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community . . .”

Eligible schools 24/25

- 456** Number of Schools receiving funding (inc. exiting schools)
- 403** Number of Schools receiving full funding
- 10** Number of schools receiving 50% funding (falling just short of the eligibility criteria)
- 5** Number of exiting schools – 25% for April-June)
- 38** Number of new schools receiving full funding
- 143** Number of clusters (Includes 30 IMES Clusters)
- 41%** of schools in NI receiving ES funding

Eligible schools by phase

- 288** Number of Primary Schools
- 67** Number of Post Primary Schools
- 62** Number of Nursery Schools
- 39** Number of Special Schools



- £5,098** Average/typical* allocation to nursery schools
- £12,796** Average allocation to primary schools
- £11,823** Average allocation to special schools
- £19,465** Average allocation to post primary

* Allocations are pro-rata to school enrolment



Funding

- £8.085m** Total Funding
- £5.788m** Individual school allocations
- £866k** Cluster Funding
- £866k** Cluster funding - Parenting
- £239k** Irish Medium Clusters
- £200k** EA admin support



Full details of the allocations are available on the DE website: [List of Eligible Schools 2024/25](#)

What does the Extended Schools Programme provide?

Action Plans submitted and approved

1851

Number of school programmes funded

398

Number of cluster programmes funded



Activity by time of day (top 3)

58.5% (-1.5)

After School

9%

Before School

10.5% (+1.5)

Service (specialist support delivery e.g. counselling)



Range of activities and programmes delivered

269 Health and Fitness

203 Literacy

179 Parenting/Family



Trends from 2023/24 (Up)

+0.6% Youth Activities and Skills

+0.4% Speech and Language

+0.3% Homework Club



Trends from 23/24 (Down)

-0.4% Literacy

-0.4% Language Club

-0.3% Community Links



88	Art/Craft/Design
167	Breakfast Club
82	Community Links
19	Cookery
88	Counselling
51	Drama/Dance
185	Extended Schools Co-Ord
4	First Aid
269	Health & Fitness
27	Healthy Eating
102	Homework Club
81	ICT & Key Skills
69	Language Club
203	Literacy
79	Music
90	Numeracy
179	Parenting/Family
32	Recycling/Eco Activities
16	Science Club
185	Specialist Clubs/Skills
34	Speech & Language
108	Sport & Sporting Skills
22	Summer Scheme
72	Youth Activities & Skills

4 Summary of Main Programme Trends and Benefits for 2024/25

The table below summarises the main benefits that the Extended Schools Programme 2024/25 has provided as well as delivery trends. This information is based on analysis of Annual Reports provided by schools and clusters

Programme Trends

1. Improved Attendance and Punctuality:

- Breakfast clubs and after-school activities have led to better attendance and punctuality among pupils. Schools have reported that these programmes can encourage pupils to attend school and in the most effective practice, schools will plan the timing and content of these programmes to target support at pupils and families. Schools have reported that the challenges faced by families in the current economic climate emphasise the importance of Breakfast Clubs.

2. Enhanced Academic Achievement:

- Targeted support programmes in literacy and numeracy, such as early morning clubs, homework support and after schools clubs, have improved academic performance. Schools use innovative ways to engage pupils outside the normal school day. There are examples where software programmes such as Mathletics and Accelerated Reader have been successfully used before and after school to engage pupils in subjects they might otherwise find challenging.

3. Increased Physical Activity:

- There is a strong emphasis on physical health through sports clubs, multi-sports sessions, and outdoor learning activities has led to higher participation in physical activities.
- Extended Schools funding was used by many schools and clusters to encourage pupils (and target groups) who would normally participate in sport/activity to do so. There are examples where sports/activities that are less “traditional” or “popular” have been used effectively.

4. Development of Social and Emotional Skills:

- Programmes focused on boosting self-confidence, resilience, and social skills, including storytelling sessions, gardening, and mental health support, have been used extensively to support the development of social and emotional skills. Demand for Health and Well Being support has continued to increase and the Extended Schools programme has been used effectively by schools and clusters to complement existing Health and Well Being provision. There are examples where schools and particularly clusters work with local community groups and partnerships to deliver Health and Well Being programmes.

5. Parental Engagement and Support:

- Workshops, family support services, and opportunities for parents to engage in school activities have strengthened school-community relationships. While engagement of parents is continually raised as a challenge by schools, there are many examples of effective practice. There is no one size fits all for parental engagement however joint pupil/parent activities are reported as being successful.

6. Community Involvement and Cultural Awareness:

- Schools and clusters have fostered a sense of community and cultural understanding through celebrating different cultures, involving local community groups in school activities, and using school premises for community events. Schools are encouraged to develop networks in their local community and Extended Schools Clusters (along with other partnership models) offer schools one way of doing this collectively.

Benefits

Pupils

95% of schools and clusters rated the benefits of their Extended Schools Programme for pupils to be “Very Good”

Most common benefits listed included

- Academic Improvement: Enhanced literacy and numeracy skills through targeted support programs.
- Physical Health: Increased participation in sports and physical activities.
- Emotional Well-being: Development of self-confidence and resilience through counselling and support services.
- Social Skills: Improved social interactions and teamwork through various clubs and activities.



Schools

The benefits to schools were rated as either “Very Good” (89%) or “Good”(10%).

Most common benefits listed included

- Alignment with School Development Plans and meeting priorities.
- Improved classroom engagement as pupils arrive settled and ready to learn.
- Enhanced reputation and community standing.
- Shared resources and cost efficiency via cluster collaboration and multi-agency partnerships.



Parents

92% of schools and clusters rated the benefits to parents as “Very Good” or “Good”

Most common benefits listed included

- Increased Involvement: Greater participation in their children’s education.
- Extended day Support: Extended day options like breakfast and after-school clubs help working parents including low income parents.
- Support services and resources to help with their children’s development.
- Opportunities for lifelong learning through accredited courses and informal classes.



Community

81% of schools and clusters rated the benefits of the programme for community as either “Very Good” or “Good”.

Most common benefits listed included

- Access to Services: Increased access to school facilities and services for families and the wider community.
- Cultural Understanding: Development of cultural awareness and collaboration with statutory and voluntary agencies.
- Community Engagement: Opportunities for community members to participate in school events and activities.



School and Cluster Programme Delivery

Attendance/participation

243,928

Total number of pupils

99,982

Total number of parents

38,871

Total number of community participants

+8.3% +18,653

% change in attendance from 23-24 Pupils

+14% +12,295

% change in attendance from 23-24 Parents

+28.8% +8,694

% change in attendance from 23-24

Community

SDP Impact

as reported by schools

90% Significant Impact on meeting School Development Plan priorities

9% Some impact on School Development Plan priorities



Who benefits

Activities by target group (Top 5)

53% Primary pupils

7% Foundation/Nursery

10% Parent and Pupil

10% Whole Community

19% Post Primary



Impact of programmes

(as per monitoring returns by schools)

89% of plans assessed as having full impact

9% of plans assessed as having partial impact

2% of plans cancelled/no impact*

*Note: All funding from cancelled plans is reallocated



Meeting policy objectives

(as reported by schools/ clusters)

98% (-1% change)

Reducing underachievement (some or strong evidence)

88% (-4%)

Fostering Health and Well Being (some or strong evidence)

91% (-4%)

Improving Life Chances (some or strong evidence)

90% (-1%)

Developing the Integrated Delivery of Support and Services (some or strong evidence)

Annual Report returns

92% (+6%)

% of schools that have submitted Annual Reports (on 8 Nov 2025)

84% (+6%)

% of clusters that have submitted Annual Reports (on 8 Nov 2025)

Education Authority Support

Number of action plans processed through www.NIESIS.org

1851
School action plans

398
Cluster action plans



Induction Support for Schools

Due to a change in the funding model in 2023/24 no “new” schools entered the programme however this was reviewed by the Dept of Education and in 2024/25 there was a total of 38 “new” schools. Although some of these schools had previously been in the programme, the majority were entering the programme for the first time. EA Community and Schools Team provided induction support to all of these new schools. This included an initial visit to the school with follow up support throughout the year to ensure that all schools successfully delivered programmes in 2024/25.

Monitoring Visits

67 Number of schools included in the EA monitoring visit schedule for 24/25.

19 Number of clusters included in the EA monitoring visits schedule for 24/25.

14% of schools and clusters that received a monitoring visit*.

*EA Delivery Model agreed with DE is for 10% of combined schools and clusters eligible for full funding in the financial year to receive a monitoring visit.



Support for Extended Schools and Clusters

- Newly appointed principals and Extended Schools Co-ordinators also receive induction support
- Reviewing and re-organising clusters
- Community and Schools Officers attend Cluster meetings and will support a cluster review process
- Sharing effective practice across schools and clusters (see page 13)
- Support for identified clusters from the EA Parent Support Co-ordinator on how to engage parents effectively

EA Community & Schools Team

The Extended Schools Programme is managed by the EA Community and Schools Team. For the 2024/25 year the team consisted of 1 x lead officer, 4 x locality officers and administration support. The Team provides point of contact support to all 456 schools and 143 clusters. This Team also has responsibility for a number of other policy and programme areas including Community Use of Schools, Community Planning and Neighbourhood Renewal.

Developing Collaborative Networks –Cluster Development Sessions (March 2025)

Principals and co-ordinators from Extended Schools (ES) Clusters, were invited to attend development days offered at six separate venues across EA in March and early April 2025. The objectives of the sessions were to provide:

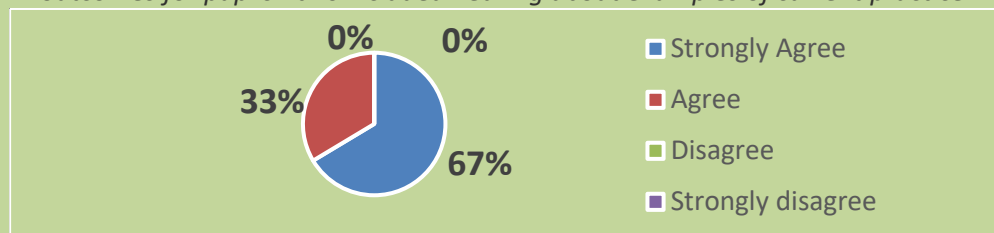
- A Programme update and Policy Review
- An opportunity for clusters school to review cluster provision with focus on developing collaborative networks and strengthening community links
- A forum for Sharing practice - clusters/community links and engaging parents
- Assistance to prepare for the 25/26 ES programme

The sessions were extremely well attended and the feedback from attendees was very positive. Resources gathered from the sessions, including examples of practice were shared with all Extended Schools via the NIESIS website.

Attendance

112	Number of Clusters receiving funding
6	Number of Venues
78	Number of Clusters attended
229	Number of attendees
70%	Clusters attended

"Attending the session helped me to understand how working collaboratively can improve outcomes for pupils - this included hearing about examples of current practice"



Face to face opportunity to meet was helpful. Great to meet other clusters and make connections and plans for the next academic year.

Was very useful and informative. Some inspirational programmes and ideas going forward. Good timing as next year's funding is imminent.

Very useful session. Informative. Excellent delivery and resources. Thank you.

A well delivered programme. Engaging and lots of ideas on how to move forward our extended school's cluster. Thank you.

Today was very valuable in considering ways to develop more parental engagement.

Great to get the opportunity to come together to share ideas. Enjoyed being with clusters from the wider locality as they know the area and are familiar with the issues.

5 Programme Outcomes

Policy Objective 1 - Reducing Underachievement

Policy Objective 2 - Fostering Health and Well Being and Social Inclusion

Policy Objective 3 - Improving Life Chances

Policy Objective 4 - Developing Integrated Delivery of Support and Services



Policy Objective 1: Reducing Underachievement

98% of schools and clusters reported they had 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programme met this objective

Indicator 1: Improved attendance



91% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided strong or some evidence of improved attendance as a result of the Extended Schools Programme

Examples of programmes include:

Areillian NS - Home Learning Pack/Parent Worker
St Colm's HS, Belfast - GCSE Revision Classes
Inner East Cluster, Belfast – Home School Liaison Officer

Holy Trinity PS, Belfast - Attendance Cup/Wellbeing

Beechlawn School, Counselling Programme

FOCUS

Holy Trinity PS, Belfast - Attendance Cup/Wellbeing

The school has identified the need to improve attendance rates as a School Development Plan priority and a range of programmes and services were introduced to do this. Two new attendance cups in each key stage were introduced and incentives were offered to pupils including cinema nights. The school also introduced wellbeing programmes to address increased pupil anxiety which was impacting on attendance. Programmes included HIP Psychology, Music Therapy and Mental Wealth Games.

Attendance rates across the school have improved by 1.2% in 2024/25 and by 2% over two years.

All 240 pupils participate in the programmes and parents also have also participated in Health and Well Being Programmes. The Well Being programme "HIP Psychology" has been particularly beneficial for Primary One pupils as it helps children manage their emotions, reduce anxiety and build resilience.

Indicator 2: Improved attainment including literacy and Numeracy



97% of schools report "strong" or "some" evidence that their ES programmes improved attainment

Examples of programmes include:

Clogher Valley Cluster – Coding Programme
Sacred Heart College - Twilight GCSE Programme
Seaview PS, Belfast - Rainbow Reading Programme
Bloomfield PS, Bangor – Catapult Club
Hill Croft School – Literacy and Numeracy Support
St Mary's College (Derry) – Saturday School
Ballykeel PS – Reading Partners Programme

FOCUS

Seaview PS, Belfast - Rainbow Reading

The school identified the need to provide early intervention reading support for pupils. The pupils were identified through analysis of PTE data, teacher assessment and consultation with parents. The support included 2 x 30min sessions of guided reading for the 16 pupils identified. Parents were also encouraged to participate in the programme and were provided with resources to support their children at home.

OUTCOMES

16 pupils received support through the Rainbow Reading programme. Progress for all pupils were tested using the Salford Reading Test. All pupils increased their reading age score with the **minimum increase 6 months and the maximum increase by 2 years**. Teachers and parents provided positive feedback on a programme which *"achieves excellent results"*

Indicator 3: Removing barriers to learning



96% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided 'strong' or 'some' evidence that barriers to learning were removed

Examples of programmes include:

Belfast Boys Model School – Streetbeat Programme
Elmgrove PS Belfast – Counselling Programme
Clarawood School – Play Therapy
St Brigid's PS Mountfield – Transitions Programme
St Paul's PS Slievemore – Families Connect Programme
Outer North Cluster - Yearn To learn/Aspire
Colaiste Feirste. Belfast - Reading for Anything

FOCUS

Elmgrove PS – Illuminate Counselling

The school identified that a significant number of children suffer from adverse childhood experiences including bereavement, family breakdown, parent mental health issues, friendship issues and poor routines. These experiences impact the children's ability to engage with school, with their peers and in their learning. The school partners with Illuminate Counselling to provide a specialised therapeutic service that supports not only pupils but also their families.

OUTCOMES

Comprehensive support to **66 clients**, delivering: **376 pupil counselling sessions 380 parent meetings** or support calls/texts 631 teacher/pastoral/key contact meetings **90 sessions** involving external agency contact **52 lunchtime** drop-in sessions. One teacher commented: *"Our school counselling service is not only an outstanding and necessary support to our children, it is invaluable to their families, teachers and assistants"*

Policy Objective 2: Fostering Health and Well Being and Social Inclusion

88% of schools and clusters reported they had 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programme met this objective

Indicator 1: Increasing physical activity



86% of schools reported 'strong' or 'some' evidence that their ES programme led to an increase in physical activity for children, adults and the wider community.

Examples of programmes include:

Colaiste Feirste, Belfast – Ladies Football Team
William Pnkerton PS, Dervock – Tag Rugby
Holy Cross Boys PS, Belfast – After School Sports
Cathedral NS, Belfast - Sonal Sports
Harberton School – Summer Scheme
Waterside 2 IM Cluster – Irish Dance Classes

Indicator 2: Maximising access to services



80% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programmes maximised access to services.

Examples of programmes include:

Mercy PS– Moving On (Transition) Programme
Ballymena Cluster - Enrich Programme
Dungannon/Armagh Special Cluster - Music Therapy
Blythfield PS, Belfast – Roots of Empathy
Waterside Cluster – Neuro-Diverse Support Programme
Currie PS, Belfast – Therapy Dog Programme

Indicator 3: Developing a better understanding of different cultures & backgrounds



78% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided 'strong' or 'some' evidence the ES programme helped pupils develop a better understanding of different background and cultures

Examples of programmes include:

Nettlefield PS, Belfast – (Newcomers) Nursery Rhyme Club
St Aloysius (Lisburn) Cluster – Intergenerational Culture Day
St Mary's HS Limavady – Newcomer Group
Steelstown PS, Derry – Korean Club
Coalisland IM Cluster – Culture Week
Upper Springfield Cluster- Newcomer Family Support

FOCUS

Holy Cross Boys PS – After Schools Sports

The school offers a range of after school sports clubs with a focus on encouraging pupils who do not usually participate in sports/physical activity. A wide range of sports including Gaelic Football, Hurling Camogie, Table Tennis, Handball and Multi Sports are offered. The school invites well-known local sportspeople in to take the coaching sessions in order to inspire pupils to participate in sports. The schools has established links with local sports clubs so that pupils have a pathway to develop their skills and fitness in the community outside school.

FOCUS

Waterside Cluster - Neuro Diverse Support Programme for families.

Over the past 3 years Community representatives and Youth Leaders have been reporting a substantial increase in the number of neuro-diverse children who have been attending after school and holiday youth provision and events in the local community – unfortunately these programmes are often unsuitable for the children and they eventually stop attending. Parents struggle to find suitable holiday activities and progress made during school is lost. Community organisations including Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership worked with schools to design and delivered a range of bespoke activities during Halloween, Christmas and February Half Term.

FOCUS

Steelstown PS – Korean Club

The introduction of the Korean Club was driven by a growing interest among pupils in global cultures, particularly in East Asian languages, media, and traditions. This interest has been fuelled by the popularity of Korean music, television, and food, which many pupils engage with outside of school. The school identified a valuable opportunity to build on this enthusiasm by offering a structured programmes where pupils could explore Korean language, customs, and culture in a fun and educational setting. The club provided language lessons, cultural activities and Themed Sessions as part of their Extended Schools Programme.

OUTCOMES

75% of P1-P7 at the school attend at least one or more of the sports sessions. **Approximately 50% of the pupils attending did not previously participate in sport/physical activities.** The school has noted that many pupils have gone on to join local sports clubs/teams to further their interest and improve fitness. Staff report that the standard of coaching is very high and teaches the boys skills such as leadership, patience and turn-taking.

OUTCOMES

45 pupils and 30 parents benefitted from the delivery of the activities delivered across a range of venues in the cluster locality. Parents reported the positive impact on their child's behaviour, social skills and confidence after participating in the activities. Parents also reported they themselves benefitted greatly – there was less stress during the holiday periods, and they were also able to share experiences with other parents/carers. The schools also developed networks and were able to refer pupils and parents to further support services in the community

OUTCOMES

All Pupils attended developed a deeper appreciation for Korean culture and traditions, gaining insights into a global perspective that fostered respect and curiosity for other cultures. **Language Development:** Children expanded their language skills by learning basic Korean vocabulary and phrases, boosting their confidence in acquiring new languages and enhancing their listening and pronunciation skills. **Improved Social Skills:** The club created a fun, collaborative environment where pupils from different year groups interacted, worked together on activities, and built friendships through shared learning experiences.

Policy Objective 3 - Improving Life Chances

91% of schools and clusters reported they had 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programme met this objective

Indicator 1: Supports parents to understand the development needs of their children and/or increased parental or community participation in education.

89% of schools reported 'strong' or 'some' evidence that their ES programme supported parents to better understand the development needs of their children and/or increased parental participation in education.

Examples of programmes include:

Holy Child NS, Belfast – Paediatric First Aid for parents
 Armagh City Cluster – Bilingual Parental Engagement
 Ceara and Donard Special School Cluster – Parent Plus Programme
 Victoria NS, Belfast – Behavioural Support Course
 Roddensvale Special School – Therapeutic Art Classes
 Omagh 2 Cluster - Online Safety Workshop



FOCUS

St Brigids PS Carnhill – Parent and Child Club (Foundation Stage)

The school identified a need to develop strong links with parents of P1 pupils in the life of the school and emphasise the importance of engaging with their children to support learning. The school provided a range of play sessions in the Year 1 classrooms for parents to attend with their children. Teachers and assistants modelled effective play and language to be used with the children. Time was set aside for parents to meet and have discussions with teachers, assistants and other families.

OUTCOMES

The majority of Year 1 parents attended these after school clubs. Positive feedback was received from parents. Simple ideas were shared with families on the importance of engaging positively with children at home and how it can have a positive impact on behaviour and learning. There was **positive feedback from teachers** on how well the sessions went and how beneficial it was to get to speak to parents and model things for them. There was also positive feedback from our pupils, who loved having their families in school.

Indicator 2: Providing opportunities for children to make informed decisions and make a positive contribution to their communities.

88% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programmes provided opportunities for children and young people to make informed decision and contribute positively to their communities.

Examples of programmes include:

Earlview PS, Newtownabbey - Earlview Little Owls
 Six Mile IPS, Antrim - ECO Club
 Bessbrook and Area Cluster – Gardening Club
 IMES Triax 2 Cluster (Post Primary) – Mental
 St Teresa's PS Belfast - Student Council and Charity Campaigns



FOCUS

Earlview PS (and Glengormley Cluster) – Earlview Little Owls

The school identified the need to develop links with the local community and to welcome parents and grandparents into the school on a regular basis. A school development priority was also supporting Early Childhood Development. Parents and grandparents were surveyed, and the club ran once a week from 9am to 10am. Parents/Grandparents bring their (preschool age) children to interact with children already at the school. Each session finishes with a group sing song or storytelling.

OUTCOMES

Earlview Little Owls has truly blossomed as a community project within the school. Starting with just 5 adults and 4 children, the group has grown significantly, now welcoming up to **17 adults and 17 children** on a weekly basis. Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing their enjoyment and desire for Earlview Little Owls to continue. The group has enhanced community connection, provided enjoyable and interactive sessions and promoted and increased mental wellbeing.

Policy Objective 4 - Developing Integrated Delivery of Support and Services

90% of schools and clusters reported they had 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programme met this objective

Indicator 1: Enabling schools to work closely with relevant statutory and voluntary agencies whose work impacts on education, including neighbourhood renewal groups

79% of schools reported 'strong' or 'some' evidence that their ES programme enabled schools to work closely with statutory and voluntary agencies whose work impacts education.

Examples of programmes include:

Knockavoe School – FestivALL Performance

Largymore Cluster – Connected Kids

St Mary's College (Derry) - Outer West Health Fayre

St Joseph's College, Enniskillen – National Trust Family Programme

Hazlewood Cluster – Cluster Cultural Diversity Event

Newry and Mourne Cluster – Community Summer Programme



FOCUS : Largymore Cluster, Lisburn – Connected Kids

Cluster schools identified a growing number of pupils presenting with anxiety, attachment difficulties and challenges with emotional regulation. The schools also aimed to support parents to respond effectively to their child's emotional needs as home. A **10-week Connected Kids programme** was delivered in each cluster schools. Small-group intervention supporting **10–12 pupils per programme** was delivered by a **trained counsellor**. Pupils were taught strategies to manage their emotions and parents were also engaged. The cluster works closely with **Lisburn Early Intervention Group** to support a range of programmes aimed at improving outcomes for children in the area.

OUTCOMES

60 pupils directly supported and **60 parents** engaged successfully across **all cluster schools**. All participating pupils maintained **good attendance** throughout the 10-week programme. **Pre- and post-programme assessments** showed **significant improvement** in pupils' emotional wellbeing and self-regulation and reduced anxiety levels across all participating pupils. Staff noted Improved capacity to attend and engage in school. Pupils reported feeling happier, calmer and more confident and parents expressed high levels of satisfaction. Schools observed improved pupil engagement and emotional regulation which positively impacted on learning behaviours.

Indicator 2: enhancing and augmenting existing local provision including cluster participation.

91% of schools and clusters reported that their ES programme provided 'strong' or 'some' evidence their programmes enhanced and augmented local provision including cluster participation.

Examples of programmes include:

Triax 1 (Primary) Cluster - Language Development Programme

Bloomfield Cluster – Counselling and Family Support Programme

Downpatrick Cluster - Action Mental Health

Upper Springfield Cluster – Newcomer Family Support

Little Voice (Belfast) Cluster - Stay and Play Sessions

Dungannon Rural Cluster – Speech and Language Therapy

FOCUS: Dungannon Rural Cluster – Speech and Language Therapy

Cluster schools identified a significant and rising number of children presenting with speech, language, social interaction and communication difficulties, particularly in Nursery and Foundation Stage. These difficulties were creating barriers to accessing the curriculum. An early intervention approach was adopted whereby a Speech and Language Therapist was employed to carry out pupil assessments, develop individual programmes and weekly therapy sessions were delivered in schools. Targets and strategies were shared with Teachers, Classroom Assistants and Parents.

OUTCOMES

31 pupils across the 3 Primary Schools in the cluster received support. **58 parents** engaged in supporting their child's programme. **12 Community** referrals were supported through the programme. Attendance at sessions was consistently high and **outcome reports for all pupils showed clear improvement** from initial assessment. Children demonstrated: Improved clarity of speech, enhanced expressive and receptive language skills and greater confidence contributing in class. Teachers reported Improved ability of pupils to access age-appropriate learning. Parents reported increased confidence supporting their child. Staff also felt upskilled in identifying Speech & Language needs of children.

Introduction

Extended Schools Clusters are a core component of the Extended Schools Programme. Clustering involves schools working together to address the needs of their pupils, parents and communities. Clusters often work in partnership with external organisations including local statutory, voluntary and community organisations. This collaborative approach provides opportunities for school to access additional expertise and resources not available to individual schools in order to improve outcomes.

This section provides a summary of how Extended Schools Clusters operated in 2024/25 and highlights some examples of how clusters achieved these improved outcomes.



How does the Extended Schools Cluster model work?

Entering into a cluster arrangement is not compulsory however schools are strongly encouraged to do so in order to realise the benefits from sharing resources and facilities which can potentially provide a greater range of opportunities for pupils. Clustering also provides 15% additional resources as part of a network allowance.

Extended Schools Clusters have 3 defined strands as follows:

1. General strand

Each fully eligible school receives an additional 15% funding allocation to provide joint extended schools programmes and services.

2. Parenting strand

Each fully eligible school received an additional 15% funding to provide joint extended schools programmes which have a specific focus in parent support and engagement.

Schools working in a cluster will combine their allocations from 1 & 2 to make up a cluster budget for the year. Each cluster has a lead school which coordinates the cluster programme. The lead schools will submit action plans and receive the full cluster budget allocation.

3. Irish Medium Strand

In 2024/25 funding was again made available to those ES Clusters wishing to deliver programmes to promote learning and awareness of the Irish language across schools and communities.

What did Clusters do in 24/25?

Details of cluster provision for 24/25 are set out below.

What is the Extended Schools Cluster Programme - the numbers

Number of schools in clusters

113

Number of ES Clusters

30

Number of Irish Medium Clusters

143

Total Number of Clusters

454

Number of funded schools in clusters for 24/25

Funding



£866 Cluster Funding General

£866k Cluster funding - Parenting

£239k Irish Medium Clusters

£1,971k Total Cluster Funding

What does the Extended Schools Cluster Programme provide?

398 Number of cluster programmes funded

Cluster Activity by time of day (top 3)

55% After School

16% Service

13% Day (Adults)



Clusters Attendance/participation

76,354

Total number of pupils

33,083

Total number of parents

9,734

Total number of community participants

Range of activities and programmes delivered

(see activity category table)

Most popular categories of programme

60

Parenting/Family Support

50

Health and Fitness (including Counselling)

37

Language Club

31

Literacy support



Extended Schools Clusters - What are the outcomes?

Extended Schools Cluster Reports provide evidence of improved outcomes across all four Programme Objectives.
The following examples provide an illustration of how clusters deliver improved outcomes through the various funding strands.

Policy Objective – Reducing Underachievement and Improving Life chances

Cluster Strand - General

Cluster Name – Downpatrick 1 Cluster – Lead School Downpatrick Primary School

Cluster Programme – Health, Speech and Language and Attendance Programmes

Budget - £41,694

Programme Summary

Need

- **Increasing levels of pupil anxiety, low self-esteem and emotional dysregulation**, particularly in Key Stage 2 pupils
- **Speech, language and communication delay** in nursery aged children, compounded by long Trust waiting lists
- **Attendance concerns**, particularly for pupils experiencing emotional, social or transitional barriers
- Limited availability of **school based mental health services** following the withdrawal of previous third sector provision
- A need to support **parents' understanding of their children's emotional and developmental needs**, particularly where external services were stretched

Across areas the cluster organises support in each school depending on need as follows:

Delivery

a) Action Mental Health – “Healthy Me: Level Up” Programme

- Delivered across four primary schools focused on Anxiety, Self-esteem, Self-regulation and Self expression
- Small group delivery (4 × 90-minute sessions per group) and additional targeted modules based on school need

b) ASD Speech and Language Therapy (Nursery Schools)

- 15 sessions (4 hours per session) delivered in school including Individual and group therapy focused on:
- Phonological awareness, Vocabulary development and Social communication and turn taking

c) Attendance Support and Engagement

- Attendance Support Worker deployed across the cluster
- Targeted interventions for pupils at risk of disengagement
- Alternative engagement pathways delivered through partnership with the Patrician Youth Centre for post primary pupils

Outputs/Outcomes

- **Healthy Me Level Up Programme:**
279 pupil participants across primary schools
 - **ASD Speech and Language Therapy:**
71 pupils and 71 parents supported
 - **Attendance Support Interventions:**
288 pupils and 12 parents engaged
 - **Post Primary Targeted Programme:**
13 Key Stage 4 pupils supported over a 36 week intervention
 - **Self-esteem improvements (St Nicholas' PS, Ardglass – P7):**
54% of boys recorded increased self esteem
88% of girls recorded increased self esteem
 - **Anxiety awareness:**
72% of boys and 75% of girls understood what anxiety is
82% of boys identified strategies to manage anxiety
 - **Speech and language outcomes (Nursery):**
Reduction of pupils scoring 2+ levels below age expectations from 24% to 0%
 - **Attendance impact:**
Examples: Two previously non attending post primary pupils improved attendance to 68% and 72%
 - Staff reported observable improvements in pupil confidence, engagement and emotional regulation
- Parents valued therapy and wellbeing support being delivered in school rather than clinic, reducing disruption and anxiety
- Pupils reported enjoyment of sessions and confidence in using new strategies
 - Schools reported stronger home-school communication and shared language around wellbeing
 - Increased engagement in extracurricular activities contributed to improved attendance and motivation

Policy Objective – Fostering Health and Well Being, Social Inclusion & Parental Engagement
Cluster Strand – General/Parental Engagement
Cluster Name -North Belfast Cluster: Lead School: Mercy Primary School
Cluster Programme – Counselling, Parental Engagement and Wellbeing including After School Sports
Budget - £33,602

Programme Summary

Need

- Address increasing emotional and mental-health needs among pupils in North Belfast communities
- Support pupils experiencing anxiety, emotional dysregulation and low resilience, which were acting as barriers to learning
- Improve parental confidence in supporting children's emotional wellbeing and behaviour at home
- Provide accessible, non-stigmatising support services within school settings due to limited community provision
- Strengthen transition support between nursery, primary and post-primary phases

Delivery

- Professional counselling services commissioned across the cluster to support pupils most in need, identified collaboratively by parents and pastoral staff
- A broad programme of after-school sports and enrichment activities (gymnastics, football, multi-sports), supporting physical and mental wellbeing
- Parent engagement and wellbeing sessions, delivered in partnership with Parenting Focus and Eden Consultancy
- Structured parent-child activities, supporting emotional awareness, self-worth and resilience
- Continuation of transition programmes between nursery, primary and Mercy College

Output/Outcomes

- **Counselling Service:** 60 pupils and 60 parents supported
- **Parent Engagement and Wellbeing:** 250 pupils and 50 parents participated in sessions
- **After-School Sports:** 120 pupils engaged
 - Improved **attendance and engagement**, supported by a diverse programme of motivating activities
 - Evidence of improved **reading levels (P4–P7)** linked to the integration of learning technologies
 - Oversubscribed physical activity programmes, demonstrating strong uptake
 - Pupils reported **improved emotional wellbeing, resilience and coping strategies**, supporting readiness to learn
 - Parents provided positive feedback on counselling and wellbeing provision, noting improved family communication
 - Schools reported enhanced **pupil confidence, enjoyment of school and behaviour**
 - Stronger community relationships emerged through cross-school and parent engagement activities



Policy Objective – Improving Life Chances

Cluster Strand – Irish Medium

Cluster Name – IMES Lurgan Cluster – St Frances PS, Lurgan (Lead School)

Cluster Programme – Irish Language Development Programme

Budget - £7,995

Programme Summary

Need

- **Improve pupils' confidence and competence in spoken Irish,**
- Address barriers for pupils **without Irish speakers in the home**, limiting reinforcement of learning outside school
- Support parents who are **highly committed to Irish-medium education but lack confidence or fluency** in Irish
- Improve literacy skills in Irish, including reading confidence and comprehension

Delivery

- **Club na nÓg youth provision** for pupils R4–R7, providing weekly opportunities to use Irish socially in a relaxed setting
- **Peer-paired reading initiatives**, supported by purchased Irish-language reading materials and digital resources
- **Irish language parent classes**, building functional vocabulary and confidence to support learning at home
- Participation in **speech and language festivals and Feis Ard Mhacha**, promoting spoken Irish and confidence
- An **all-Irish football blitz and fun day**, enabling language use beyond the classroom in a community context
- Provision of **transport** to facilitate participation in Irish-language events

Outputs/Outcomes

Outputs

- 153 pupils participated in the programme across the cluster schools
- 20 parents participated in language classes
- 11 community members involved

Outcomes

Literacy improvement: 80% of pupils involved in peer-paired reading improved their reading level in Irish

Pupils demonstrated: Increased confidence in spoken Irish, greater willingness to use Irish socially, Improved reading independence and enjoyment

Parents reported: Reduced stress during homework time, Increased confidence supporting Irish at home and stronger engagement with school

Schools observed: Greater pupil confidence and inclusion, strengthened peer relationships and improved connection between school, home and the Irish-language community

Extended Schools Cluster in 2024-25 - Benefit Summary and Development Areas

In 2023/24 there were 408 cluster programmes provided across 138 clusters. These programmes are designed to meet local need therefore there is a wide range of activities and programmes provided. The following summary table is not exhaustive but provides a summary of the main benefits and trends reported by school as well as the main development areas.

General

Benefits:

Enhanced Learning Experiences: Pupils benefited from a variety of activities, including sports, music, and digital skills such as coding and VR, which contributed to their overall development.

Improved Attendance and Academic Achievement: Clusters reported that a range of provision including sports, music, arts have positively impacted on school attendance and academic performance, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Clusters can pool resources to provide programs focusing on physical activities, counselling, and mental health support have significantly improved pupils' health and wellbeing. There are examples where clusters work closely with local community groups to develop services and programme to support health and well-being.

Community Engagement: Schools have fostered better relationships with parents and the community, encouraging greater involvement in school activities and events.

Trends:

Focus on Mental Health: There is a strong emphasis on mental health and wellbeing, with many clusters incorporating counselling and mental health programs. Often individual schools would not be able to access or afford these services. The impact of Covid continues to be referenced by schools with regard to mental health.

Alignment of School Development Plans and Community Needs: Clusters assess need across schools and in the local community to identify priorities



Parent Strand

Benefits:

Parental Support and Education: Parents received support through workshops and programs that helped them understand and support their children's educational needs better.

Improved Parent-Child Relationships: Activities designed to involve parents in their children's learning have strengthened family bonds and improved communication.

Enhanced Learning Outcomes: With better parental support, schools reported that children showed improvements in academic performance, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

Access to specialist advice and pathways

Cluster-funded parent programmes, counselling and signposting created clearer routes to external services, early intervention and adult learning opportunities.

Trends:

Increased Parental Engagement: Cluster Annual Reports show there is a noticeable trend towards involving parents more in the educational process through targeted workshops and support programs. Informal engagement methods are particularly effective at the early stages of engagement

Focus on Early Years: Many programs are aimed at supporting parents of younger children, ensuring a strong foundation for future learning. There are excellent examples of practice in Nursery School.

Parent Support Workers – there are examples of clusters appointing parent support workers



Irish Medium Strand

Benefits:

Language Development: Pupils have improved their Irish language skills through immersive activities and programs which are provided outside the classroom.

Support for non-Irish speaking parents: Cluster approaches helped bridge language barriers, improving parental understanding of learning, school routines and wellbeing support.

Community and Parental Involvement: Parents and the community have been actively involved in supporting Irish language and cultural activities, fostering a strong sense of community.

Trends:

Emphasis on Language: There is a strong focus on promoting the Irish language through various activities and programs.

Collaborative Learning: Schools are working together to provide shared learning experiences, enhancing the sense of community and collaboration.



Development Areas - Clusters

Summary of the key development areas for Extended Schools Clusters from 2024/25 is:

Cluster structures

Extended Schools Clusters should review current cluster structures against best/effective practice to ensure they are meeting the requirements of the programme and are maximising the impact of the cluster funding.

Collaborative Networks

Extended Schools Clusters should review current structures in the context of other partnerships/networks in their geographical area. While this is not always possible or practical to adopt a fully integrated placed based approach across networks, clusters should at least audit external links in the local community in order to assess if there are opportunities to collaborate.

Demonstrating Impact

Cluster Annual Reports contain a wide range of benefits however in some reports the evidence provided can be general/anecdotal. More explicit evidence should be included in Cluster evaluation reports.

Parental engagement

Community and Schools officers attend a significant number of cluster meetings across the year. Feedback from clusters indicate that sustained parental engagement continues to be a development area.



The 2024/25 Extended Schools Programme has once again demonstrated its vital role in supporting children, families and communities experiencing the highest levels of educational and social disadvantage across Northern Ireland. In its nineteenth year of delivery, the programme continues to provide a flexible, responsive and locally-informed way for schools to address barriers to learning that are often beyond the reach of statutory provision alone.

Evidence from school and cluster annual reports confirms that Extended Schools funding has been used strategically to respond to a complex and evolving landscape. Schools have faced increasing challenges related to pupil mental health and wellbeing, attendance, speech and language needs, family hardship and the long-term impacts of Covid-19. The programme's flexibility has enabled schools and clusters to tailor provision closely to identified local needs, ensuring that support remains targeted, preventative and meaningful.

The scale of delivery in 2024/25 reflects the continuing need for Extended Schools provision. With 456 schools and 143 clusters funded, representing 41% of all schools in Northern Ireland, the programme has supported substantial participation by pupils, parents and the wider community. Improved attendance and punctuality, enhanced engagement in learning, strengthened emotional wellbeing and increased parental involvement were consistently reported outcomes. Importantly, 95% of schools rated the benefits of the programme for pupils as "Very Good", with similarly strong ratings for parents, schools and communities.

Cluster working has remained a core strength of the programme. Clusters have enabled schools to pool resources, access specialist expertise and deliver services—such as counselling, speech and language therapy, emotional wellbeing programmes and parenting support—that would be difficult for individual schools to sustain independently. Irish-medium clusters have continued to play a crucial role in supporting language development, parental confidence and cultural identity, particularly for families without Irish speakers in the home. Evidence across cluster reports demonstrates improved outcomes across all four Extended Schools policy objectives.

Parental engagement remains both a significant success and an ongoing development priority. Many schools and clusters have built strong, trust-based relationships with parents through informal learning opportunities, joint parent-child activities and wellbeing programmes. These approaches have strengthened home-school partnerships and increased parents' confidence in supporting learning and development. At the same time, sustaining parental engagement—particularly for the most marginalised families—continues to require time, consistency and targeted support.

The Education Authority Community and Schools Team has played a key role in supporting programme delivery, providing induction, monitoring, advice and opportunities for shared learning throughout the year. Development sessions for clusters have been particularly effective in strengthening collaborative networks and supporting continuous improvement.

In conclusion, the 2024/25 Extended Schools Programme has delivered demonstrable impact in addressing educational disadvantage and improving life chances for children and young people. However, as a non-statutory programme, ongoing uncertainty around funding presents a significant challenge. Greater stability and longer-term certainty would enable schools and clusters to plan more effectively, embed successful practice and maximise the long-term impact of this essential programme. The evidence contained within this report underscores that the need for Extended Schools support is not diminishing; rather, it is more necessary than ever.

Recommendations

Provide greater funding certainty to enable Strategic Planning

The report highlights that the Extended Schools Programme delivers consistent, demonstrable impact across all four policy objectives. However, as a non-statutory programme, annual funding uncertainty creates challenges for schools in sustaining successful interventions, retaining skilled staff, and embedding effective practice. Greater certainty would enable schools to move from short-term planning to strategic, preventative approaches, particularly in areas such as counselling, speech and language therapy, parental engagement and early intervention support.

Strengthen evidence-based impact reporting across schools and clusters:

Schools and clusters need further support to continue to strengthen the quality and consistency of impact reporting, with increased emphasis on measurable outcomes alongside qualitative evidence. While the report contains strong examples of positive impact, it also identifies that some cluster and school reports rely on general or anecdotal descriptions. Additional guidance and support on evaluation would help schools clearly demonstrate how Extended Schools interventions contribute to improved attendance, wellbeing, attainment and parental engagement. This aligns with the programme's emphasis on accountability and value for money

Prioritise sustained Parental Engagement as a core Programme outcome

Continue to prioritise parental engagement as a core strand of Extended Schools delivery, with greater emphasis on sustained and targeted approaches for hard-to-reach families. The report shows that parental engagement programmes deliver strong benefits for pupils, parents and schools, yet sustained engagement remains a development area. Evidence suggests that informal, relationship-based and joint parent-child activities are particularly effective, especially in early years and primary settings. Additional support for clusters to develop parental engagement strategies would build capacity and consistency across the programme.

Further develop and align cluster working and community partnerships

Encourage clusters to continue to review and refine their structures, strengthening collaboration with existing local networks and external statutory and voluntary partners. Cluster working is a key strength of the Extended Schools Programme, enabling access to specialist services and shared expertise. The report notes, however, that some clusters could benefit from reviewing how they align with other community planning, neighbourhood renewal and family support structures. Stronger alignment would reduce duplication, maximise reach and increase the overall impact of cluster provision.

