

School Population Projections, 2024/25 based – September 2026

The Department of Education (DE) has today, published annual School Population Projections for Northern Ireland.

These projections estimate pupil numbers across school phases in Northern Ireland until 2034/35. They are primarily informed by birth and population forecasts produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The methodology incorporates recent demographic and educational trends, such as increased retention beyond the minimum school leaving age and patterns in pre-school education participation. Additionally, the projections reflect a range of (annually reviewed) assumptions provided by policy across the Department of Education. These are listed as footnotes to the table.

These projections are not forecasts and do not attempt to predict the impact of future policy changes. Demographic behaviour is inherently uncertain and therefore projections will inevitably differ to a greater or lesser extent from actual future population. Projections become increasingly uncertain as they go forward into the future.

Key Facts and Figures

All comparisons are based on actual data from 2024/25 and projected data from 2034/35:

- Across all school phases, pupil numbers are projected to decline by 15.7% by the 2034/35 academic year.
- The pre-school education sector is projected to experience a 19.5% decline in enrolment. In addition to this overall decline in numbers, a shift in enrolment patterns is anticipated, with an increase in full-time places and a corresponding reduction in part-time provision. These changes are driven by the implementation of the [Pre-School Standardisation Programme](#).
- Enrolment in primary and preparatory schools (year 1 – year 7) is projected to decline by 23.1%.
- Post-primary school enrolments are projected to decline by 13.2%.
- In contrast to overall declining enrolments, the number of pupils in special schools and specialist provisions within mainstream is projected to increase from 12,021 in 2024/25 to 19,085 in 2034/35, an increase of 58.8%. As a result of this growth, the special education sector is expected to account for 6.4% of the total school population, up from 3.4% in 2024/25.
- The projected declines in school enrolments are consistent with general population trends. Between 2024 and 2034, the population of children aged 3 to 17 is expected to decrease by 15.4%, according to 2024 based [NISRA population projections](#). When broken down by age group, the data show a 17.8% decline among 3-year-olds, a 21.0% decline among those aged 4 to 10, and a 12.8% decline among those aged 11 to 15. A decline of 2.6% is projected for the 16 to 17 age group over the same period.