education for sustainable development forum

Extreme weather impacts on Education in Northern Ireland

This paper and associated graphs illustrate the extent of lost learning days due to extreme weather in Northern Ireland between 2019 and 2026. This is an example of how the climate crisis is already having a real-life and lived impact on the education of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Climate change appears to impact weather patterns mostly in terms of frequency and intensity. Since the negative impacts of climate change already affect children in multiple aspects of their lives, it is essential that they are taught about climate change and its impacts, and how they can effectively adapt to them.

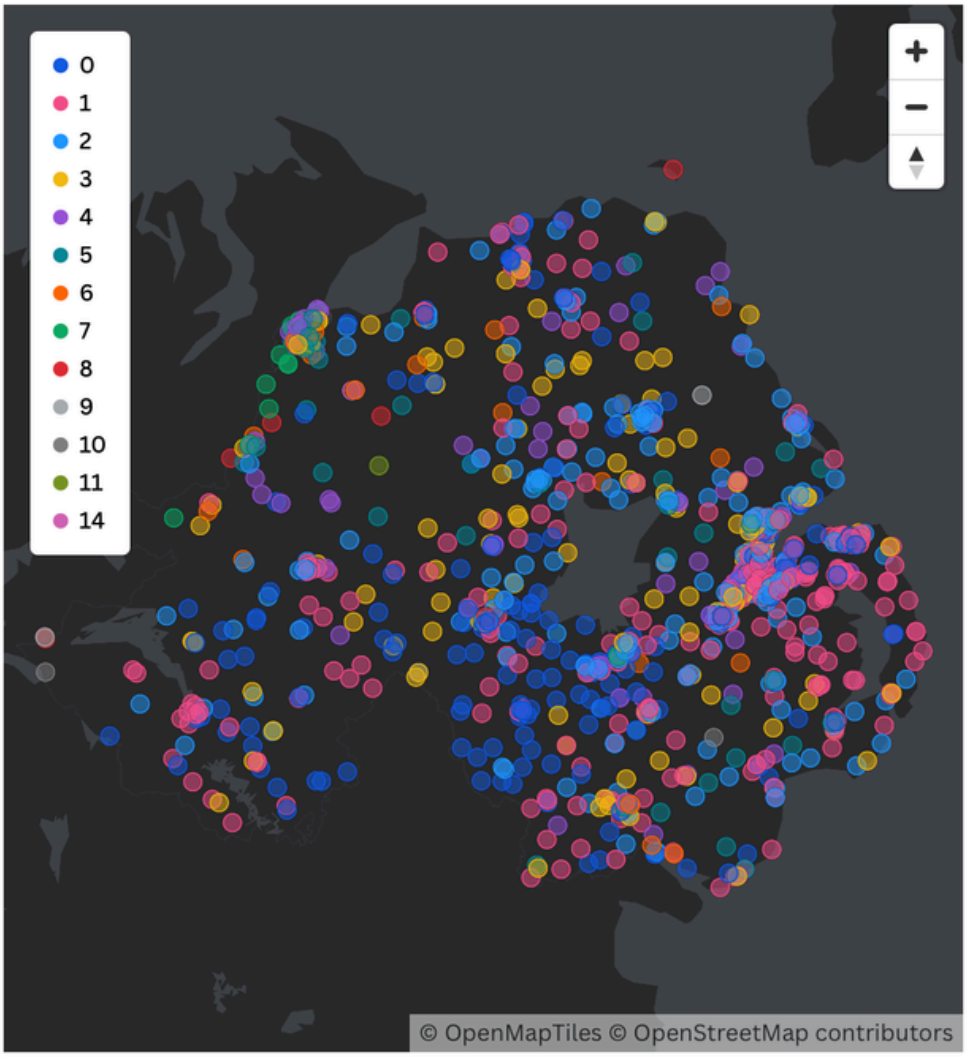
In 2025, the Education Minister announced a review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. This opened the opportunity for ESDF to advocate for change in the Transform Ed NI Curriculum 2028. The importance of our children and young people learning about Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), including environment, nature, climate and outdoor learning, can not be underestimated. Education represents one of our most significant social interventions to address climate change. Children and their education are being directly impacted by extreme weather. They have a right to learn about the subjects directly impacting them. Instilling this awareness from an early age can equip them with the knowledge that will support their current and future adaptation actions to a constantly changing environment. Education for Sustainable Development can act as a useful tool and medium of lifelong learning and social development on subjects related to nature and climate change.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, with reference to UNCRC Articles 28 and 29, states that *"Children should be given environmental education that is accurate and in ways they understand. Environmental education should support children to connect with, and respect, the environment. The places where children learn should be safe from environmental harm". As duty-bearers of children and young people's* rights, it is imperative that Education and skills for Sustainable Development be part of our school life and across curriculum and subjects.

Based on data supplied by the Department of Education for the period between 2019 and 2026, the mean number of education days missed due to extreme weather in Northern Ireland was over 2.5 days. Figure 1. All schools closed for a long period during 2020 and beyond due to the Covid 19 pandemic. During this time, there were 3 storms in Northern Ireland. The data on the impact of these storms is not included in this paper.

Figure 1: School Closures caused by adverse weather in NI

Number of full closure days since 2019 per school.



Source: Department of Education- NI Gov FOI (ED1 26 44339 Adverse weather data), Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team, 2026 •

The combined overall period of missed school days due to extreme weather for all schools and nurseries in Northern Ireland (between 2019 and 2026) would be equal to over 6 years of missed education days (6.11 years). This does not include schools closing early due to extreme weather. Early closures lie with the decision-makers at the individual schools, and that data is not collected by the Department of Education.

230

Overall, 230 nurseries/schools have closed for more than 5 days due to extreme weather in the period between 2019-26

2.5

The mean number of education days missed due to extreme weather in Northern Ireland was over 2.5

11

11 weather warnings due to rain and the impact of heavy rainfall

8

8 weather warnings due to wind and its impacts

7

7 weather warnings due to ice and its impacts

2026

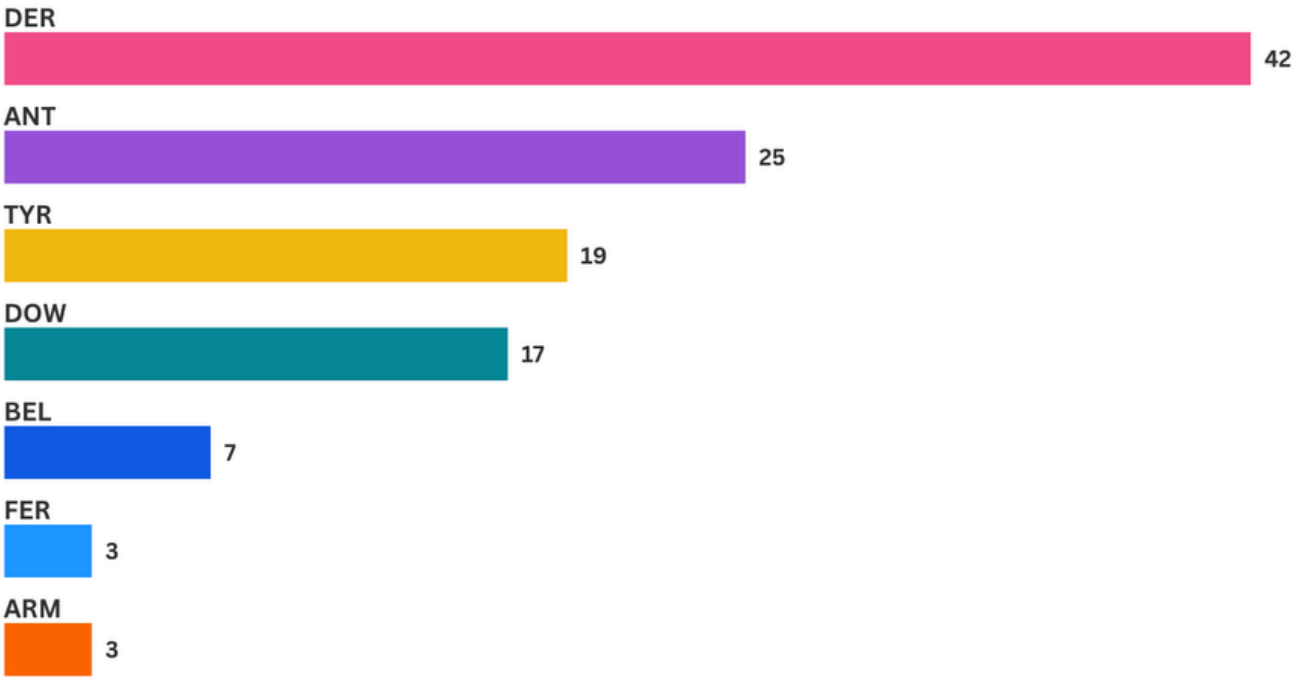
Has been the worst year for school closures due to extreme weather since 2019

Figure 2. The top 3 areas by county that have been most impacted by extreme weather school closures during the period of 2019-26 are:

- County Londonderry/Derry: 42 schools
- County Antrim, not including Belfast City Centre: 25 schools
- County Tyrone: 19 schools

School closures due to weather conditions are not always based on the geographical area or the impact of localised weather. Decision-making includes risk assessment and such considerations as health and safety, staff and pupil travel, and conditions of the school buildings, its grounds and estate.

Figure 2: Schools with more than 5 or more days closed since 2019, sorted by county

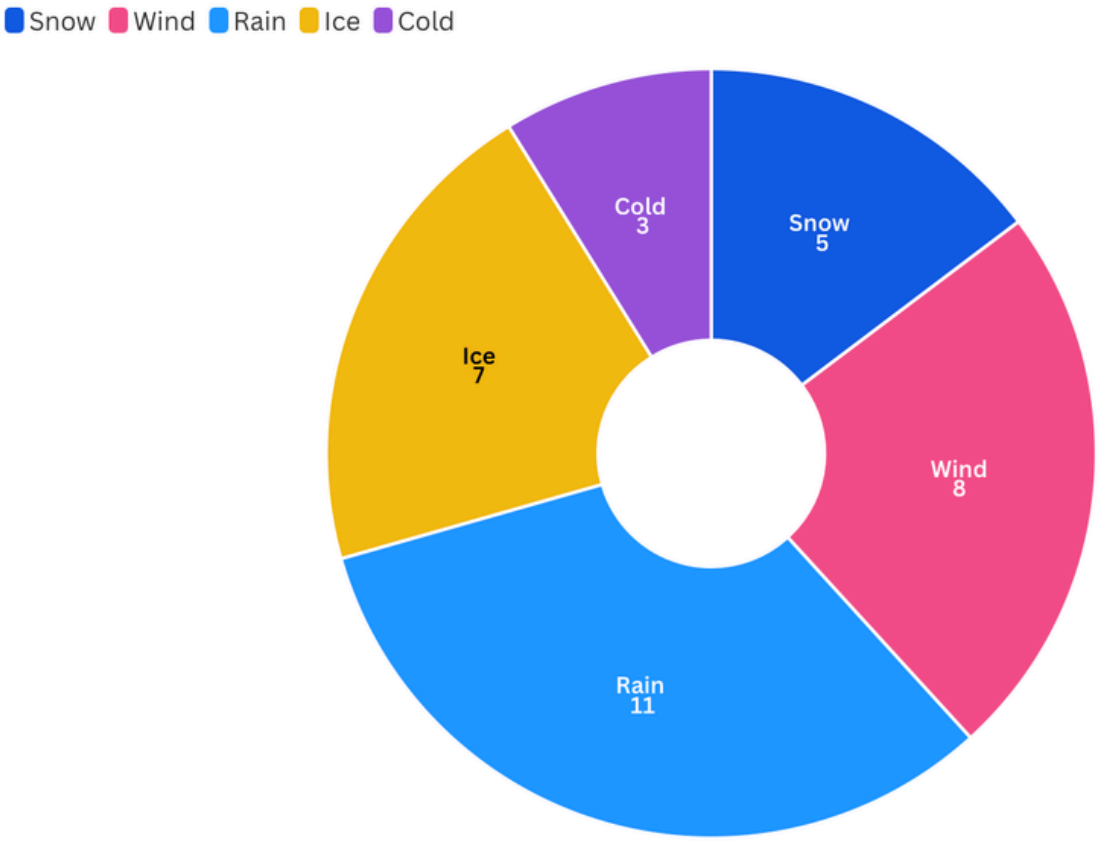


Source: Department of Education- NI Gov FOI (ED1 26 44339 Adverse weather data), Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team, 2026 •

Extreme weather events that have the highest impact on education in Northern Ireland are recorded as occurring on days with weather warnings due to rain and the impact of heavy rainfall (11 instances). This is followed closely by wind (8 instances) and ice (7 instances) between 2019-26. Figure 3.

The vast majority of school closures with the greatest impact happened in winter between 2019 and 2026. There are some examples in late Autumn and early Spring, between 2019-26, except for one Amber Warning for snow in March 2023 (spring).
Figure 4: 2019-2026 Timeline of weather events impacting school closures

Figure 3: Number of closures due to types of adverse weather



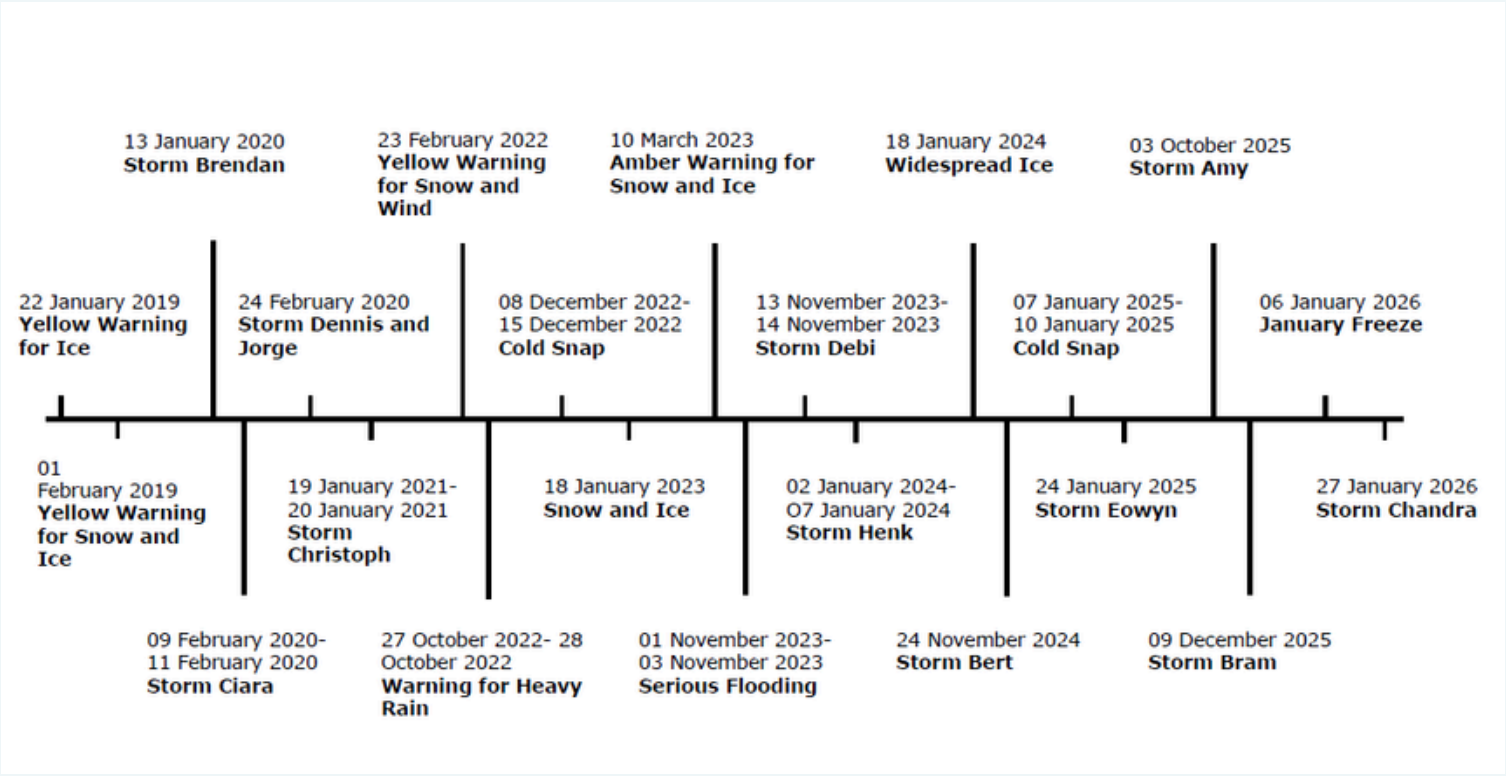
Source: Department of Education- NI Gov FOI (ED1 26 44339 Adverse weather data), Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team. 2026 •

Not all extreme weather events happen in winter, and extreme weather can include heat waves or flooding due to heavy rainfall after a long period of dry weather. While extreme heat has not impacted schools in Northern Ireland in this period of data, in 2026 more than 1,000 schools across the UK either closed or sent pupils home early due to extreme weather in the June/July heatwaves. Schools in Northern Ireland were closed for the summer school holidays at this time. Other locations of learning and education had to close, such as Museums and Libraries in England.

It is important, now more than ever, that the NI Curriculum fully includes Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), including climate change and adaptation, environment and sustainability, biodiversity, nature and outdoor learning across subjects. Children and their education are directly impacted by our changing climate, and they deserve ESD to be fully included in the NI Curriculum at all stages.

Education for Sustainable Development is not only aligned with Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan, but also actively supports the aims of the NI Curriculum 2028, helping learners develop as individuals, contributors to society and the economy, stewards of the environment, and lifelong learners.

Figure 4: 2019-2026 Timeline of weather events impacting school closures



For full details of the weather timeline, please visit
Timeline of School Closures due to Adverse Weather 2019-2026

Read more about ESDF's response to the Curriculum consultation here:

- ESDF NI Curriculum consultation response
- Evidence for ESD NI Curriculum Consultation
- Transform Ed NI Curriculum 2028 key areas on ESD
- Copy and Paste – NI Curriculum Consultation Response

Acknowledgements

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Education for Sustainable Development Forum (ESDF) works in partnership to develop positive attitudes and change behaviour towards the environment. ESDF aims to enhance the profile of environmental education in both curricular and extra-curricular activities. Our members work independently and collaboratively to develop and deliver Education for Sustainable Development.

Sources: How a new era of heatwaves could shake up the school calendar – BBC Weather Aug 2026 • Heatwave closures: galleries, venues shut after high temperatures - Museum and Heritage Advisor • Department of Education- NI Gov FOI (ED1 26 44339 Adverse weather data), Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team, 2026 • Climate Northern Ireland, Extreme Weather Events in Northern Ireland, 2026 • BBC, NI Weather: February was wettest on record, 2 March 2020 • BBC, Weather: Snow and ice shuts schools for a second day, 18 January 2023 • BBC, NI schools were closed during storm without ministerial approval, 27 November 2025

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