

Enhancing support for primary one

February 2026

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of attainment in primary one regarding the decline in Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) in 2024/25. Drawing on national data, inspection findings and local authority (LA) intelligence, it highlights some of the approaches that are proving most effective in improving early literacy, numeracy, and wider learning outcomes.

National ACEL data at primary one shows broadly stable long-term performance with small recent decreases in both literacy and numeracy. LA performance varies, with around half improving outcomes across key organisers. Inspection evidence from high-performing early learning and childcare (ELC) settings and primary schools highlights the central role of high-quality play pedagogy, strong adult-child interactions, high-quality learning environments, and systematic assessment in securing progress.

Evidence from LAs demonstrates that targeted, evidence-informed approaches, particularly in early reading, language development, and conceptual numeracy, are driving improvements, especially where supported by effective use of Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) funding.

Background

At the meeting of the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 9th December 2025, Ms Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, at that time, provided a statement on education statistics and the 2026 National Improvement Framework (Scottish Parliament Official Report, 9.12.25). During this statement Ms Gilruth expressed concern around the decrease in ACEL attainment in 2024/25 for primary one. Ms Gilruth acknowledged that the pandemic has impacted greatly on our children and young people, and she stressed the importance of not allowing that to become a defining feature of their future lives. Education Scotland (ES) was asked to consider how to enhance support, as part of the work of the SAC, particularly for those learners currently in primary one and subsequent cohorts.

Purpose

This report sets out what we know is working well across the system in improving outcomes for learners in the early years (Birth-8 years), with a particular focus on primary one. Included in the report are examples of evidence-based approaches which may support improvement in attainment. The report also highlights planned and potential developments which can further enhance support available to LAs, establishments, senior leaders, practitioners and families. A summary of the relevant data is provided within the report, with further details in Appendix 1. Recognising that improvement is an ongoing process, Appendix 3 provides additional resources and further reading to support continued reflection, professional learning and informed decision-making across the system.

Process

ES senior regional advisors, attainment advisors (AAs), national improvement framework advisors and colleagues from inclusion, wellbeing and equalities, early learning and childcare, literacy and numeracy teams contributed to the content within this report. Most LAs, 24 of 32, provided examples of effective approaches to improve the attainment and achievement of learners in primary one which are included as case studies.

Parts of this document were supported by approved AI tools; Education Scotland staff retain full responsibility and have reviewed and approved all content.

Data analysis

Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels

For this report, primary one ACEL data was analysed for the years 2018/19 (the last year pre-Covid), 2023/24 and 2024/25. The primary one cohort numbers for these years are as follows: 2018/19 – 55091, 2023/24 – 50057 and 2024/25 - 50004. In 2024/25 each child within the cohort represented approximately 0.002% of the figures. (see Appendix One: Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels data).

Between 2023/24 and 2024/25 national data show a slight decrease in literacy overall, and a slight improvement in quintile one. There is a similar picture for numeracy with a slight decrease overall, and a slight improvement in quintile one.

Local authority data between 2023/24 and 2024/25 indicate the following:

- In literacy, fewer than half improved overall including in quintile one.
- In reading, fewer than half improved overall however the majority improved in quintile one.
- In writing, fewer than half improved overall including in quintile one.
- In listening and talking, fewer than half improved overall including in quintile one.
- In numeracy, fewer than half improved overall, however the majority improved in quintile one.

While the data shows some improvements, these are not evident across all measures. It is imperative that schools, LAs, ES and Scottish Government (SG) continue to monitor attainment of primary one learners, to ensure that any recent declines do not persist. Moreover, it will be essential to continue to track and support this cohort carefully as they move through their school years.

Attendance

Attendance data for 2023/24 and 2024/25 indicates that primary one overall attendance was the highest across all primary stages. Schools are however, encouraged to monitor the attendance of individual primary one learners closely to ensure it does not negatively impact on learner outcomes.

Findings from inspections

Early learning and childcare (ELC) settings

Research shows that high-quality ELC supports positive outcomes for children and families. Evidence was synthesised from 23 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE) ELC inspection reports published from July 2024 to September 2025, with 'very good' evaluations for '[How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare?](#)' (Education Scotland, 2016) quality indicator 2.3 (learning, teaching, and assessment) and/or 3.2 (securing children's

progress). These settings represent the highest performing provision nationally during this period.

The inspection evidence indicates that to support strong literacy and numeracy outcomes, high-quality ELC settings consistently provide:

- **Play-based, language and numeracy-rich environments** where stories, rhyme, conversation, and mark-making are embedded naturally throughout the day, and mathematical concepts (counting, pattern, measure, shape, data) are embedded in real-life and exploratory contexts indoors and outdoors.
- **Skilful, responsive adult-child interactions** that extend vocabulary, reasoning and narrative skills through open-ended questioning, commentary and high-quality dialogue, as well as questioning, commentary and modelling that extend mathematical thinking and language.
- **Purposefully designed indoor, outdoor and community learning environments** that promote curiosity, storytelling, collaboration, and authentic literacy experiences and encourage problem-solving, estimation and application of maths in authentic situations (for example loose parts play, block play, woodwork, cooking, and gardening).
- **Systematic assessment, tracking and moderation** to identify progress, spot gaps and plan targeted next steps in children's numeracy, communication and early literacy.
- **Strong, values-driven leadership and professional learning** that empowers staff, builds a shared vision, and ensures consistently high-quality pedagogy supporting literacy and numeracy by building staff confidence.
- **Equity-focused, inclusive practice** which removes barriers and provides additional support, including communication supports, personalised strategies and multi-agency collaboration, ensuring all children experience success in early language and literacy and mathematics.
- **Meaningful use of digital technologies** to support storytelling, revisiting learning, documentation, and multimodal communication to reinforce numeracy in engaging ways.
- **Active parental engagement in children's learning** through home-link activities, lending-resources which bring literacy and numeracy into the home learning environment, and family learning sessions 'including stay-and-play.'
- **Conditions that promote confidence and wellbeing**, allowing children to engage deeply with language, enjoy mathematical exploration, express ideas, take risks and develop secure foundations for reading, writing and mathematics.

These factors appear consistently across settings with 'very good' evaluations regardless of geography, governance, or demographic profile.

The recently published HMIE thematic, '[Literacy and English within Scotland's Curriculum](#)', (HMIE, 2026) echoes these findings and further highlights Scots language as a culturally meaningful element of literacy. Another noted feature of high-quality practice in ELC is the provision of structured small-group language interventions for learners who

require targeted support in vocabulary, sentence structure and communication. In primary one, structured phonics, early handwriting and rich vocabulary activities help learners build strong foundations in reading and writing, while simple, child-friendly feedback supports them to understand what they are learning and how they can do better. Real-life and play-based literacy experiences, such as storytelling, mark-making and digital book creation make learning meaningful and engaging, helping learners develop confidence and enthusiasm. Targeted interventions, like small-group phonics or early oral-language support, help learners who need extra support to make good progress, improving their language development and engagement. Within the report, schools where staff engage in early-years professional learning, such as dyslexia-friendly or English as an additional language strategies, learners benefit from more inclusive, nurturing classrooms that build confidence and early literacy success.

The report emphasises that literacy is a shared responsibility across all curriculum areas. Strengthening whole-school approaches, improving progression, and supporting staff through professional learning are key to ensuring high-quality literacy learning for all.

Primary schools

During session 2024/25, HMIE inspection evidence from ten primary schools rated ‘very good’ for ‘[How good is our school? \(4th edition\)](#)’ (Education Scotland, 2015) quality indicator 3.2 (raising attainment) highlighted various aspects of highly effective practice in primary one. These included learners experiencing a seamless transition between ELC settings and primary school, alongside consistent practices.

Play pedagogy was embedded as a central approach in the majority of these schools supporting learning and sustaining deep engagement, while also supporting progression in early literacy and numeracy. The inspection evidence showed that when literacy and numeracy are embedded naturally within rich, play-based environments, learners develop secure early skills and a strong foundation for engaging with learning-based- environments.

Effective use of tracking data, beginning in early learning and childcare settings and continuing into primary one, enables staff to identify gaps early and to tailor support with accuracy. As a result, many learners make accelerated progress, often achieving above schools with similar characteristics, in early reading, phonological awareness, and number skills.

Current evidence – what do we know is working well?

ES, as part of the SAC, undertook a short, focused review of evidence-informed strategies and approaches that effectively support attainment and improvement across the early years, and specifically primary one. In addition to this, evidence was gathered from AAs who work closely with LAs.

Literacy

Research consistently shows that early reading development is best supported through literacy-rich environments and intentional adult–child interactions. ‘Learning to read in the early years’ (Education Scotland, 2024a) outlines three key approaches to early reading development: literacy-rich environments, the development of reading skills, and fostering independent, engaged readers. Findings from the 2024/25 pilot of the resource demonstrated significant increases in learner and families’ engagement with reading. More learners independently selected and enjoyed a wide range of texts during play, with weekly reading for pleasure increasing across settings. Family participation in reading-focused activities also strengthened considerably.

ES’s thematic inspection report on literacy and English (ES, 2026) highlights the shared responsibility of schools and settings, LAs, national bodies and SG to work collectively to drive improvement and to strengthen literacy. Recommendations included:

- planning clear and progressive literacy programmes
- learners being given genuine chances to shape their own learning
- promotion of a reading culture/reading for enjoyment and access to high-quality, diverse texts
- strengthening of teaching including explicit listening and talking skills being taught, ensuring that secondary teachers take responsibility for literacy, and understand each learner’s strengths and needs
- strengthen teachers’ skills in supporting learners who need additional support with literacy and language

Furthermore, the Education Endowment Foundation’s (EEF) *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1* guidance report (EEF, 2020) identifies systematic phonics alongside rich language experiences and play-based approaches as effective strategies, particularly for disadvantaged learners. The importance of high-quality interaction between key adults and learners is also stressed. For example, practitioners need to be skilled in knowing when to pose questions, extend thinking, model new vocabulary or talk ‘with’ the learners.

Scotland’s Early Years Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2025) indicates that children in the most deprived areas are three times more likely to experience SLC concerns at 27–30 months, highlighting the importance of early language through staff training in responsive interactions and strong partnerships with speech and language therapy services. Research shows that high-quality, responsive parent–child

interactions underpin SLC development and can mitigate the impact of socio-economic disadvantage. Parent coaching and responsive, child-led book sharing, where children choose the books and guide the reading, further strengthen early language outcomes.

From a recent (unpublished) synthesis of AA evidence of effective strategies to improve literacy within primary, it was found that early literacy improves when structured, evidence-based approaches are used. LAs focusing on systematic phonics, progressive oral language development, consistent high-quality literacy rich environments, early baseline assessment and well-planned, structured writing approaches are seeing the strongest gains.

Further AA analysis of local approaches found almost all LAs identify literacy, particularly early reading, writing and oral language, as a central improvement priority. Typical approaches include:

- structured reading/writing frameworks and authority-wide literacy strategies
- speech and language therapy and educational psychology-led interventions targeting vocabulary gaps, speech, language and communication delays
- writing pilot programmes, which are already demonstrating promising impact
- expanding reading-for-pleasure initiatives involving families and communities

From this analysis, improving literacy is viewed as the most critical lever for mitigating poverty-related gaps and building positive long-term attainment trajectories.

A strong example of LA improvement work is the *South Ayrshire Reads* strategy. It is resourced through Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) to target schools with high levels of deprivation, offering bespoke support including team-teaching, lesson modelling, and parent/carers workshops. As a result, overall literacy attainment for primary one has risen by three percentage points between 2023/24 and 2024/25. Primary one reading attainment increased by four percentage points over the same period.

Another example of impactful development in early literacy is South Lanarkshire's Early Language Intervention (NELI). The expansion of the NELI programme has proven to be one of the most significant drivers of improved primary one literacy outcomes for the authority.

Dumfries and Galloway's Excellence and Equity Literacy group has worked with colleagues in speech and language therapy on a face-to-face 'pre-talking, listening, questioning' (pre-TLQ), and 'talking, listening, questioning' (TLQ) training across the authority. The impact of the pre-TLQ on learners has been noted through improvements in turn taking, eye contact, attention and listening. The impact of the TLQ training on learners has seen improvements in information finding and grammar skills. This has supported learners well as they transition into primary one.

Effective partnerships with services such as speech and language therapy and other family/community teams were also highlighted by AAs in their review as improving early communication, wellbeing and engagement.

Numeracy

Recent thematic inspection reports on numeracy (HMIE, 2019) and mathematics (Education Scotland, 2024b) indicate that effective early numeracy learning should be active, play-based, contextualised and conceptually numeracy rich. It should also be underpinned by skilled interaction, assessment, strong relationships, appropriate challenge, differentiation and the effective use of digital tools.

Similarly, the EEF (2020) promotes conceptual understanding over rote learning, the use of concrete materials, play-based approaches, effective progression and assessment, and the explicit development of mathematical language. When applied consistently, these principles build confidence, enjoyment and secure numeracy foundations that support long-term attainment and equity.

AAs recently undertook a review and synthesis of effective numeracy strategies within primary one across 17 LAs. It was noted that numeracy strengthens when teaching is developmental and systematic. 'Concrete, Pictorial, Abstract' (CPA) based pedagogy, clear progression pathways, early number sense routines, and moderation across clusters were reported as leading to improved conceptual understanding and more consistent practice across LAs.

Evidence from LAs in the most recent tri-annual reports on the SAC also supported these effective approaches, pointing to high-quality numeracy professional learning, targeted small-group interventions and number-knowledge programmes, and strengthened progression pathways that support teacher judgement.

Wider evidence

Play pedagogy

'Realising the Ambition' (Education Scotland, 2020) highlights the importance of high-quality, developmentally appropriate pedagogy across the early level. It also emphasises the need for consistency and continuity in children's experiences as they move from ELC into primary one and beyond. Central to the guidance is a focus on play-based, child-centred approaches that nurture wellbeing, relationships, and deep learning. Play is highly influential in the development of children's development, wellbeing and skills. There is also some evidence that play can mitigate against some of the impacts of poverty by reducing stress and building critical social-emotional skills.

AAs highlighted play pedagogy as an effective approach being implemented across 12 LAs, from a sample of 20 in total. It was reported that where play pedagogy was high-quality, it had enhanced engagement and transitions from ELC into primary one. The sample also indicated that aligned pedagogical approaches, joint planning, shared data systems, and joint professional learning between ELC and primary one, led to accelerated progress for learners.

Evidence from LAs in the most recent tri-annual reports on the SAC also demonstrated a system-wide shift toward play-based, child-centred pedagogy. The majority of LAs report embedding play pedagogy as the foundation of early level practice. The key features of this enhanced support include; dedicated play pedagogy leads, networks and professional learning, the expansion of play-based approaches into primary two and improved learner engagement and independence. This reflects a national realignment towards developmentally appropriate pedagogy in early primary, better transitions, and more responsive pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

International research into culturally-responsive play highlights that when early learning practitioners incorporate children's home cultures – languages, traditions and stories – there is a measurable improvement in engagement and active learning (Moore, 2019). These factors are strong indicators of increased attainment in numeracy and literacy. In this report, active parental engagement and family participation in children's learning have been identified as key factors in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. Culturally responsive pedagogy supports the inclusion of parents and families in such approaches.

Equity

The SAC continues to play a vital role in schools in ensuring the youngest learners receive the right support at the earliest stages of their primary education. Across authorities, the effective use of Pupil Equity funding (PEF) and SEF to target primary one learners in quintile one is helping schools identify poverty-related barriers. When approaches are grounded in effective use of data and aligned with whole school equity priorities, a strong foundation can be built upon and strengthen support to children and families who face the greatest challenge.

AAs reviewed effective equity-focused strategies across a sample of 17 LAs. The most effective support for learners emerges where equity work is data driven and well embedded. The effective use of PEF and SEF funding particularly supports learners in quintile one, and together with strong parental engagement this leads to early poverty-related attainment gaps narrowing more quickly.

There is a strong equity lens across all LA SAC tri-annual reports. These are characterised by evidence of; targeted, additional staffing in areas of high-deprivation, strengthened PEF governance and evidence-based use of funds, trauma-informed practice, nurturing approaches, and 'Cost of the School Day' understanding embedded into policy, professional learning and practice. The reports indicate that authorities are becoming more sophisticated in deploying resources to address poverty-related barriers earlier and with greater precision.

The City of Edinburgh has an emphasis on joined up working across children's services, schools and communities to support families facing poverty or additional needs. This also

includes prevention strategies, early identification and early intervention which are having a positive impact on this cohort of learners.

As part of the 'Equity Team' work in West Lothian, there are eight targeted schools and 25 universal schools which are offered a variety of bespoke support, including primary one (quintile one) support surgeries with class teachers, with a focus on literacy and numeracy. They support schools to focus on closing poverty-related attainment gaps.

Transitions

Realising the Ambition (Education Scotland, 2020) stresses that well-planned, high-quality child-centred transitions are crucial to help children feel secure and ready for the next stage. It recommends that staff across ELC and primary work together at transition points to ensure continuity in children's learning and development, with shared understanding of their progress and needs. The guidance highlights that strong relationships, effective communication with families, and joined-up working between ELC and primary staff all support continuity in children's development and lead to better outcomes.

Parental engagement

Research consistently shows that parental engagement in children's learning is a crucial factor in supporting early learning and long-term educational outcomes. Strong relationships between parents and educators build trust and create the conditions for meaningful involvement in learning. When parents actively engage with teaching and learning, both at home and in partnership with schools, children show higher levels of academic success, wellbeing and confidence.

Evidence from research and literature reviews suggest that parents' everyday interactions with their children are directly linked to improved development, regardless of socio-economic background (DBIS, 2012; OECD, 2020). It further suggests that the most effective way to help learners from low-income families to achieve their ambitions is to focus on family learning, by engaging parents in their children's learning, in their own learning, and providing a range of support for learners. Interventions that help parent/carers feel more confident in supporting children's learning produce better outcomes, as do those that help parents better understand how the education system works and how they can work with teachers and schools to help their children reach their full potential (EU/Carpentieri, 2012).

Edinburgh City Council worked with Scottish Book Trust and Moray House School of Education and Sport to develop short videos to support children's learning at home through the 'Read, Write, Count' initiative. The funding supported the 'Read, Write, Count Group' to address inequalities by engaging with families who may find it difficult to engage. It specifically targeted families learning English as a second or other language, fathers, families with children with care experience, and other families identified as likely to benefit from a focussed interaction. The research found that parental engagement in their child's learning is a key factor to ensuring successful attainment and lifelong learning outcomes.

From a recent synthesis of SAC tri-annual reports, most authorities highlight significant work to strengthen family involvement, including family learning programmes targeting early readiness and parental confidence, as well as reading and numeracy programmes linked with home learning routines.

Overall, parental engagement and family learning have significant positive effects on early attainment, attendance, health and wellbeing. Empowering parents to participate in their child's and their own learning is central to raising attainment and reducing the poverty-related attainment gap from the earliest stages of education.

Relationships

Relationships are foundational to learning, especially in the early level which influences outcomes in primary one. Research from Scotland and beyond (including OECD, 2021; Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, 2015; Cliffe & Solvason, 2023; and Pearse & Boylan, 2025) consistently highlights the importance of relationships and relational pedagogy in improving children's wellbeing and learning. This has been especially significant in the context of Covid-19 when rebuilding connections often tends to be undervalued in policy and practice. OECD (2020) analysis identifies the quality of relationships and interactions as being more influential on children's learning and wellbeing than the organisational features of an early level setting.

Case Studies

This section of the report presents case studies from across 26 LAs. These case studies provide examples of effective approaches to improve the attainment and achievement of learners in ELC and primary one. Each case study details the demographic profile of the establishment/local authority, as well as an overview of the approach and its reported or expected impact.

The following case studies are included:

- Aberdeen City
- Aberdeenshire
- Angus
- Argyll and Bute
- Clackmannanshire
- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES)
- City of Edinburgh
- Dumfries and Galloway
- East Dunbartonshire
- East Lothian
- East Renfrewshire
- Fife
- Glasgow City
- Highland
- Midlothian
- North Ayrshire
- North Lanarkshire
- Perth and Kinross
- Renfrewshire
- Scottish Borders
- Shetland Islands
- South Ayrshire
- South Lanarkshire
- Stirling
- West Dunbartonshire
- West Lothian

Improving Literacy in Primary One

The current roll is 260. The school has learners from the second to the tenth deciles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Most learners reside within the 6th to 9th deciles. 12% of learners qualify for free school meal entitlement, 30-40% additional support needs, 10%-20% ethnic minorities.

Rationale: Creating a literacy rich learning environment and promoting a reading culture in primary one

What is working well:

- Intergenerational project, real life contexts to transfer skills in the community and within paired reading session with primary seven buddies
- Regular consistent high profile library visits
- Strong partnerships with parent/carers, paired reading
- Professional learning trios within associated school group
- Use of targeted interventions for personalised support, such as 'talk boost,' to develop early language, comprehension and conversational skills and '5-minute box' to support phonics, fluency and decoding
- Continue to build teacher confidence and learners' reflective practice through timely, meaningful feedback, so learners can make improvements
- High levels of teacher experience and retention of staff
- Supporting teachers to engage in robust tracking and monitoring of data for Literacy
- High quality professional learning focusing on improving pedagogical practice

Impact:

- Data from observations on assessment showed increased engagement, improved listening skills and more consistent progress in early literacy benchmarks. Staff delivering the interventions reported greater confidence in supporting language development
- Increased pupil confidence in reading, writing and talking ensuring opportunity for a stronger engagement with reading for pleasure
- Greater parental involvement and community participation
- Strengthened independence of learners to become more confident and capable in reading skills
- Promotion of a reading culture/reading for enjoyment
- Consistent high-level attainment

Improving Early Level Literacy

The population is approximately 265,000 with people living in small rural/coastal towns, and villages. One in six learners in the council area are officially living in poverty, although the actual figure is likely higher due to the hidden nature of rural poverty. 12% Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement.

Early level literacy attainment in Aberdeenshire is steadily improving, with strong progress in core areas, particularly reading and listening and talking. While the general cohort shows positive improvement, equity gaps, particularly for FSM learners, remain a priority focus. Recent gains for SIMD one and two learners are encouraging and suggest targeted interventions may be having a positive impact.

- Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) has been used to maintain clear and sustained focus on raising attainment in literacy, with evidence indicating strong engagement across the local authority
- SEF has been used to promote high-quality literacy development, particularly through strengthening play pedagogy at early level
- Strong partnership work with Dr Marion Burns, author of *Realising the Ambition*, with targeted schools and clusters to support high-quality play pedagogy
- Authority-wide “Playfest” showcasing high-quality practice across Scotland, promoting professional learning and collaboration
- All headteachers received training on high-quality play pedagogy from Education Scotland
- SEF used for professional learning, ‘Talk for Writing’ and ‘Big Writing’ to support consistent, structured, evidence-based approaches to literacy.
- All schools have access to the full suite of Annie Glennie’s ‘Learning Zoo’ resources to support training in phonics and early literacy instruction
- Emphasis on high-quality teaching and learning, strengthened through partnership work with Tom Sherrington, supporting schools to refine pedagogy and better coherence with the Northern Alliance learning, teaching and assessment toolkit.

Angus Council - Improving literacy outcomes in ELC / primary one

Angus Communication Elevation (ACE) collaborative project

Context:

Ladyloan Nursery - Roll 70 children. The current primary school roll is 241 with 80% of children living in SIMD quintiles one and two and 40-50% have an ASN.

Warddykes Nursery - Roll 40 children. The current primary school roll is 285 with 90% of children living in SIMD quintiles one and two and 40-50% have an ASN.

Abbey View Early Years Centre- Roll 100 children. The co-located primary school (Hayshead) roll is 460 with 70% of children living in SIMD quintiles one and two and 30-40% have an ASN.

Rationale: Children living in areas of high deprivation have been found to have a 20-month gap in vocabulary at school entry, when compared to peers from wealthier backgrounds (Waldfoegel and Washbrook, 2012).

Overview: Angus Communication Elevation (ACE) is a two-year collaborative project in Arbroath taking place in Ladyloan Nursery, Warddykes Nursery and Abbey View Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Centre. Funded by the Tayside Health Fund and adapted from a successful Dundee model, the project brings ELC staff and Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs). The project focuses on reducing barriers to children's talking, listening, attention and storytelling skills, particularly in SIMD one communities. Embedding SLTs in nurseries for two days a week over 24 months aims to enhance trust, strengthen relationships and improve workforce capacity.

SLTs initially model the programmes, coach ELC staff to deliver them confidently and independently. Children's skills are assessed before and after participation to monitor progress. The project focuses on working closely with the Equity and Excellence Leads to build vocabulary, attention and listening for language and narrative skills including sequencing and storytelling. A cascade approach is used so all practitioners can support communication.

Intended Impact (communication):

- Accelerated gains in language development and entering primary one with more age-appropriate skills
- Increased staff confidence and knowledge in delivering language programmes
- Strong, collaborative relationships between SLTs and nursery staff have led to sustainable, high-quality early intervention
- High-quality, play based language learning opportunities, ensuring children experience rich communication within meaningful, developmentally appropriate contexts
- Communication friendly nursery learning environments
- Sharing strategies with families, increasing confidence and capability to support child's language development at home

Rosneath Primary School, Argyll and Bute

Literacy – improving writing

Rosneath Primary School – Primary 1/2

Currently there are 14 learners in the primary 1/2 class (eight P1s and six P2s). The level of learners living in SIMD quintile two in the class is 82% and those entitled to a free school meal is 25%. 50% of the class are recorded as having an additional support need and 25% are registered as young carers.

The school is situated in a rural accessible location; many learners are affected by poverty of experience due to the limited range of local community resources and amenities. Opportunities within the village are restricted, and accessing wider activities, services, and cultural experiences often involves significant travel and associated costs, which can present barriers for families.

Detail of the intervention

Writing attainment was identified by the school and through HMIE inspection feedback (June 2025) as an area requiring focused improvement. In June 2025, the whole school writing attainment at achieving expected level in writing was 69%.

Since May 2025, the class teacher in P1/2 has been using Greg Bottrill's [‘Drawing Club’](#) as an intervention for early writing. All learners in the class are involved.

Impact to date – expected achievement of ACCEL - February 2026:

71% of primary one learners are expected to achieve, with 29% exceeding expectations. 67% of the primary 1/2 class are expected to achieve, with 29% exceeding expectations.

Outcomes:

The school reports very positive outcomes. They have observed a significant shift in learners' attitudes towards writing. Many learners who were previously reluctant or lacking confidence are now motivated and eager to write. They are increasingly willing to express their ideas and take pride in presenting their work. Vocabulary development has also improved. New and ambitious words are introduced in an enjoyable and accessible way, and learners are keen to use them in their own writing. During observations, learners have been heard referring to previously introduced vocabulary.

Parents have also commented positively, noting increased enthusiasm for writing at home. One parent shared that their child now chooses to draw and write stories independently, which was not previously the case. Overall, learners' progress is clear. There is measurable improvement in confidence and vocabulary use as well as a noticeably more positive attitude towards writing.

Comments from learners

- “I love Drawing Club because it is fun and it is fun to write letters”
- “I love Drawing Club because I can write whatever I want as long as it makes sense. Reason two, I let my imagination go wild”.
- “I think it is fun because we can communicate anything”.

Clackmannanshire - Improving numeracy outcomes in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

Numeracy Improvement Framework

In Clackmannanshire, approximately 32% of children live in quintile 1 and approximately 15% in quintile 5. The proportion of primary pupils eligible for free school meal is 63.7%. 26.7% of pupils are recorded as having additional support needs and 3.6% identified as learning English as an additional language.

Rationale: Analysis of primary 1 (P1) National Standardised Assessment (NSA) data, alongside observation, showed that learners were entering P1 without the foundational numeracy skills required to achieve the benchmarks associated with P1 progression. This prompted an authority-wide improvement focus on early numeracy.

The approach: The local authority (LA) developed and scaled a numeracy improvement framework from birth to 7 years, including expectations and tools for tracking, monitoring and assessment, learning, teaching and assessment, and evaluating impact. The framework sets out developmental milestones for assessment and linked to evidence-based interventions, enabling practitioners to target support timeously, with precision and a clear evidence base.

Aligned professional learning ensured practitioners were equipped to use the framework effectively and an audit tool was introduced to support a consistent, high-quality approach across the LA.

This work aligned with wider developments linked to the OECD 'Starting Strong Project', focused on improving child development outcomes, to ensure timely support to meet developmental milestones.

Impact / expected outcome: Implementation impact is evident in Park (roll 108, of whom 66% live in Q1) and Menstrie (roll 93, of whom 2% live in Q1) Early Learning Centres, where practitioners used the framework and its numeracy tracking tool to target skill development. Baseline data from November 2025 showed clear progress by February 2026, with learners improving across all eight discrete numeracy skills, including number identification, sequencing and counting.

Recent inspection evidence from three primary schools provides early indication of impact in inspected schools, highlighting nurturing learning environments, tracking of numeracy progress, differentiated learning experiences and effective use of concrete materials to support early number and mathematical concepts.

Expectations are that progress will be evident within national standardised assessments that are currently being undertaken (2025/26).

Quantitative data shows an increase in educators' confidence in assessment and knowing how to intervene to support progress. High levels of engagement in using the framework are evident.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) Sgoil Àraich an Iochdair (ELC)

Improving Gaelic development through improved assessment and tracking

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is a small rural authority with 22 schools and a total pupil population of 3200 in primary and secondary education and 356 in early years settings. Families in the authority live within a SIMD range of deciles 3-8.

Rationale

Through analysis of ACEL and school level data, a Gaelic literacy attainment dip at mid primary level was identified, leading to consideration of an early intervention in ELC. A specific Gaelic ELC setting identified that staff wanted to develop confidence in using strategies to support Gaelic language development. In response, a pilot was established in the ELC setting.

Detail of approach

The pilot included a team of colleagues from the NHS Western Isles speech and language therapy team and ELC staff with a focus on tracking Gaelic language development across early level. The assessment approach is based on the Derbyshire Language Programme, a structured intervention designed to support learners with language difficulties, focusing on vocabulary development, sentence comprehension and information-carrying words.

To support this work, a need was identified for a Gaelic language assessment tracking toolkit. It was envisaged that this would increase staff confidence in understanding and assessing Gaelic language development. The pilot team co-developed a Gaelic language tracker to record each learner's Gaelic vocabulary development, considering the requirements of the early level experiences and outcomes. Collaborative working was a key feature of this project.

Impact / expected outcome of approach / intervention / focus

From initial evaluations from staff, an increased in confidence was reported immediately after the pilot and associated training in the Gaelic language tracker.

Staff in the pilot setting had previously shared that demonstrating individual learner's progression of fluency in Gaelic was challenging, however the new vocabulary trackers now support this. This has increased staff confidence, and the associated training has built staff capacity within Gaelic language assessment.

Due to the success of this small-scale pilot, the authority plan to roll out the toolkit to all settings in the authority. Trackers are currently being developed within the pilot setting to continue to increase and build on vocabulary. Further training is being delivered to staff this session (2025/26).

Improving Numeracy outcomes in primary one - Number sense

The current roll is 306 with 76% of children living in quintile one. ASN is between 40-50% and 19% of the school are EAL.

Rationale:

Teacher assessments indicated that although learners appeared confident with number sense, some children's responses seemed to be less confident, and they were unable to apply skills across different contexts. Learners required stronger concrete experiences before moving on to pictorial understanding. This case study applies to one primary one class.

What is working well:

- Planning now responds directly to class teacher assessments following dialogue with the senior leadership team. Gaps are identified and prioritised and ongoing teacher reflection has strengthened consistency and understanding of Early Level standards.
- Since January 2026, the Numeracy Development Officer has provided weekly in-class modelling and team teaching. This has strengthened teacher practice through modelling effective questioning, differentiation of content, process, product and environment, and clear lesson structure. This structure is replicated daily to support a continual improvement cycle.
- Daily numeracy lessons follow four clear stages that build a positive learning culture with clear learning intentions and success criteria, considered differentiation and opportunities to practise, apply, extend and review.
- Real time modelling demonstrates techniques that bring the benchmarks to life, ensuring learners apply their understanding in new contexts and explain their thinking using concrete representations.
- Learners use a wide range of concrete materials and are supported through consistent mathematical language. Play pedagogy and interdisciplinary learning have increased enthusiasm and engagement. Outdoor learning provides meaningful opportunities to explore number in different contexts. Very recent evidence indicates that SEAL strategies are also becoming consistently part of learning.

Expected outcome of intervention:

- Strengthened understanding of early addition and subtraction through the use of concrete materials with learners beginning to understand these operations.
- Increased accuracy and confidence with mathematical language.
- Improved ability to transfer methods across materials and contexts in line with national expectations for linking concepts and applying learning in new situations.
- Enhanced support for learners with EAL through consistent modelling, concrete experiences and structured language development.
- Increased teacher confidence through weekly team teaching, which strengthens shared practice and consistency.

Improving Literacy outcomes for learners in ELC and into primary one: Pre-Talk, Listening, Questioning (Pre-TLQ)

Dumfries and Galloway is the third largest region in Scotland. There are 16 secondary schools, 90 primary schools, 45 local LA nurseries and 65 funded providers in the private and third sectors. 10.5% of school-aged learners live in areas of highest deprivation - The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles one and two.

Intervention:

This is an authority-wide intervention for targeted learners in early years settings. In June 2025 Pre-TLQ impact data from over the course of session 2024/25 was submitted from 11 settings (96 learners).

The authority's evaluation of local systems and supports in place for speech, language and communication for learners in the early years led to developments in the universal and targeted offer for learners.

Pre-Talking, Listening, Questioning (Pre-TLQ) is an intervention that focuses on developing literacy skills for targeted learners in the early years. It is based on the "Language Through Listening" programme and is designed to enhance learners' language skills through engaging activities that focus on pre-linguistic skills such as eye contact, turn-taking, listening, and attention. This programme is particularly beneficial for learners aged 3-5 years who may have challenges with these skills. The activities can be used in small group or whole class settings by teachers and/or therapists, and they aim to consolidate these pre-linguistic skills to aid understanding and support the development of expressive language.

Authority staff collaborated with colleagues in Speech and Language Therapy to develop training for staff as well as the 12-week programme that was implemented across the authority. This work is supported by the Early Years Teams and by the Equity and Excellence Leads (EELs).

Impact:

Over the 12-week intervention period settings tracked learners' turn taking, eye contact, attention and listening during each of the Pre-TLQ sessions, giving a score for each of these from one to three. Average scores in each of these areas are recorded and gains are noted in the table below:

	Turn Taking	Eye Contact	Attention	Listening
Week 1	1.67	1.59	1.42	1.53
Week 12	2.46	2.40	2.33	2.29
Average Gains	+0.67	+0.69	+0.77	+0.65

Overall ratings for listening, understanding and social development were also recorded for each learner. The percentage of learners were recorded using a Red, Amber, Green scale before, at mid-point and after, demonstrating the progress of learners:

	Before			Mid-Point			After		
	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green
Listening and Understanding	56%	35%	9%	30%	56%	14%	12%	55%	33%
Social Development	38%	49%	13%	18%	60%	22%	7%	48%	45%

Use of Family Learning Bags – Story Time Maths to raise attainment and close the poverty-related gap in numeracy.

The local authority (LA) is largely affluent, with 49.8% of learners deriving from quintile five compared with 7.5% in quintile one. That said the schools involved in this pilot (Craighead, Twechar, Harestanes, and Colquhoun Park) serve a mixed catchment, with a proportion of learners living in quintile one.

This project focused on boosting parental confidence and tackling maths anxiety within "areas of Place". Supported by an Education Scotland STEM grant and the Multiply initiative, a team of early level champions developed eight high-quality family learning bags. These resources were designed to support families during the crucial EYC/primary one transition, aiming to raise attainment and close the poverty-related gap in numeracy.

Approach

The "Count Me In" team delivered sessions over four weeks, designed to show parents exactly how maths is taught in today's classrooms using the Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract (CPA) method as a bridge between school modelling and home learning.

The session flow was intentionally structured to put parents at ease:

- **Strategic Timing:** Sessions were held during drop-off or pick-up times to encourage higher attendance.
- **Staff Modelling:** The team demonstrated concepts like counting, addition/subtraction, early multiplication/division, money and time using everyday school resources such as ten frames, counters and clocks.
- **Adult Exploration:** For the first 30 minutes, parents explored the resources and asked questions in a supportive "adults-only" space to alleviate maths anxiety.
- **Playing Together:** Children then joined for a snack, a "Maths Tale" story and gameplay, allowing parents to lead the learning with staff on hand to coach, if necessary, in real-time.

Impact

The pilot was a clear success. After the workshops, 83% of parents reported feeling significantly more confident in supporting their child's numeracy.

Key highlights included:

- **Staff Feedback:** Leadership noted that the themed bags made tricky concepts accessible for families and sparked enthusiastic mathematical discussions among the children
- **Learner Motivation:** One primary two pupil, previously reluctant to attend school, became "desperate to come to the sessions" by week three. His teacher noted a major boost in his classroom motivation and enthusiasm for numbers.
- **Breaking Barriers:** A mother with dyslexia, who initially felt she couldn't help with addition, gained such "helpful insight" through the CPA modelling and subsequently signed up for an adult "Maths for Parents" course.
- **Engagement over Homework:** Families reported frequent "light bulb moments" and found play-based games much easier to manage at home than traditional homework.

Improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in primary one through the development of play pedagogy.

There are over 8000 learners in East Lothian Council's 34 primary schools and almost 7000 pupils in seven secondary schools. Of these, 5.2% were recorded in 2024/25 as living in quintile one compared with 19.3% in quintile five.

Rationale

Through local authority self-evaluation and the school review cycle, a need was identified to develop effective and consistent approaches to play in primary one settings. The initiative began in 2023/24 with the support of an early years specialist from Education Scotland, who delivered professional learning and guidance to the local authority strategic leadership group. This group has continued to lead the development, considering local context, feedback and the needs of schools. It will continue into session 2026/27 with a further focus on leadership and self-evaluation for self-improvement using a play self-evaluation toolkit.

Details of approach

Primary one and two practitioners were invited to attend four, two-hour professional learning sessions with a member of their senior leadership team. Senior leaders across all primary schools also completed a self-evaluation of play pedagogy in their setting to support next steps. In both 2023/24 and 2024/25, twenty-five schools participated in the sessions involving over 130 practitioners.

Sessions developed knowledge and understanding in primary one learning environments, responsive and intentional planning and high-quality observations. Effective practice from across the local authority was shared and visits encouraged, through the local authority self-improving schools approach.

Impact

Alongside wider raising attainment work, the development in play pedagogy has contributed to increases in all areas of attainment in primary one.

- Reading attainment has increased by six percentage points (pp) since 2022/23 to its highest level of 82% in 2024/25. Writing has seen similar gains in this period with a 7pp increase to a high of 78%. Literacy overall is up 8pp to 77%.
- Numeracy attainment has increased by 5pp since 2022/23 to a high of 85%.
- This increase in ACEL data is mirrored in the results of the primary one national standardised assessments.
- The attainment gap in literacy and numeracy at primary one has also reduced over time. In literacy, the gap has reduced from 31pp to 19pp in three years while the gap in numeracy has reduced from 30pp to 14pp in the same period.

Feedback from the sessions evidenced a positive impact on professional knowledge and confidence to make changes in practice.

This work is being further developed in session 2025/26.

Improving Numeracy outcomes in primary one

The current roll is 254 with six children living in areas of deprivation / quintile one.

A range of attainment data (ACEL data, standardised assessments, primary one baseline and school-based assessments) was analysed over a 5-year period and identified that some learners were consistently not meeting ACEL expectations across the school, with trends indicating a barrier around mental arithmetic. After consulting with a local authority numeracy and maths principal teacher (N&M PT), a Number Talks approach was agreed as a whole school strategy to support strengthening mental agility and fluency, and subsequently improving overall attainment in numeracy, including identified learners in primary one. The N&M PT delivered professional learning for all staff including the Senior Leadership Team, consisting of a drop-in session to support any emerging questions and queries around initial implementation. After a 6-week period of implementation a recall session. They engaged in professional dialogue around what was working well, challenges, progress so far, and received further input on extending Number Talks into other numeracy and mathematics organisers.

In primary one, Number Talks takes place in small groups allowing for effective adaptations and assessment, immediate feedback and enhanced engagement. Images and pictorial approaches are used to support understanding, stimulate rich mathematical discussion, help learners to explain their thinking and develop a rich number sense. Hand signals are used to reduce anxiety amongst learners and enable teachers to assess readiness to share and strategy use. Planning is guided by progressive planners ensuring clear structure and appropriate progression. Pre and post assessments are carried out to assess the impact of a teaching block, identify next steps and ensure that teaching is responsive to learners' needs.

Impact:

Number Talks has positively impacted learners' confidence, flexibility and agility in arithmetical approaches, and engagement in mental maths. Across the school pre-assessments identified hindered progress in some learners' mental arithmetic skills and flexibility in their approaches. Post-assessment data has shown clear progress in their ability to select and apply a range of strategies more accurately and efficiently. All learners in the primary one target intervention group increased their post assessment score, with over half of the group increasing their score by at least 100% demonstrating significant improvement. This improvement is also reflected in emerging ACEL data and ongoing class formative and summative assessments. Pupil voice activities further support this; most learners express that they feel more confident explaining their thinking and feel increased enjoyment in lessons.

SNSA assessments in April will provide further data to triangulate findings and support evaluation of the overall impact on attainment and progress. All staff will conduct interventions with identified learners in March to assess the impact of teaching number talks to support subtraction across the school. Based on this data, next steps will be identified.

Improving Early Literacy across Fife

Improving Literacy / Language Outcomes in ELC

There are 196 children living in areas of deprivation/quintile one across four nursery settings in Fife.

Practitioners across these settings identified a need to strengthen early communication and language development, particularly for children showing slower progress in expressive language.

Baseline assessments using the Early Language in Play Settings (eLIPS) tool indicated that a significant number of children were categorised as ‘amber’ or ‘red’ for the *saying* domain, signalling delays in expressive language development. Practitioners wanted to better understand the underlying causes and implement consistent, evidence-based strategies to accelerate improvement.

Practitioners undertook professional learning in Quality Improvement (QI) methodology, enabling them to investigate the root causes of slow language development with greater precision. Using QI tools, teams identified key barriers and opportunities for improvement within their daily practice.

A central part of the approach involved the implementation of the Communication High 5 strategies. Staff received in-depth training and were supported to embed each strategy gradually and intentionally into play-based learning interactions.

Impact

Across the four settings, staff reported that:

- New QI skills helped them uncover the root causes of language delays and design precise, targeted interventions.
- Consistent use of the Communication High 5 strategies created more intentional and supportive language-rich interactions.
- Small, purposeful adjustments, sustained over time, led to noticeable improvements.
- Collaborative reflection strengthened staff confidence and consistency of practice.

By applying the Communication High 5 strategies and QI methodology consistently, the nursery settings have achieved measurable gains in expressive language for children who had previously been assessed as ‘amber’ or ‘red’ in the eLIPS *saying* category.

Practitioners report that:

- Children are demonstrating increased confidence in verbal communication.
- Improvements are being seen earlier and more systematically than before.
- Strategies are now embedded as part of everyday, high-quality practice.

Aim: By January 2025, 75% of children* will be ‘green’ and <10% as ‘red’ in the ‘saying eLIPS category *children entering ELC April 2024 intake

	Baseline (August 2024)				Professional judgement (March 2025)			
	Green	Amber	Red	Total	Green	Amber	Red	Total
Number of children	12	8	12	32	24	6	2	32
%	37.5%	25%	37.5%	100%	75%	18.75%	6.25%	100%

Raising Early Literacy Attainment in ELC and primary one - phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency

To raise early literacy attainment, Glasgow City Council implemented a coherent, authority-wide, evidence-informed approach aligned to 'Glasgow Reads' and the five key components of reading. The aim is to secure decoding and encoding early, strengthen fluency as the bridge to understanding, and reduce variability in practice across settings.

Phonemic Awareness (ELC–primary one) Strategy

In ELC, practitioners are aiming to embed daily structured phonological awareness experiences including rhyme, singing, syllable blending, sound discrimination and oral language-rich play. Children systematically develop the ability to hear, identify and manipulate sounds within words.

This ensures children entering primary one will have secure awareness of sound structures, supporting rapid transition into developing further the tools for reading. Furthermore, there have been increased opportunities for primary one to three practitioners to access professional learning webinars on phonemic awareness, and phonemic awareness is also an integral part of the phonics sessions.

Impact

This includes increased confidence of learners in identifying and manipulating sounds; stronger listening and auditory discrimination skills; improved readiness for systematic grapheme–phoneme learning, and smoother progression from ELC into primary one.

Systematic Phonics and Fluency (primary one) Strategy

In primary one, a systematic and explicit phonics model is being embedded across classrooms, focusing on high quality, research-based pedagogy, explicit modelling of blending and segmenting, direct teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, differentiation and daily rapid review to secure retention and automaticity.

A structured coaching model (three visits plus review) strengthens pedagogical consistency, supports professional learning and reduces variation of quality in delivery. Staff who attend the training sessions can benefit from fortnightly online support sessions, where they can explore themes such as differentiation, ask questions to support practice and share what is working well. Fluency development is explicitly prioritised through professional learning and resources that improve accuracy, automaticity and prosody. Whilst this is a focus at all stages, it is also incorporated into the primary one stage.

Impact

This has included: an increased proportion of learners confidently blending unfamiliar words; improved accuracy and automaticity in decoding, less reliance on guessing and multi-cueing strategies, improved application of phoneme knowledge in writing, and greater consistency in phonics instruction across settings.

Practitioner confidence and instructional clarity is improving, contributing to positive trends in early attainment data.

Highland Council Early Years Sector Strategy

An authority wide strategic approach aiming to strengthen practice across the Highland Council Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector.

Context: There are currently 220 active settings, including; local authority (LA) settings, private, voluntary, independent (PVI) providers and commissioned childminders. In Highland, 65% of people live in rural settings.

Focus: Improving access and outcomes for children and families by promoting meaningful play and high-quality learning experiences, responsive and relational practice and inclusive approaches.

Details of the strategy: This strategy sits as part of the Highland Council's Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy. It includes the four themes of: learning and teaching, curriculum, leadership and data, with health and wellbeing, parental involvement and engagement and inclusive practice as foundation principles. The strategy aims to strengthen practice in the ELC Sector by focusing on three high level strategic priorities to strengthen leadership and management capacity, develop systems that support effective collaboration and communication and professional learning.

Use of data:

- All ELC settings are expected to gain evaluations of good or better during external inspections.
- Each ELC setting tracks and monitors children's progress using a system of observations and assessments against a set of seven developmental areas; movement, co-ordination, routines, social, play, language understanding and language expression.
- Data indicates a gender and poverty-related gap in child development overviews.

Expected outcomes: The strategy was launched in 2025 and will run for three years and governed by a strategy steering group.

Overall, the strategy intends to improve the following outcomes-

- Effective use of data to support improvement priorities
- Improve accessibility of support materials for staff, including online resources and digital platforms
- Consistent key pedagogical and operational concepts across settings
- Embed inclusive practice, ensuring all children's needs are met through effective staged intervention
- Expand the professional learning offer and use digital tools to remove barriers and enhance learning. Share best practice across the authority
- Maintain and grow successful approaches, for example, embedding literacy progression, maths improvement programme and speech, language and communication skills

Improving Writing Attainment in Primary One

Midlothian has a population of approximately 99,500, There are around 9,000 primary-aged children, including 1,112 primary one pupils. Current figures show that approximately 23% of children locally are living in poverty, slightly below the national average of 24%. The overall percentage of children registered for free school meals is slightly lower than the national average.

Focus: To improve writing attainment in primary one by securing consistent professional judgement across early level from ELC into primary one and strengthening continuity in early literacy teaching.

An authority-wide moderation model was implemented to align expectations of early level writing. Professional learning sessions brought together early years practitioners, primary one teachers and school leaders to examine and moderate examples of on-track writing, establish shared standards and apply agreed criteria within school-based improvement discussions. High levels of participation supported a consistent understanding of achievement across settings, with follow-up support provided where required.

Further moderation sessions deepened consistency by using pre-moderated writing samples and introducing a writing tool, 'Early-to-First bridging matrix'. This matrix connects early level benchmarks across ELC and primary one, clarifying progression in writing development and supporting practitioners to make more accurate judgements, particularly for learners working between levels. The development of play-based pedagogy increased the range and quality of writing evidence, including mark-making, drawing and early independent writing, enabling more responsive teaching and assessment of emerging literacy skills.

Cross-sector collaboration established a shared language of progress across early level. This work is supported by strengthened tracking processes and leadership monitoring to ensure consistency of practice and sustained improvement.

Impact

There is clear evidence of improved consistency in teacher judgement and increased practitioner confidence in assessing early writing. Moderation processes have strengthened alignment between pedagogy, assessment and progression across ELC and primary one. Increased opportunities for purposeful early writing have improved learner engagement and confidence.

Early data indicates an increase in achievement of early level writing and stronger professional dialogue focused on attainment. Improvement is attributable to strengthened moderation practice, shared expectations of achievement and more consistent early literacy teaching. Monitoring and ongoing professional learning are in place to sustain and extend gains in primary one literacy outcomes.

Improvement in tracking and monitoring data/progress, particularly literacy and numeracy outcomes in ELC into Primary one

North Ayrshire has a population of just over 135,000 people. The local authority has 48 primary schools, eight secondary schools, one all-through school and one specialist Additional Support Needs campus. The local authority has 41 council managed and 14 partnership early learning and childcare settings. Approximately 46% of all children and young people live in quintile one of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). By contrast, only 9% of North Ayrshire's children live in SIMD quintile five (the least deprived areas).

This is an authority-wide tracking system introduced this session (2025/26) and used by all ELC settings.

- The local authority (LA) has introduced a new Early Years tracker which spans ante-pre-school, preschool and primary one.
- Staff are required to track individual progress in reading, writing, talking and listening numeracy and health and wellbeing against the Curriculum for Excellence benchmarks using the North Ayrshire ELC Frameworks.
- Learners' progress is recorded three times yearly through level achievement data and two additional custom measures that assess whether they are on track and the extent to which they are meeting individual targets.
- The data is then collated and available for the central team, which allows the LA to access data across all settings and monitor progress across the early years.

Expected impact of approach:

- Effective tracking will lead to a clear progression and continuity of attainment data between ELC and primary one establishments. Resulting in early identification of gaps in learning, allowing appropriate and timely interventions at school level, such as small, targeted support groups for literacy, numeracy or health and wellbeing.
- More robust and consistent tracking across the early level, supporting improved professional judgement and informing professional dialogue
- Increased staff confidence in using data to inform planning and next steps.
- Enhanced transition information from ELC to primary one, supporting continuity and progression.
- Improved ability to analyse trends at individual, cohort and setting level.

Our Lady of Good Aid Cathedral Primary School, North Lanarkshire

Improving Literacy and Numeracy outcomes in primary one.

The school roll is 520 children arranged across 20 classes. There are 43% of learners who reside in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles one and two. There are 40% of learners who require additional support with their learning and 29% have English as an additional language. 19% of learners are entitled to free school meals.

Detail of approach

Led very effectively by the headteacher, staff have developed the school learning, teaching and assessment policy. At the heart of this policy are the outstanding bespoke 'Active 8' and 'Active8: Let's Play' approaches to learning and teaching.

A recent inspection by HMIE recognised the impact of this pedagogy in transforming all children's learning. Learners experience consistent, high-quality learning and teaching across the school and the curriculum. All children are highly motivated and engage very well in learning, with most making expected or better than expected progress in literacy and numeracy.

In primary one, a typical 'Active8: Let's Play' day includes a variety of adult-led, adult-initiated and child-led independent and collaborative activities. Whole-class lessons still feature, where appropriate.

Inspectors recognised that a major advantage of the school's 'Active8' approach is that it creates time and space for the teacher to observe learners, provide one-to-one support, give live feedback and engage in high-quality learning dialogues, which is helping primary one learners make very good progress in literacy and numeracy.

Impact

- Overall attainment in literacy and numeracy is very good. Most learners in primary one (and across P1, 4 and 7) attain nationally expected levels in literacy and numeracy. At all stages, a few learners are working beyond expected levels.
- Most learners who require additional support are making very good progress towards their individual targets.
- In literacy and numeracy, most learners make very good progress from their prior levels of attainment in reading, writing, listening and talking.

All staff have a clear strategy for, and a strong focus on, raising attainment by focusing on high-quality learning and teaching. This is supporting staff very well to raise the attainment over time for most learners in literacy and English and numeracy and mathematics. Senior leaders and staff track learners' progress and attainment effectively in all curriculum areas over time. They use a wide range of assessment data to identify and address any attainment gaps and set achievable targets. Skilled staff provide support through a range of targeted and universal interventions. Learners make very good progress across the curriculum.

Using Data to Improve Speech, Language and Communication in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Settings

Improving Literacy / Language Outcomes in ELC

Over the past two years, ELC settings across Perth and Kinross have implemented improvement methodology and data-informed approaches to enhance children's speech, language and communication outcomes. This was driven by an ambition to strengthen early communication outcomes, particularly for children who would benefit most from high-quality, language-rich environments.

At the outset, settings sought to understand why some children were not meeting their early communication and language milestones. Although data was being collected across the local authority (LA), it was not being used consistently to inform practice. The aims were:

- For the LA to use available data to identify and prioritise system-level improvement needs
- For individual settings to use their own data to guide targeted changes that would positively influence the quality of speech and language learning experiences

Communication Champion (CC) roles, with a focus on speech, language and professional learning, are already established in most ELC settings. The overarching aim was all children in ELC would experience daily, language-rich environments designed to improve talking and listening. 13 settings were identified to participate based on their existing speech and language data and inclusion of communication as a priority within their improvement plan. Early Years Support Teachers and CCs in these settings tested the approach using PDSA cycles (Plan–Do–Study–Act). Teachers modelled how improvement methodology could be practically applied within ELC contexts.

Collaborative moderation sessions enabled practitioners to review assessments together, share emerging learning, and identify what was working.

Impact

89% of ELC settings engaged well with the training materials. 62% of settings reported to have increased knowledge of how to use data to analyse what aspects most need to be improved with regards to speech, language and communication. This has resulted in improvement in the proportion of pupils starting primary one who have met all of their developmental milestones. May 2025 data showed an upward trend with 89% of children meeting their speech and language milestones prior to starting primary one.

Settings developed a stronger understanding of how to use data to analyse which aspects of practice required improvement. This increased confidence and consistency across almost all ELC settings in Perth and Kinross. Staff across participating settings reported that the approach:

- Supported them to be more intentional in their practice
- Made it easier to interpret and act upon data
- Had a clear impact on children's communication development

Early language and communication remain areas of priority with the CC role a core element of support for ELC teams. Settings have also identified the need for strengthened partnerships with families. Practitioners working with Strong Start 2-year-olds will participate in a refreshed Story Safari programme, currently being tested across seven ELC settings. This programme incorporates measurable data collection, enabling teams to track its direct impact on children's communication progress.

Improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in primary one: Target Schools Programme

Renfrewshire Council supports 27,529 children and young people across early years, primary, secondary and additional support needs settings. A quarter of the area's 225 data zones are within Scotland's 20% most deprived communities, making early literacy and numeracy a continued priority, particularly for learners at risk of falling behind.

In 2024/25, Renfrewshire continued its 'Target Schools Programme', first introduced in 2023/24. Ten primary schools were identified due to comparatively low attainment levels and high proportions of children living in quintile one. Within these schools, target learners were selected if they were working below expected levels or at risk of falling behind but did not have an additional support need. The focus included P1, P4 and P7 pupils, with some schools adding children who were considered highly likely to drop off track during the year.

Each school received an additional 1.0 FTE teacher funded through the Strategic Equity Fund (SEF), supported by literacy and numeracy development officers. The programme aimed to raise Curriculum for Excellence attainment, supplemented by GL assessment data and qualitative feedback from headteachers, class teachers and learners.

Impact:

A total of 52 primary one pupils participated in 2024/25. Renfrewshire's early years progression toolkit shows steady year-on-year improvement for this cohort. At the start of primary one, the group's average literacy score was 68%, and numeracy was 57%. By the end of primary one, the proportion achieving early level was:

- Listening and Talking: 100%
- Reading: 71%
- Writing: 73%
- Numeracy: 79%

Staff and learner feedback was consistently positive. Learners were able to identify where they had improved, and teachers highlighted increased confidence as a key outcome. Small group teaching was noted as particularly effective, helping teachers address gaps that might have been harder to identify in whole class settings. Teachers also valued the immediate support and guidance from development officers.

Given the strong results, the programme expanded significantly in 2025/26. 17 schools are now participating, with a strengthened focus on early intervention in primary one. This year, 212 primary one pupils are receiving targeted support, reflecting the council's commitment to improving early literacy and numeracy and reducing inequality across its schools.

A tracking report from February 2026 shows that 44–68% of learners in the programme are on track to achieve expected levels across literacy and numeracy. These figures are expected to improve further as pupils continue to engage with the programme.

Improving outcomes in early level by strengthening the learning, teaching and assessment cycle across all settings.

In the delivery of early learning and childcare funded entitlement, Scottish Borders Council has 47 local authority provider settings, 21 private and voluntary nurseries settings and 11 funded provider childminders.

7.71% of all school aged learners live in quintile one. Of these, 8.58% of primary one learners live in quintile one.

Rationale: Local authority self-evaluation and analysis of early level data highlighted a need to strengthen the effectiveness and consistency of the learning, teaching and assessment cycle across all local authority and partner providers.

A multi-faceted approach was implemented which included;

- professional learning pathways for all early level providers, in developing emerging literacy, early numeracy and play pedagogy
- robust 'ELC four' (pre-school year) to primary one transition guidance, followed by all providers
- early years teacher support, available to all providers
- implementation of literacy and numeracy trackers and developmental overviews in ELC for all ELC providers.
- the introduction of 'SBCway' early level approaches in literacy and numeracy building effectively on ELC approaches
- inset day moderation opportunities for all partners

The strength of this approach has been the inclusion of the many private and voluntary providers and the support of local authority officers and early years teachers. This has ensured consistency of approach in tracking, improved learner experience of building on prior learning and smoother transition experiences.

Impact: As a result of this strategic approach there is evidence in internal and external review processes of increased confidence and reliability in the tracking of learner progress. Practitioner knowledge and understanding, across all settings and providers, of 'on track' learners has improved and is evidenced in the consistency of numbers of learners on track from the end of 'ELC four' to the end of primary one.

Primary one ACEL data demonstrates that over the last four years, levels of attainment have largely been maintained with most primary one learners achieving expected levels. However, the local authority reports that the robust processes, now embedded, will allow for a focus on specific areas of learning and teaching to improve levels of attainment. Next steps include developing a consistent approach to teaching writing in primary one.

Shetland Islands Council - Primary One Drawing Club

Improving literacy in Primary one

Shetland Islands Council has 20 primary schools and five junior high schools which include primary departments.

Context

The local authority sought to strengthen early literacy, vocabulary and fine motor development across primary one. To address this, they identified Greg Bottrill's 'Drawing Club' as an approach which provides consistency, is developmentally appropriate and promotes meaningful experiences for children.

Aims

- Implement a strategic approach to professional learning, ensuring coherence and consistency in teaching approaches
- Enhance children's spoken and written vocabulary
- Improve fine motor skills through mark-making
- Strengthen early writing confidence and skills
- Promote imaginative thinking and storytelling
- Enhance children's engagement, creativity and motivation in learning

Implementation Model

A sustained professional learning programme was established to ensure consistent, high-quality implementation across the authority. Training sessions focused on; a developmentally appropriate approach, use of texts, teaching of vocabulary and phonological development.

Impact

- Increased excitement and motivation for learning
- Strengthened early literacy foundations through vocabulary, rhyming patterns, phonological awareness and story structure
- Improved fine motor skills and confidence to mark-make
- Improvements in fine motor skills including grip and control, shape and letter formation
- Confidence for hesitant writers to mark make, draw and write
- Improved listening and talking skills
- Developed creativity skills
- Literacy attainment overall has increased by 9.6 percentage points (pp) over the last three years (Reading increased by 8pp, writing increased by 11.2pp and listening and talking increased by 5.2pp).

"It has been a fantastic way to engage with the magic of stories, often "hooking" children who were sometimes hesitant to indulge their imaginations. It has spawned a lot of creativity and been responsible for many laughs!"

Primary one teacher

‘South Ayrshire Reads’ (SAR)

Improving Literacy outcomes (foundational skills of reading)

South Ayrshire Council

The LA has a population of approximately 112,000, with a mix of small coastal towns and rural villages. 20 of the most overall deprived data-zones in Scotland are in South Ayrshire (12th highest nationally). 20.7% of learners in South Ayrshire are living in relative poverty (after housing costs) in 2023/24, equating to approximately 4,005 learners. Rural and fuel poverty are other indicators of disadvantage in the authority.

Strategic aims are:

- To develop confident and skilled readers with a lifelong love of reading and the confidence and tools to access all aspects of education, culture and society
- To support and develop all education staff to implement best practice through a culture of shared knowledge, collaboration and enquiry
- To promote the implementation of excellent reading curricula and planning in schools and early learning and childcare settings which prioritise best practice, challenge and adapted teaching for learners with additional support needs
- To gather, use and analyse data effectively to drive change and improvement in learners’ reading skills, reading confidence and reading attainment

Details of the strategy

South Ayrshire Reads is an ambitious, long-term plan to effectively develop the reading skills of all learners through high-quality pedagogy. The strategy prioritises professional learning, guided by research and evidence, designed to help all education staff implement best practice through a culture of shared knowledge, collaboration and enquiry.

Universal professional learning on the science of reading has been delivered to all primary and ELC practitioners, additional support for learning teachers and school assistants. Establishments in areas of high deprivation were targeted first and remain a priority focus. Early level training focused on ‘*Reading in a Play-Based Environment*,’ has supported practitioners to embed reading meaningfully within a play-based context. Practitioners explored how early literacy development can be naturally supported through a balance of meaningful child-led, adult-initiated, and adult-led experiences. The aim was to support practitioners to create environments that promote curiosity, language development and a love of reading. A parental engagement officer was also appointed to facilitate local family learning events linked to reading and literacy.

Impact:

From the start of the strategy (2022/23) to 2024/25, the following impact is reported:

- Primary one overall literacy increased by three percentage points (pp)
- Primary one reading attainment increased by four pp
- Reading attainment of primary one learners (quintile one) increased by six pp
- The primary one poverty-related reading attainment gap narrowed by five pp

Improving Literacy outcomes in ELC and primary one

Across the 54 primary schools delivering the **Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)** targeted programme, along with 45 schools delivering the whole class model and 15 nursery classes delivering the preschool component, a significant proportion of participating learners live in SIMD quintile one. In total, 160 learners in quintile one were identified through the Language Screen tool as requiring targeted early language support. This large-scale, authority-wide approach was selected due to strong evidence that NELI accelerates progress for quintile one learners and aligns closely with Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) aims to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

The local authority expanded NELI as a key early level literacy intervention within the Curriculum Workstream, forming a core component of its SEF literacy strategy. NELI provides a structured 20-week targeted programme focusing on expressive language, receptive vocabulary, listening comprehension and sentence level narrative skills for identified learners. The intervention is complemented by a whole class NELI programme in primary one and a pre-school model in ELC settings, creating a universal, progressive early language pathway.

This work is intentionally aligned with other SEF funded early level strategies. NELI strengthens the oral language foundations essential for early reading and writing, supporting progression into 'Improving Our Writing' (IOW), which focuses on explicit teaching of fundamental writing skills. It also complements the 'Improving Our Classroom/School' (IOS/Build Your Pedagogy (BYP)) workstream, which emphasises early identification of learners not on track and rich language interactions across early level stages. Together, these approaches create a coherent, equity focused ELC–primary one literacy improvement model.

NELI has demonstrated significant, measurable impact. Learners in quintile one participating in the targeted programme recorded average gains of four standardised points across the four key Language Screen domains — Expressive Language, Receptive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, and Sentence Repetition. These results indicate accelerated progress for learners most affected by poverty.

Practitioners delivering the whole-class and pre-school models also reported increased confidence, with early level stage staff demonstrating an average two-point rise on the authority's professional learning confidence scale. Improved oral language has strengthened learners' readiness for early reading and writing and supported smoother transitions from ELC to primary one.

Early evidence indicates positive movement in ACEL primary one literacy outcomes for quintile one learners, reflecting the benefit of intervening early and consistently across multiple establishments. By implementing NELI at scale and aligning it with complementary strategies such as 'Improving Our Writing' and 'Improving Our School/BYP', the local authority is delivering a robust, equity driven early level model that directly contributes to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Stirling Council - Improving literacy outcomes in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

Improve pedagogical approaches within literacy

This intervention, funded by Strategic Equity Funding (SEF), aims to improve the literacy attainment of quintile one learners in targeted early years settings. During session 2024/25, 31 learners (22 from SIMD quintile one) participated in the intervention across six nurseries. In session 2025/26, 28 learners (13 from SIMD quintile one) participated across seven nurseries.

Rationale: Analysis of 2023/24 Stirling ELC data and the 'Stirling Literacy for Life' self-evaluation toolkit identified reading as a key improvement priority. The Stirling early years team identified high-quality practice in other local authorities who were implementing the 'three read approach'. Taking account of Stirling's context, local and national guidance and current research, SEF literacy leads developed 'Stirling's Three Read Approach'. It aimed to improve outcomes for learners in quintile one through improved literacy pedagogy.

The approach: SEF literacy leads worked in close partnership with ELC Equity and Excellence leads (EELs) to improve pedagogical approaches within literacy across six ELC targeted settings. SEF funding enabled EELs to upskill a further seven 'Equity Champs' to deliver the intervention. The targeted professional learning aligned with Education Scotland's 'Learning to read in the early years' guidance and research highlighted by the Education Endowment Foundation.

Over 100 practitioners have now been trained and are delivering this approach across targeted establishments. The approach focuses on strengthening three of the five core components of reading; comprehension, fluency and vocabulary. To address the remaining two components of reading (phonemic awareness and phonic skills) a further programme - '*A Way with Words*' was also developed with support from speech and language partners. It is currently being piloted across the early level. An assessment framework was created to support both interventions, ensure learner readiness and study the impact on learners.

Impact: 2024/25 data from the authority early years assessment framework showed improved attainment of quintile one learners compared to baseline assessment data. This equated to 59 percentage points in reading and 32 percentage points in listening and talking.

ELC attainment data (2024/25) indicated an increase in quintile one attainment across all aspects of literacy. This was particularly evident in reading which increased by 4 percentage points from 2023/24 levels.

The gap between quintile one and quintile five also reduced across all aspects of literacy. This reduction was particularly evident in talking and listening which reduced by five percentage points and in reading which reduced by six percentage points from 2023/24 levels.

Following the first phase of the '*A Way with Words*' pilot, 80% of quintile one learners are on track to achieve expected Curriculum for Excellence levels in both reading and listening and talking. All learners demonstrated increased phonological, phonemic and phonic skills.

Clydemuir Primary School, West Dunbartonshire

Improving numeracy outcomes - Count with Me @ WDC'

The school roll is around 150 with approximately 67% of learners living in SIMD quintile one. 60-70% of learners are recorded as having an additional support need.

Detail of approach

Since session 2023/24, SEF funding has been used to support the development and implementation of a local authority strategy to improve numeracy outcomes in early learning and childcare centres (ELCC) and primary schools. The strategy, 'Count with Me @ WDC', was launched in June 2024. Clydemuir Primary School is a strong example of the impact of the strategy. Clydemuir's headteacher had a lead role in the development of the strategy. Prior to the official launch, the school had already begun to implement some of the approaches. In session 2024-25, the school fully implemented the 'Count with Me @ WDC' approach.

The 'Count with Me @ WDC' strategy

- The strategy is based on evidence-based approaches such as 'Maths Recovery', 'Stages of Arithmetical Learning' and 'Number Talks'.
- A maths coach was identified in every ELCC and primary school. This was a teacher/practitioner already demonstrating effective practice.
- Maths coaches attended a suite of professional learning sessions on effective pedagogy, for example, the 'Concrete, Pictorial and Abstract' approach. The training included a focus on building the capacity of the coaches to lead the improvement work within their own establishments.
- Maths coaches delivered a programme of training in their respective establishments. This included modelling high quality learning experiences.
- An interactive numeracy session starts every lesson. These are focused on exploration of number, number processes and connections.
- A 'Count with Me @ WDC Learning, Teaching and Assessment Manual' was shared with all ELCC and primary schools to support implementation at teacher/practitioner level.
- Revised progression pathways and a skills framework were created to support consistency across establishments.

Impact of approach

The school increased primary one numeracy attainment as follows:

Year	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
ACEL (Early Level)	76%	90%	100%

Before 2023/24, the school's primary one numeracy attainment was consistently below national attainment levels and in all but one year, was below local authority attainment levels. In 2023/24 and 2024/25, it was significantly above both local authority and national levels.

Improving the quality and consistency of early reading and writing

West Lothian has a population of approximately 183,820, including around 15,000 primary-aged children. The authority contains 22 data zones within Scotland's 15% most deprived areas. Current figures show that 24.6% of children locally are living in poverty, slightly above the national average of 24%, with 70% of those children living in working families.

The focus of the work is on strengthening early literacy and numeracy through targeted equity support in identified schools, particularly for quintile one learners in primary one. This includes developing and delivering enhanced training and guidance to improve the quality and consistency of early reading and writing. Building on the pilot of Education Scotland's 'Learning to read in the early years' resource, the central team will support more systematic approaches to early literacy teaching while also refining a training and support model to improve writing outcomes. Alongside this, there will be a clear emphasis on supporting schools to use the 'RIC Numeracy Closing the Gap Resource' effectively to raise attainment in numeracy.

Across primary one, literacy and numeracy have improved through a structured blend of intensive and targeted support focused on high-impact teaching and equity.

In eight schools, using the intensive model, regular equity review meetings and collaborative improvement sessions has strengthened planning and consistency. Senior leaders engaged in data dialogue workshops, while every teacher received 1:1 equity class analysis. This sharpened understanding of learner needs, especially primary one quintile one pupils, and enabled precise support in early literacy and numeracy. Bespoke professional learning and tailored class or cohort interventions ensured strategies were directly linked to classroom practice, accelerating progress where it mattered most.

Across a further 25 schools in the targeted model, termly collaborative improvement sessions and data-focused support built shared practice and sustained improvement. Pupil equity fund (PEF) planning, in some schools, supported specialist input in early literacy and numeracy, which helped schools embed effective approaches at scale.

PEF funded interventions included 'Speechlink', structured phonics teaching, 'Fry' sight word development, and play-based approaches to meet diverse learning needs. Froebel-informed pedagogy further strengthened early learning environments in some schools.

Impact

Primary one teachers in the intensive and targeted school model, rated the support by the equity team as extremely useful. Schools have reported measurable gains in listening skills and increased learner confidence, alongside improved staff confidence in implementing play pedagogy and sharing practice at the 'Primary 1 Network'.

West Lothian has shown a steady increase in their primary one literacy and numeracy data since 2020/21, both of which continue to be above the national average. Overall, the combined focus on data-informed practice, targeted professional learning, and equity-driven interventions have improved outcomes by aligning teaching more closely with learner need and reducing early attainment gaps.

Enhancing support

There is a wide range of support available to practitioners, school leaders and LAs, which has a particular focus on early years. This section highlights what is currently available, and will soon become available, to support attainment and improvement across early years, and particularly in primary one.

What is currently available to enhance support in primary one?

Learning to read in the early years professional learning resource

This suite of professional learning resources has been developed with educators across Scotland to provide professional support, specifically on reading in the early years. Drawing upon a range of international research and guidance, it supports staff to interpret Scotland's curriculum guidance and make research-informed decisions for learning and teaching. The resource aims to develop and consolidate knowledge and practice of how children learn to read in the early years. It also provides a tool for self-evaluation and gives access to further research and resources.

Supporting Early Mathematic Development

A programme of eleven 'Supporting Early Mathematical Development' professional learning webinars has been created for ELC and early primary practitioners. The sessions provide support and guidance on teaching approaches for numeracy and mathematics which are aimed at ensuring learners progress and effectively develop their early mathematical skills. Furthermore, they provide practical guidance and suggestions on ways of permeating early level numeracy and mathematics in the spaces, interactions, and experiences across settings, supporting a play-pedagogy approach.

ES currently offer several professional learning resources to support practitioners on the key principles of early numeracy and mathematics via the National Numeracy and Mathematics Professional Learning Community on Glow. This includes modules focused on early counting, early mathematical development and block play.

Play Pedagogy

ES currently offer practitioners support on developing a play pedagogy approach in primary one via the 'Early Level Play Pedagogy Toolkit' (Education Scotland, 2019). This is built firmly on the principles and guidance within Realising the Ambition. Since 2020, ES has also worked with LAs and other stakeholders to provide bespoke support to ELC practitioners, teachers and ELC setting and school leaders on Realising the Ambition and child-centred play pedagogy.

'Equity: Mitigating the Impact of Poverty'

The 'Equity: Mitigating the Impact of Poverty' professional learning resource, developed by ES with LAs, builds leaders' and practitioners' capacity to reduce the effects of poverty through inclusive practice, early intervention, and effective use of data. It supports the SAC by improving literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing for learners most affected by disadvantage. A

current 2025/26 pilot with four LAs is helping leaders integrate equity approaches into improvement planning and strengthen collaborative, prevention-focused work across ELC and schools. Initial evaluations point to improved understanding of poverty and the emergence of more targeted actions to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

Attainment advisor (AA) support as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC)

AAs continue to provide a crucial layer of support to LAs as part of the SAC. By working with LAs to interrogate their data more deeply, AAs can support schools to identify patterns earlier, refine their approaches and monitor the impact of interventions with greater accuracy. Promoting and signposting the use of proven, research-informed strategies, encouraging leaders to adopt approaches that are responsive to local need and sustainable over time. The emphasis on early intervention is especially valuable in the early years, where timely, well-targeted support can prevent small gaps from widening. Through ongoing challenge, support, guidance and collaboration, AAs strengthen local capacity and help authorities deliver more coherent and effective equity approaches.

Public Health Approach to Learning (PHAL)

The 'Public Health Approach to Learning' (PHAL) represents a collaboration between ES, Public Health Scotland, Police Scotland, and the Scottish Prevention Hub. Designed to enhance health, wellbeing, justice, and educational outcomes for children and young people, PHAL adopts a collaborative, holistic, data-driven, and place-based methodology. By integrating insights from multiple sources, it aims to empower schools and those in the local community to make informed decisions, strengthen curriculum planning, and embed rights-based practices aligned with United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principles.

Currently, phase one is being piloted in south Edinburgh, with three schools supporting the refinement of approaches to ensure that they meet school community and local needs with a key focus on prevention and intervention. Some ELC data and indicators for school age children, including primary one, are included in the data and analytics dashboard, in conjunction with lived experience from school-aged children and young people to support this.

Additional Support Needs (ASN) Teachers' Professional Learning Programme

Funded by SG and led by ES with the support of an advisory panel with LA representation, this pilot programme strengthens inclusive practice and aims to improve outcomes for all learners. With a first cohort of teachers and pupil support staff, the programme is being developed to better support ASN teachers in Scotland, building consistent, nationally recognised specialist expertise in ASN. Working with LAs, this national programme supports early, effective identification, planning and support for additional support needs – a crucial step for improving learning outcomes at all levels, including primary one.

Building Racial Literacy Professional Learning Programme

A wide range of ELC and primary school educators take part in ES's anti-racist professional learning programme, 'Building Racial Literacy'. The programme includes

improving confidence in using anti-racist, culturally responsive approaches which can help improve parental and family engagement in children's learning. For ELC and primary school educators, action plans often include diversifying books as well as the spaces, interactions and experiences in their settings.

Planned and potential developments

'Leading play pedagogy in primary one'

ES is currently developing a professional learning resource for primary headteachers and senior leaders, to be published in June 2026. This will support the strategic implementation of play pedagogy within primary one. The resource is based on the evidence and guidance within Realising the Ambition and will focus on high-quality environments, observations, interactions, and planning. Session content has been previously trialled in several LAs with positive evaluations reported. Practitioner and school-level evaluations will be collated in May 2027 to measure the impact of this professional learning.

'Pedagogy in Practice'

From August 2026, ES will publish the new 'Pedagogy in Practice' professional learning programme. This programme will be accessed by educators across all sectors, with the first two of three phases being facilitated by ES using a national cohort model. The programme offers a full-day gateway session considering system identity, self-identity and learner identity, followed by five online building block sessions:

- differentiation and adaptive teaching
- questioning
- metacognition
- pace, challenge and application, and
- dialogue and feedback

Phase three of the programme, covering subject and context specific pedagogy will build on existing high quality ES materials and will be developed more fully during 2026/27 in line with the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) timeline.

Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC)

ES is currently collaborating with practitioners and stakeholder organisations on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC). Practitioners and teachers working across the early level of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) are contributing to a wide range of co-production activity to support various aspects of curriculum improvement. An 'Early Level Reference Group' and other stakeholder engagement on the early level of CfE will commence in March 2026. The national practice guidance 'Realising the Ambition: Being Me,' (Education Scotland, 2020) which supports practice to the end of the early level and beyond, has also been adopted into the CIC. The CIC therefore provides an opportunity to develop further and strengthen the Scottish approach to early years education in-line with international evidence on effective early learning.

Joint submission by Education Scotland and Director for Children and Families (DCaF) on the inclusion of ELC in the SAC

In August 2025, as part of the SAC call for evidence, ES and DCaF submitted a proposal for the extension of SAC to include all funded ELC from birth onwards. The submission made the case for the SAC programme to have a greater emphasis on the early years, including early language and communication. This reflected evidence that the poverty-related gap in children's outcomes is evident from the earliest stages; that avoiding or reducing equity gaps in the early years is more effective and less costly than attempting to do so at school; that early investment can have the greatest impact, and that early learning better predicts later educational success than any other factor.

National practice guidance on additional support needs in the early years

DCaF is currently exploring funding options to facilitate ES to lead on the co-production of a new section on meeting additional support needs to extend the current national practice guidance *Realising the Ambition*. If resources are secured it is intended that introduction of the new guidance be supported by a national programme of professional learning.

Leadership in private and third sector ELC provision

Research shows that leadership is a key factor in driving quality improvement and improved outcomes in ELC. DCaF is currently exploring funding options to facilitate ES to develop, with private and third sector ELC, a bespoke leadership programme, to support improvement in this part of the ELC sector.

Early Learning and Childcare Equity and Excellence Leads (EELs)

SG committed to provide an additional graduate (now known as Equity and Excellence Leads) in ELC settings in Scotland's most deprived areas by August 2018. EELs play a critical role in supporting children to close the poverty-related outcomes gap by:

- being an additional resource over and above the usual staffing complement for a setting therefore, having greater flexibility and reflection time for this purpose
- working directly with children and families and not focusing on managerial responsibilities
- leading and supporting pedagogy in a setting, and upskilling fellow practitioners

The funding allocation for EELs across Scotland was expected to support 435 full time equivalent posts. Figures for 2025 showed that 273 EELs were in post. DCaF has commissioned an evaluation of the programme which will be published in 2026. Findings from the evaluation will form an important evidence base on which to plan next steps.

Actions for consideration

The following actions for consideration indicate where a coordinated system-level focus could support improved outcomes for primary one learners. They are derived from the broad range of evidence presented in this report. Strategies based on targeted support and enhanced collaboration are likely to be most effective in addressing recent declines in early literacy, numeracy and wider learning. They will require coordinated action and resourcing at multiple layers in the system, from national through regional, to individual establishments and settings. These are:

1. **Strengthen early literacy and language development** by widening access to structured early-language interventions, supporting systematic phonics and early writing approaches and enhancing professional learning on high-quality adult–child interaction and vocabulary development. Partnerships with speech and language therapy are critical to this.
2. **Enhance early numeracy pedagogy** through expanded professional learning on early mathematical development and by encouraging targeted small-group interventions for learners requiring additional support.
3. **Embed high-quality play pedagogy** across the early level by supporting consistent implementation of *Realising the Ambition*, promoting aligned pedagogical approaches between ELC settings and primary one, enabling continuity into primary two where appropriate.
4. **Strengthen equity-focused early intervention** by promoting data-driven use of PEF/SEF for learners in quintile one, supporting multi-agency approaches to early barriers (including speech, language and wellbeing) and sharing effective LA models nationally.
5. **Improve continuity and transitions between ELC and primary one** through joint professional learning, shared moderation, collaborative planning and the use of shared assessment information to identify gaps early and tailor support as part of primary one transition planning.
6. **Expand rich opportunities for parental engagement and family learning** by developing accessible resources (including multilingual materials), strengthening partnerships that support home learning, and targeting support to families who may face barriers to engagement.
7. **Deepen support for equity and inclusion** by enhancing practitioner training in early speech, language and communication needs, culturally responsive pedagogy, and nurturing and trauma-informed approaches across the early level.
8. **Strengthen national monitoring and intelligence** by tracking the progress of the 2024/25 primary one cohort, using evidence to identify emerging risks, and providing targeted support to local authorities where declines are most evident.

Conclusion

The report has set out the key data on primary one performance across a range of measures, identifying this cohort as a priority for continued focus given the enduring impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on early learning and development.

The resources and case studies included illustrate the breadth of well-designed, evidence-informed and innovative practice being implemented across Scotland to mitigate these impacts. They highlight the strong professional commitment of practitioners, leaders and partners to improving outcomes for children in the early years and to adapting practice in response to emerging needs.

The education system remains attentive to the challenges faced by this cohort and will continue to monitor progress closely to ensure that support is appropriately targeted, proportionate and effective across all settings.

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Appendix One: Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels Data

It is important to note that for quintile one data this is not always published for each LA as it is suppressed for some. Where data is suppressed, this is to protect against the risk of disclosure of personal information.

National trends

P1 Literacy

- Overall, there was a **slight improvement** (0.33 percentage points (pp)) between 2018/19 and 2024/25.
- Overall, there was a **slight decrease** (0.44pp) between 2023/24 and 2024/25. There were **slight decreases** in all three organisers. The overall decrease equates to approximately 221 children.
- In quintile one, there was a **slight decrease** (0.26pp) between 2018/19 and 2024/25.
- In quintile one, there was a **slight improvement** (0.37pp) between 2023/24 and 2024/25.

P1 Numeracy

- Overall, there was a **slight decrease** (0.14pp) between 2018/19 and 2024/25
- Overall, there was a **slight decrease** (0.31pp) between 2023/24 and 2024/25. The overall decrease equates to approximately 157 children.
- In quintile one, there was a **decrease** (1.45pp) between 2018/19 and 2024/25.
- In quintile one, there was a **slight improvement** (0.5pp) between 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Local Authorities trends

P1 Literacy

- Overall, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (18/32) improved.
- Overall, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (13/32) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (15/27) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (12/26) improved.

P1 Reading

- Overall, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (14/32) improved.
- Overall, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (10/32) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (13/27) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (14/26) improved.

P1 Writing

- Overall, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (13/32) improved.
- Overall, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (12/32) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (15/27) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (12/26) improved.

P1 Listening and Talking

- Overall, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (12/32) improved.
- Overall, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (11/32) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (11/27) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (10/26) improved.

P1 Numeracy

- Overall, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (19/32) improved.
- Overall, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **less than half** of LAs (14/32) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2018/19 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (15/27) improved.
- In quintile one, between 2023/24 and 2024/25 **the majority** of LAs (15/26) improved.

Appendix Two: Supporting evidence from Health Visitors (Public Health Scotland)

Health Visitor Data – Heys Dashboard

Latest Publication:

Early child development statistics - Scotland 2023 to 2024 - Early child development - Publications - Public Health Scotland

- In 2023/24, 17% of those at 27-30 month review, and 18% of those at 4-5 year review had a concern noted about at least one area of their development.
- These findings represent a small decrease in the percentage of children with a concern noted about at least one area of development at the 27-30 month review (18% in 2022/23) but increases at the 4-5 year reviews (17% respectively in 2022/23).
- The most frequently recorded developmental concern varies at each review. Concerns about Gross Motor development were noted at 8%, 3% and 3% of reviews; about Speech, Language and Communication development at 7%, 12% and 8% of reviews, and about Emotional and Behavioural development at 2%, 7% and 10% of reviews at 13-15 months, 27-30 months, and 4-5 years, respectively in 2023/24.
- There are marked and persistent socioeconomic inequalities in the percentage of children recorded as having a concern about their development at each of the reviews. The gap between those living in the most and least deprived areas is greatest at the 27-30 month review (16 percentage points) and smallest at the 13-15 month review (5 percentage points).
- Since Oct 2020 there has been an upward shift across 6 data points or more in the number of children with at least 1 area of concern compared to the pre-pandemic baseline in both the 27-30 month and 4-5 year assessments.
- The pre-pandemic median for % of children with at least one concern (27-30 month) was 14.72% and in latest data from Jan 2024-June 25 the median was 16.56%
- The pre-pandemic median for % of children with at least one concern (4-5 year) was 11.19% and in latest data from Jan 2024-June 25 the median was 18.81%

Developmental concerns by domain

27-30 month review:

12% (5,290) of children had a concern recorded for the Speech, language, and communication domain, and 7% had a documented concern about Emotional/behavioural

development (3,027) and Personal/social development (2,973). Six percent of children had a concern recorded for Problem solving (2,702). Concerns about other aspects of children's development were less common, with up to 5% of children having a concern recorded for each domain: Fine motor (2,414, 5%); Gross motor (1,459, 3%); Vision (832, 2%); and Hearing (788, 2%). The proportion of concerns that were newly identified as a result of the 27-30 month review varied between the different developmental domains. A higher proportion of concerns in the Speech, language and communication, Fine motor, Problem solving, Personal/social and Emotional/behavioural domains were new (70-75%), compared to Hearing (61%) and Gross motor (60%). The lowest proportion of new concerns was in the Vision domain (47%).

4-5 year review: 2023-2024

10% (3,872) of children had a concern recorded for the Emotional/behavioural domain and 8% (3,233) for the Speech, language, and communication domain; whilst 6% of children had a concern recorded for the Fine motor (2,347) and Personal/social (2,249) domains. Concerns about other aspects of children's development were less common, with up to 4% of children having a concern recorded for each domain: Problem solving (1,699, 4%); Vision (1,618, 4%); Gross motor (1,097, 3%); and Hearing (995, 2%). The proportion of concerns that were newly identified as a result of the 4-5 year review varied between the different developmental domains. A higher proportion of concerns in the Hearing, Fine Motor and Emotional/behavioural domains were new (between 49-55%).

Appendix Three: Resources and further reading

[Culturally Responsive Play in Innovative Early Childhood Classrooms | Springer Nature Link](#)

[Developing a mapping tool to support connection and loving relationships in early years settings](#)

[Early child development statistics - Scotland 2023 to 2024 - Early child development - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

[Early Level Play Pedagogy Toolkit | Resources | National Improvement Hub](#)

[Education Endowment Foundation | EEF](#)

[Engaging parents and families - A toolkit for practitioners | Resources | Education Scotland](#)

[Enhancing the quality of mathematics education in Scotland](#)

[Literacy and English within Scotland's curriculum | National thematic inspections | Inspection reports | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland](#)

[Mathematics in the Early Years](#)

[Numeracy and mathematics for Scotland's learners: a thematic report](#)

[Parents and families | Resource Themes | Education Scotland](#)

[Professional Learning Guide](#)

[Realising the Ambition | Resources | Education Scotland](#)

[Recommendations for literacy and English | Literacy and English within Scotland's curriculum | National thematic inspections | Inspection reports | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland](#)

[Strategic Framework for Parental Involvement, Parental Engagement, Family Learning and Learning at Home](#)

[Starting Strong VI | OECD | Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

What is it that we still don't get? – Relational pedagogy and why relationships and connections matter in early childhood

Why relationships matter for the early years