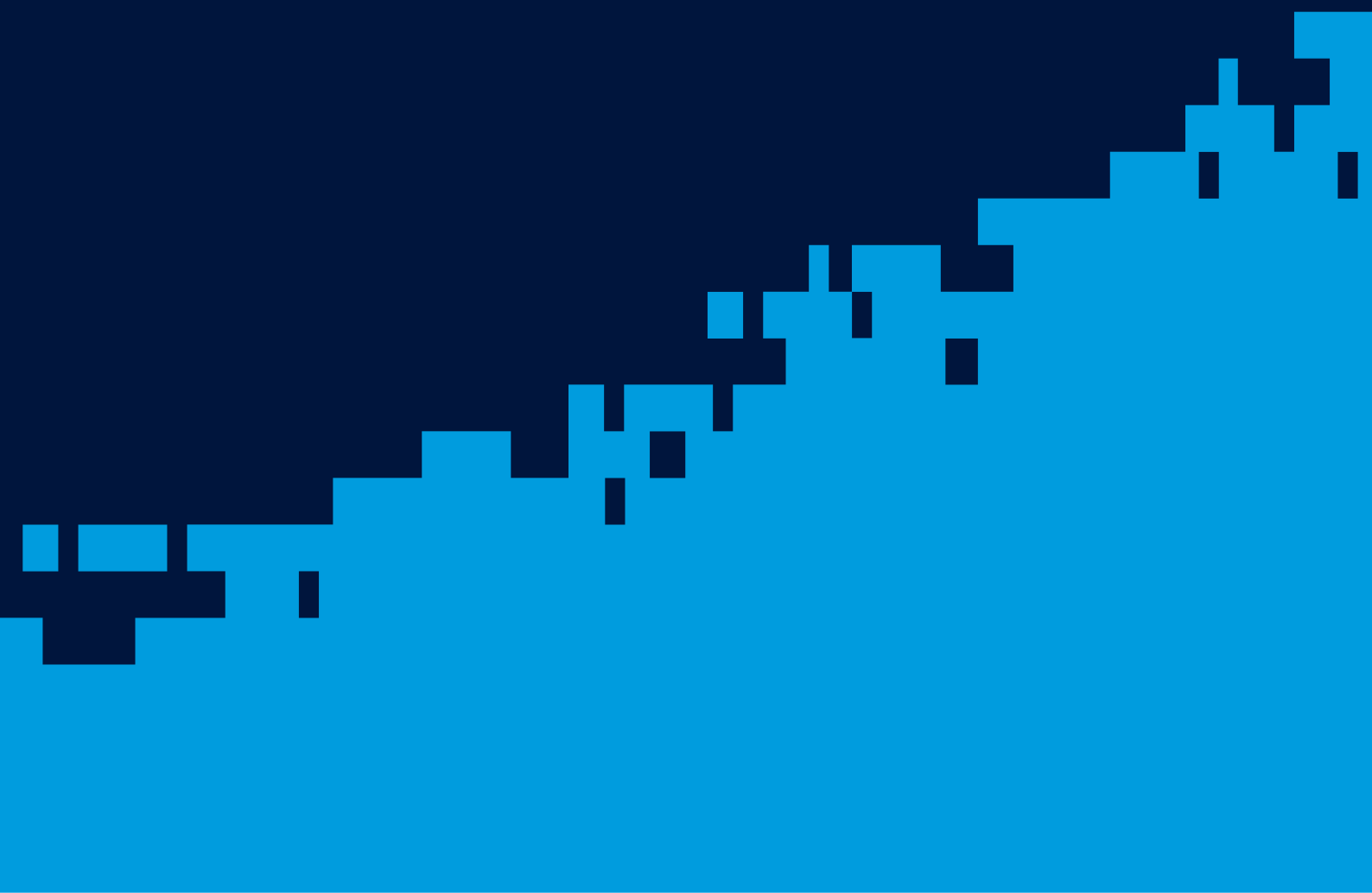


# Department of Education

Outcome based research into the  
current and future impact of Nurture  
Provision in Northern Ireland

29 July 2025



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The RSM team involved in this research is moving to the [RSK Group](#) under a new name, Fortia Insight



# Executive summary

## Overview

The Department of Education (DE) commissioned RSM UK Consulting LLP (RSM) to evidence the impact of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. This included:

- Consideration of the strategic fit of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland.
- Identifying evidence of the social, educational and economic return on investment to measure short and long-term outcomes of Nurture Provision.
- Providing evidence for DE to use to develop options for its future support of Nurture Provision.

Our mixed methods approach involved review of existing evidence, consultations, and modelling the current and future return on investment from Nurture Provision. RSM conducted 13 one-to-one or paired interviews, five focus groups, and empirical research at five schools with DE funded Nurture Groups. We spoke to 109 stakeholders including: representatives from DE, Education Training Inspectorate (ETI), Education Authority (EA), Nurture UK<sup>1</sup>, Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network (NINGN); representatives responsible for Nurture Provision in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; Educational Psychologists; School Leaders; Nurture Group staff; and the parents and carers of children who are (or were) part of a Nurture Group. We also spoke to 40 children who were participating, or had participated, in a Nurture Group. These qualitative consultations were supplemented by written feedback from Nurture Group staff and principals<sup>2</sup> as well as online questionnaires for Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) and pupils. The SLT questionnaire received 125 responses. School staff helped groups of pupils to complete the pupil questionnaire. We received responses from 78 different groups of pupils involving over 1,000 pupils in total. The number of people who willingly contributed their time to this research indicates the value they place on Nurture Provision.

## Nurture<sup>3</sup>

Nurture is an internationally recognised, early intervention approach. It draws on Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) and relationship-based approaches to **create a learning environment where all pupils can thrive academically, socially and emotionally**. In doing so it aims to improve attendance, tackle educational disadvantage and raise attainment for all pupils. Its preventative framework offers consistency and stability and promotes resilience. For children in challenging circumstances, this could potentially reduce the need for more intensive support or intervention in later life.

## Strategic fit of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland

The principles of Nurture (Nurture UK, 2023) are aligned to the 2024-2027 Programme for Government's (PfG) aim of giving children "*the best start in life*" (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). It is also aligned to the PfG's focus on both early intervention and support for special educational needs. It fits with DE's SEND Transformation programme and other DE workstreams and strategic priorities in health, social care and justice. These include the use of TIP (EA and DE, 2024) and addressing the link between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and negative life outcomes (Hughes et al., 2017). Programmes such as The Attach Programme (TAP)<sup>4</sup> and the Reach Programme<sup>5</sup> implement Nurture principles. Others focus on social, behavioural, emotional and well-being (SBEW) needs (e.g. Sure Start, Being Well Doing Well and Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE)). Together they represent substantial investment under the Northern Ireland Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy for 2020-2030 (2021a). It supports DE's medium term strategic focus on Every CHILD (Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning and Delivering, DE, 2023a).

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<sup>1</sup> Nurture UK is a UK-based charity that supports schools in implementing Nurture-based approaches to improve children's social, emotional, and mental well-being. This is by offering a range of activities, such as training courses, webinars, events, educational materials and programmes.

<sup>2</sup> Collated and shared by the Education Authority's Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS) via their Nurture Group Cluster network.

<sup>3</sup> Lucas, S., Inslay, K. and Buckland, G. (2006) *Nurture Group Principles and Curriculum Guidelines Helping Children to Achieve*, The Nurture Group Network

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/primary-children-looked-after-advisory-service/the-attach-programme>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/reach>

## Current delivery model in Northern Ireland

The core components of DE funded Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland are Nurture Groups and the Nurture in Education Programme (NEP). Nurture Groups are a targeted, school-based, short-term, early intervention approach for pupils in Years 1 to 3. There are currently 62 DE-funded Nurture Groups in primary schools across Northern Ireland. Nurture Group provision complemented by the NEP. NEP is a universal intervention that focusses on capacity building within schools to develop a Whole School Nurturing Approach (WSNA). As part of the NEP, school staff are trained in the theoretical aspects of Nurture. This includes the principles of Nurture, TIP, SBEW, neuroscience, attachment, eco-systemic perspective, psychological safety, resilience and therapeutic supports. The whole school ethos has the potential to affect every pupil, staff member and family that engages with the school.

Schools with a DE funded Nurture Group should also have NEP in place. Other schools have implemented a WSNA, with support of the NEP, but do not have a targeted Nurture Group. Some schools have developed their own nurturing approach and/ or targeted group support, independent of DE Nurture Group funding or NEP support. This research focuses on DE funded Nurture Groups and NEP.

The Additional Educational Needs Team (AENT), which sits within DE's Raising Aspirations and Supporting Learning (RASL) Directorate, has policy responsibility for Nurture Provision<sup>6</sup>. DE funded Nurture Provision is delivered by the EA through the Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS). NASS works directly with schools to provide advice, training and support on Nurture Provision, in relation to both Nurture Groups and NEP<sup>7</sup>. DE also provides funding to selected primary schools to deliver a Nurture Group. In 2024/25 there were 62 DE funded Nurture Groups with capacity to support eight to ten pupils each at any point in time. DE funding for Nurture Provision was £4.52m per year in 2023/24 and 2024/25, including<sup>8</sup>:

- £0.67m for the EA's NASS management operations; and
- £3.84m for delivery of 62 Nurture Groups in schools (£62,000 for each of the 62 Nurture Groups).

The current funding level represents a 20% reduction in funding compared to 2022/23 and was a result of wider budgetary pressures across the Department. Allocation of the reduced funds was based on engagement with the sector and appraisal of potential options. The approach taken by DE to managing the funding reduction for Nurture Provision aimed to prioritise protecting funding for delivery of Nurture Groups as far as was deemed possible within the reduced funding envelope. Nurture Group funding decreased from £70,000 to £62,000 per Nurture Group (11%). Principals and staff from the 62 DE funded Nurture Group schools reported providing additional resource from their school budget and other sources to run their Nurture Group. Feedback collected through our consultation exercise indicated a shortfall in resources for Nurture Provision; 86% of respondents from DE funded Nurture Group schools said they did not have enough resources to deliver Nurture Provision as intended. This was supported by our wider consultations in which funding constraints were the most frequently referenced challenge. However, analysis of the outcome data (summarised below), indicates no statistically significant difference in the outcomes achieved before and after DE funding was reduced.

Many respondents also felt that basing funding on generalist salary points does not reflect the specialised roles of Nurture Group staff. In agreement with DE, we have modelled the cost of delivering a Nurture Group based on both staff receiving higher rates to reflect their specialist roles and training (see Options for future support).

Funding for NASS management operations was approximately halved (see findings below on the impact of this reduced funding position on NASS' capacity). Additional funding for NEP was provided indirectly through additional staff resource from the EA central budget to cover salary costs.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'Nurture Provision' is used throughout this report to describe all DE funded Nurture activity in Northern Ireland. This includes DE funded Nurture Groups and NEP.

<sup>7</sup> NASS Nurture Programmes and Support. Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/nurture-programmes-and-support#:~:text=The%20Nurture%20Advisory%20%26%20Support%20Service%20%28NASS%29%20aims,people%20within%20a%20whole%20school%20nurture%20approach%20framework.>

<sup>8</sup> The funding position for 2025/26 has been confirmed at the same level as 2024/25.

## Benefits of Nurture Provision

Analysis of feedback, collated by NASS, and consultations with principals and school staff showed that NASS provided **high quality training and support**. Participants described **professional growth in TIP, child psychology and behaviour management**. Training data from NASS showed that 560 schools in Northern Ireland had participated in at least one Nurture related training session since 2018. This represented 53% of all schools and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings in Northern Ireland (DE, 2025). Analysis of feedback collated by NASS across different Nurture training modules showed that, overall, Nurture related training was rated excellent (NASS, 2024c).

There is evidence that **Nurture Group provision reduces barriers to learning for both Nurture Group pupils and their base class** (Nolan et al., 2021). Firstly, DE statistical returns indicated **improved attendance** for most Nurture Group pupils (DE, 2021; DE, 2022; DE, 2023a; DE, 2024a). This was supported by consultation with Nurture representatives in other jurisdictions. It should be noted, however, that RSM's analysis indicated that the change was only statistically significant in 2023/24. There was also evidence from the pupil questionnaires that **Nurture Provision had improved children's attitudes to coming into school**. This indicates Nurture's potential to help reduce school avoidance<sup>9</sup>. Improved attendance means children spend more time in school, which is one less barrier to their learning. Secondly, Nurture Group pupils experienced improvements in their Boxall<sup>10</sup> development and diagnostic scores (DE, 2021; DE, 2022; DE, 2023a; DE, 2024a). This indicates **improvements in pupils' attitudes and behaviours. Research evidence shows this should lead to a reduction in challenging behaviour and improved educational outcomes for the individual, their base class and the whole school** (Nolan et al., 2021; Cefai and Cooper, 2017; Department for Education in England (DfE), 2024). This was supported by findings from our consultations with school leaders, staff and parents. They reported that children had **better emotional resilience and were using coping strategies that substantially reduced challenging behaviour**. This led to more time spent on teaching and learning for the whole class. Some of the Nurture Group staff who participated in our research went so far as to say that, without Nurture Provision, many schools would be "*failing children*". They felt that there was no alternative approach that would meet the complex, attachment-related, SBEW needs that Nurture Groups aim to support.

Nurture provides a framework to tackle educational inequalities (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021), promote inclusive education and support children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (IPSOS, 2023). This is supported by our primary research. Many stakeholders agreed that the early intervention provided by Nurture resulted in long-term benefits for some of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable children. This included **reducing the need for more intensive support later in the child's life** (Sloan et al., 2016). Interviews with SLTs confirmed that Nurture Provision (Nurture Groups and NEP) had a **positive impact on children with SEN related needs in Northern Ireland**. They said it helped these children to regulate their emotions, thus removing SBEW barriers to learning.

NASS statistical returns indicated that more **Nurture Group pupils moved to a lower stage of the SEN Code of Practice (20%)**, than a higher stage (8%) following Nurture Group support (DE, 2024a). This was supported by consultation with EA Educational Psychologists. They noted that many Nurture Group pupils, did not require further intervention after receiving Nurture Group support. This is despite pupils having been chosen because they had very challenging SBEW needs. In contrast, RSM's analysis of the additional data returns submitted to us by 27 Nurture Group schools found that, on average, children moved to a higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice after leaving the Nurture Group. The reason for this difference in the data received by RSM and NASS is unclear, however it may be due to the profile of respondents (27 of the 62 schools (44%) responded to RSM's request for data<sup>11</sup>, compared to all 62 schools in the NASS returns). It may also be because the requests were worded differently and, therefore, captured slightly different responses<sup>12</sup>. The increase observed in RSM data returns may reflect pupils being placed at Stage 1 to access Nurture Group support or that many children receive diagnoses and/ or have their SEN formally recognised around the ages that Nurture Group support takes place. An increase in average SEN Code of Practice stage is unlikely to reflect an impact of Nurture Provision itself. **The researchers' assessment**

<sup>9</sup> School avoidance is where a pupil refuses to attend school or has difficulty remaining in school the entire day due to anxiety, depression, or social factors.

<sup>10</sup> The Boxall profile is an assessment tool that provides a score for a child's social, emotional, and behavioural development. The development score measures the extent to which children exhibit positive attitudes and behaviours. The diagnostic score measures the level of children's negative behaviours and attitudes.

<sup>11</sup> This included data on 223 pupils in 2023/24, which provided a sufficiently large sample to analyse where statistically significant changes in outcomes had occurred.

<sup>12</sup> NASS statistical returns asked Nurture Group staff to provide the number of pupils who moved to a lower or higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice following Nurture Group support. RSM asked staff to provide each child's SEN Code of Practice stage before attending the Nurture Group and the following term after leaving the Nurture Group.

was that NASS data returns, which reported a fall in average SEN Code of Practice stages following Nurture Group participation, were more likely to be reflective of the impact of Nurture Groups. This is supported by qualitative data, which also suggested that Nurture Groups reduced the need for additional SEN support. Consequently, the NASS data was used to inform assumptions of changes in SEN Code of Practice stages in the return on investment analysis.

Evidence shows that children with higher SBEW levels and lower levels of mental health difficulties have **higher academic attainment** (Panayiotou et al., 2019, Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012). Our consultations with **parents of Nurture Group pupils identified positive learning outcomes**, which should contribute to increased educational attainment in the long-term (Panayiotou et al., 2019; DfE, 2012; Nolan et al., 2021; DfE, 2025; DfE, 2022; Klein et al., 2024; Nuffield Foundation, 2024). This was supported by our consultations with school leaders and staff, which found that pupils who received Nurture support saw improvements in emotional regulation, self-confidence, resilience and academic achievement. Additionally, international research showed that the length of time a nurturing approach was in place in a school contributed to its long-term effectiveness (Nolan et al., 2021).

There are also multiple sources that highlight the relationship between school attendance and academic achievement (DfE, 2022; DfE, 2025; Klein et al., 2024; Nuffield Foundation, 2024) and the likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system (Office for National Statistics Census 2021, 2022). This was supported by SLTs from NEP schools, who observed improvements in the SBEW of pupils in extreme crisis as a result of their nurturing environment, thus leading to a reduction in school absence and criminal activity.

Benefits of Nurture Provision extended beyond the child themselves. **Parents of Nurture Group pupils were less worried** about their child at school and **found home life easier** due to their child's improved emotional self-regulation and social development. The NEP increased the capabilities and confidence of **school staff in understanding needs and managing challenging behaviour**. School staff also benefited from the **increased focus on staff well-being**. More widely, Nurture Groups complimented the NEP in creating an increased sense of community and a **culture of inclusivity and empathy within participating schools**.

## Return on investment

Nurture Provision has substantial social, educational and economic benefits. In the short-term, Nurture Group provision delivers substantial SBEW improvements for participating pupils. On average, Nurture Groups deliver substantial improvements in Boxall scores, at a total cost of around £9,978 per pupil<sup>13</sup>. While this cost per pupil is considerably higher than the average per pupil allocation (the Common Funding Formula allocates £3,938 per primary school pupil with additional funding for pupils who require additional supports<sup>14</sup>), this reflects that Nurture Group provision is a relatively resource intensive, high-cost intervention. We also estimate that schools face lower costs of providing SEN support as a result of Nurture Group provision. Schools reported that Nurture Groups had a net effect of reducing the level of SEN provision required for 12% of pupils.

Improved SBEW for pupils of primary school age is correlated with educational performance aged 16 (Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012). **It was estimated that the improved SBEW of Nurture Group pupils increased their expected General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades by between 1.5 and 2.7 grades per pupil**. A one grade improvement means moving to the next grade up (e.g. from a D to a C) in one subject, a two grade improvement could mean moving up one grade in two subjects or moving up two grades in one subject.

Nurture Groups also help contribute to better education performance through improved school attendance. In 2023/24, chronic absences (10% or higher) fell from 49.7% to 36.9% following participation in Nurture Groups, and severe chronic absence (20% or higher) fell from 22.3% to 8.5%. It was estimated that **participation in Nurture Groups led to an additional 34 children (6.1%) reaching the expected standard at Key Stage 2. For each case of reduced chronic absence, GCSE performance was improved by on average 4.5 grades<sup>15</sup>** (DfE, 2022 and DfE, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> It was estimated that it costs £89,644.97 per year to run a Nurture Group. This was multiplied by the number of Nurture Groups (62) and divided by the total number of children who attended Nurture Groups in 2023/24 (557). This resulted in an estimated average cost per pupil of £9,978. See section 4.5.1 for further details.

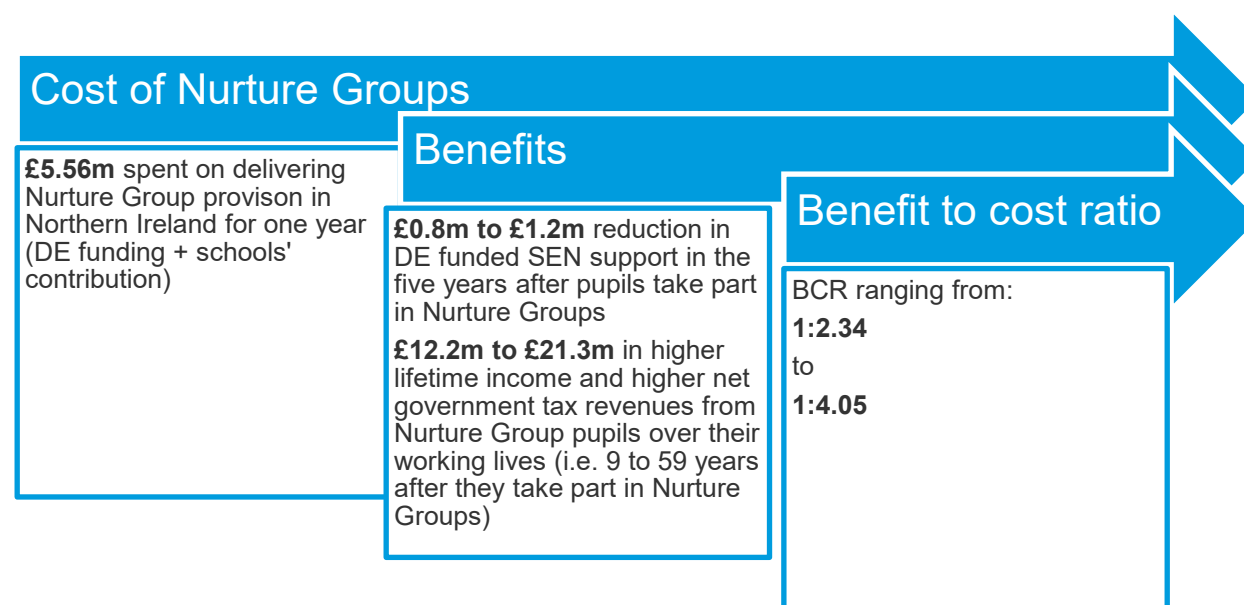
<sup>14</sup> Such as newcomer pupils, Traveller pupils and Children Looked After (CLA).

<sup>15</sup> Authors' calculations based on school data returns.

The economic return on investment was assessed by identifying and estimating the monetary benefits of Nurture Groups as far as possible<sup>16</sup>. This included **reduced need for SEN spending, higher lifetime income of pupils through improved attainment, and higher net government tax revenues**.

**It was not possible to estimate several potentially substantial benefits, including reduced costs of managing behavioural incidents in schools, reduced costs of physical and mental health services, reduced costs to the criminal justice system and reduced costs of late intervention of ACEs<sup>17</sup>. Any potential cost reductions in these areas would be in addition to the benefits that have been quantified in our review. It is important to note that these non-monetary benefits may be substantial. That would mean that the value of Nurture Groups is even greater than the value of monetary benefits estimated above.**

Based on the monetary benefits that were possible to include in the return on investment, **Nurture Group provision has an estimated benefit to cost ratio (BCR) of between 2.34 and 4.05**. The estimated BCR implies that the measured monetised benefits of Nurture Groups were between 134% and 305% larger than the costs of provision. This means that **the benefits of Nurture Groups far outweigh the costs**. We estimate that the £5.56m<sup>18</sup> spent each year on Nurture Groups- through DE funding and schools' contributions- offers long-term value for the economy. In the five years after they take part in Nurture Groups, we estimate that DE will spend between £0.8m and £1.2m less on SEN support for those pupils. Over their working lives, these pupils are expected to contribute between £12.2m and £21.3m more to the economy, approximately 9 to 59 years after they take part in Nurture Groups.



The estimated BCR of Nurture Group provision in Northern Ireland is based on the best evidence available. However, the evidence leaves a degree of uncertainty, reflected by the wide range given for the estimated BCR. Further research on the long-term impacts of Nurture Groups would enable a more precise estimate of the BCR to be made. One option for further consideration would be **a cohort study to compare the trajectories of Nurture Groups pupils to a matched comparator group**.

**Our analysis does not attempt to provide a monetary valuation to non-monetary benefits, such as pupils' emotional and social well-being<sup>19</sup>. It is important to note that these non-monetary benefits**

<sup>16</sup> The Return on Investment analysis focused solely on the costs and benefits of Nurture Groups. For the NEP, it was determined that, while it may be possible to gather data on outcomes in NEP schools, it would not be possible to attribute any changes in outcomes identified to the support provided by the NEP. Therefore, it would not be possible to provide a rigorous estimate of the benefits of the NEP.

<sup>17</sup> There is some evidence that each of these outcomes are improved by Nurture Group provision. However, there was not enough evidence to be able to quantify the associated cost savings robustly.

<sup>18</sup> This estimate is based on subtracting DE funding per Nurture Group (£62,000) from the estimated total average cost of running a Nurture Group (see Section 4.5.1), to provide an estimate of the average funding provided by schools from their central budget, allocated by DE via the common funding formula (£27,645). This figure was then multiplied by the number of Nurture Groups (62) to provide an estimate of the total school contribution.

<sup>19</sup> Methods do exist to 'monetise' (measure in monetary terms) well-being and other non-monetary benefits of Nurture Groups, such as the stated preference approach or 'well-being approach' as detailed in HM Treasury (2021). However, potential approaches were found to be infeasible without conducting substantial further primary data collection which was beyond the scope of the research.

may be very substantial and mean that the value of Nurture Groups is, in reality, even greater than the value of monetary benefits estimated.

### Options for future support

The average cost of delivering a Nurture Group was estimated assuming that each group requires one full time Nurture teacher and one full time classroom assistant (CA). We also included an estimated £2,000 in annual running costs to cover stationary, trips and extra-curricular activities. **The total average annual cost per Nurture Group was estimated as £89,645.** Nurture Group funding is conditional on both the teacher and CA having completed training on the Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups and having received or be working towards Nurture UK accredited training (EA and DE, 2024). **If both staff members were paid on the SEN-specific pay scales to reflect their specialised skills and training, then the per unit cost of running a Nurture Group would be £98,429.** This is £8,784 higher than the costs of running a Nurture Group with both members of staff on generalist pay scales.

In 2024/25, DE provided £62,000 funding to the annual running costs of each Nurture Group. This implies a DE contribution in 2024/25 of 69% of the total costs of running the Nurture Group and that schools, therefore, contributed on average £27,645 (31%) from their own budgets<sup>20</sup>. If DE were to fund the total average costs of running a Nurture Group, then this would imply a DE contribution of £89,645 per Nurture Group. In recognition of the additional funding these schools attract to support tackling educational disadvantage and differentiated need<sup>21</sup>, we have developed a scenario where that funding contributes to the costs of running a Nurture Group. This scenario estimates that, on average, Nurture Group schools receive an additional £11,090 funding to support Nurture Group pupils through the common funding formula. This is equivalent to 12% of the estimated cost of running a Nurture Group. Therefore, under this scenario, schools would contribute £11,090 (12%) towards the cost of running a Nurture Group with DE making up the remaining £78,555 (88%).

**Whilst data on the quality of existing NEP provision was positive, respondents to the SLT questionnaire had mixed views about NASS's capacity to meet all schools' training needs with their current resources.** Schools with a self-funded Nurture Group or no Nurture Group were more likely to report that NASS did not have capacity to meet their needs. Post-primary settings were also more likely to report limited training provision and skill development opportunities. A minority of respondents to the SLT questionnaire also felt that while initial support was good, there was a lack of capacity to meet ongoing training needs. They said new staff had not received any training on Nurture approaches, which could weaken the whole school approach over time. **NASS's reduced delivery capacity as a result of decreased funding can be considered to contribute to these findings.** A final scenario for consideration is, therefore, to increase NASS's capacity to facilitate provision of more NEP training and support in the future. The nature and scope of this additional resource should be informed by the agreed future model of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. It was agreed with DE that there are currently too many uncertainties to robustly estimate the costs associated with this recommendation.

**DE should also consider encouraging local training providers to include an understanding of Nurture principles and approach, including TIP and relational approaches, within initial teaching and CA qualifications.** This would help mitigate the challenge of staff turnover leading to a loss of Nurture knowledge within NEP schools, since newly qualified staff would have a baseline understanding. At the time of writing NASS was working with Stranmillis University College and Ulster University to integrate Nurture into their curriculums. This was being undertaken voluntarily by both institutions in recognition of the benefits of Nurture Provision.

<sup>20</sup> Primarily from DE funding allocated to the school through the common funding formula.

<sup>21</sup> Such as newcomer pupils, Traveller pupils and Children Looked After (CLA).

# Glossary

The following definitions apply throughout this document unless the context requires otherwise:

Term	Definition
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Traumatic events occurring before age 18, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, which can have long-term impacts on health and well-being.
Boxall Profile	An assessment tool that measures a child's social, emotional, and behavioural development. It includes a development score for positive attitudes and behaviours and a diagnostic score for negative behaviours and attitudes.
Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)	A range of services provided by the National Health Service (NHS) and other organisations in the UK to support the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people up to the age of 18.
Children and Young People's Services (CYPS)	Assessment, diagnosis and treatment services aimed at supporting the well-being and development of children and young people.
Children Looked After (CLA)	Children and young people who are in the care of a local authority or Trust. This can include children in foster care, residential care, or with other family or friends.
Classroom Assistant (CA)	A staff member who supports the teacher in the classroom, often with additional training for specialised roles such as Nurture Groups.
Department of Education (DE)	The government department responsible for education policy and funding in Northern Ireland.
Education Authority (EA)	The body responsible for delivering education services in Northern Ireland, including the Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS).
Emotional Health and Well-being (EHWB)	The state of being emotionally healthy, which includes the ability to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and cope with challenges.
General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)	Academic qualifications in a particular subject, taken in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and other British territories, typically by students aged 15-16.
Initial Teacher Education (ITE)	The training and education provided to individuals preparing to become teachers. In Northern Ireland, ITE is delivered by Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.
Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS)	A service within the EA that provides advice, training and support on Nurture Provision to schools.
Nurture Groups	Targeted, school-based, short-term, early intervention groups for pupils in Years 1 to 3, aimed at addressing social, behavioural, emotional, and well-being needs.
Nurture in Education Programme (NEP)	A universal intervention that focuses on capacity building within schools to develop a Whole School Nurturing Approach (WSNA).
Nurture Provision	DE funded Nurture activity in Northern Ireland, including Nurture Groups and NEP
Nurture Teacher	The specialised teacher of a Nurture Group. They are responsible for the day-to-day running of the Nurture Group, making sure that Nurture principles are maintained through consistent practice and approach.
Programme for Government (PfG)	A framework outlining the strategic priorities and objectives of the Northern Ireland Executive.
Return on investment	A measure of the financial return on an investment relative to its cost, used to evaluate the efficiency of an investment.
Senior Leadership Team (SLT)	The group of senior staff members in a school responsible for strategic planning and decision-making.

Term	Definition
Special Educational Needs (SEN)	Educational requirements for children or young people who have learning difficulties and/ or disabilities that can affect their ability to learn.
Trauma Informed Practice (TIP)	An approach that recognises the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life, including in their behaviour and learning.
Whole School Nurturing Approach (WSNA)	A school-wide culture and ethos that promotes well-being and learning for all pupils, staff, and families.



# 1. Introduction and approach

## 1.1 Introduction

RSM UK Consulting LLP (RSM) was commissioned by the Department of Education (DE) to provide evidence of the current and future impact of DE funded Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. The RSM research team included: Jenny Irwin (Quality Assurance); Beth Young (Project Director); Dave Innes (Quantitative Lead); Michael Greig (Qualitative Lead); Inna Yordanova (Quantitative Researcher); Nazia Chowdhury (Qualitative Researcher); and Hugh O'Reilly (Mixed Method Researcher).

This research followed from a previous mixed methods and cost-effective study on Nurture Groups by Queen's University Belfast (Sloan et al., 2016) and aims to provide an up-to-date account of the impacts of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. The scope of RSM's research includes both Nurture Groups and the Nurture in Education Programme (NEP).

The research team would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr Aileen Gildea from Queen's University Belfast and Dr Seaneen Sloan from University College Dublin. Dr Gildea and Dr Sloan were part of the 2016 evaluation team. They contributed to this research by commenting on early drafts of our research tools and outputs.

### Research objectives

1. Consider the strategic fit of Nurture Provision within the wider landscape including Emotional Health and Well-being (EHWB), Education and Welfare Services (EWS) and Special Educational Needs (SEN), Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Children Looked After (CLA).
2. Provide evidence in relation to the social, educational and economic return on investment to measure short and long-term outcomes of Nurture Provision.
3. Provide evidence for DE to use to develop models/ options for its future support of Nurture Provision.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodology, including the timings of key activities.

## 1.2 Approach

Our methodology involved:

- **A comprehensive mixed-methods approach** combining evidence review and stakeholder consultations;
- **Regular engagement with stakeholders and validation of findings through workshops;** and
- **Robust return on investment modelling.**

Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodology, including the timings of key activities. This is followed by Table 1 which summarises the outputs of each stage of the methodology.

Figure 1: Summary of the methodology

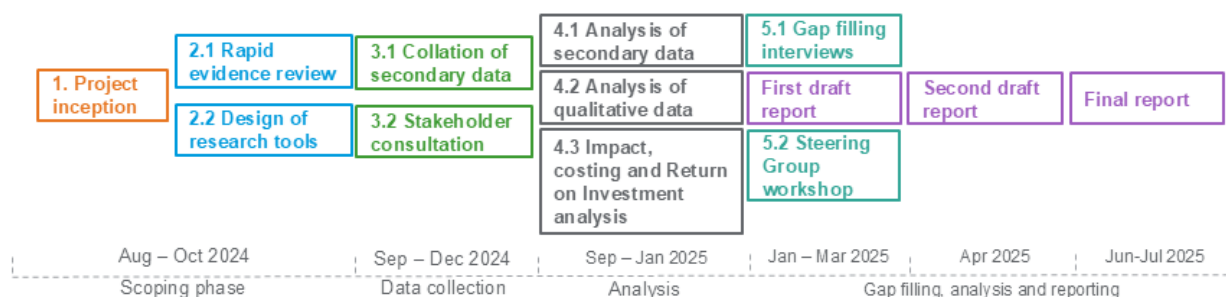


Table 1: Methodology stages and outputs

Stage	Output
1. Project Inception	Project Inception Document (PID)
2.1 Rapid Evidence Review	A rapid evidence review (RER) was conducted to identify and consolidate outcome-based evidence on Nurture Provision from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions (Scotland and Ireland) from academic year 2016/17 to 2023/24. The review also included an overview of the delivery of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland, the levels of need, and how Nurture overlaps with other policy areas and objectives. In total, 64 texts were included in the RER. This consisted of 26 from an academic database search, 17 from manual searching and reference mining, and 21 supplied by DE and wider stakeholders.
2.2 Design of research tools	This included semi-structured topic guides for focus groups and interviews and research materials (participant information sheets, content for invitations to participate via email etc.).
3.1 Collation of Secondary data	We requested anonymised pupil-level outcome data from all 62 Nurture Group schools. Schools were not obliged to respond but were encouraged to do so by the research team, DE and the Education Authority's (EA's) Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS). 27 schools returned their pupil-level outcome data, yielding a 44% sample of the Nurture Group population. This provided data on 223 pupils in 2023/24, which was sufficient to analyse where statistically significant changes in outcomes had occurred.
3.2 Stakeholder consultation	<p>In total, RSM conducted: 13 one-to-one or group interviews, five focus groups, and empirical research at five schools with a DE funded Nurture Group. In total we spoke to 109 stakeholders including: representatives from DE, Education Training Inspectorate (ETI), EA (including the EA's NASS who provide support and advice on Nurture), Nurture UK, Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network (NINGN); representatives responsible for Nurture Provision in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; Educational Psychologists; School Leaders; Nurture Group staff; and parents and carers of children who are (or were) part of a Nurture Group. We also had facilitated engagement with 40 children who were participating, or had participated, in a Nurture Group.</p> <p>Qualitative consultations were supplemented by written feedback from Nurture Group staff and principals,<sup>22</sup> and two online questionnaires (see Appendix B for profile of respondents):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A pupil questionnaire, which was sent to all schools that had accessed DE funded NEP support. School staff were asked to assist a small group of pupils to complete the questionnaire. We received completed questionnaires from 78 separate groups, representing 1,052 pupils in total. This allowed us to capture 1,052 pupils' opinions about their school's approach to Nurture; and</li> <li>• A Senior Leadership Team (SLT) questionnaire, which received 125 responses.</li> </ul>
4.1 Analysis of secondary data	Descriptive statistics, trend analysis and cross-tabulations of Nurture Group outcome data. Thematic analysis of training feedback.
4.2 Analysis of qualitative data	Cleaned summary notes, coded thematically to identify core findings and nuances.
4.3 Impact and costing analysis	Analysis summary Spreadsheets and data on costings analysis and economic modelling
5.1 Gap filling interviews	Interviews completed
5.2 Validation Workshop	Workshop completed Collated feedback on findings
6. Reporting	First Draft Report Second Draft Report Final Report and presentation

<sup>22</sup> Collated and shared by NASS via their Nurture Group Cluster network.

The remainder of this report is structured under the following sections:

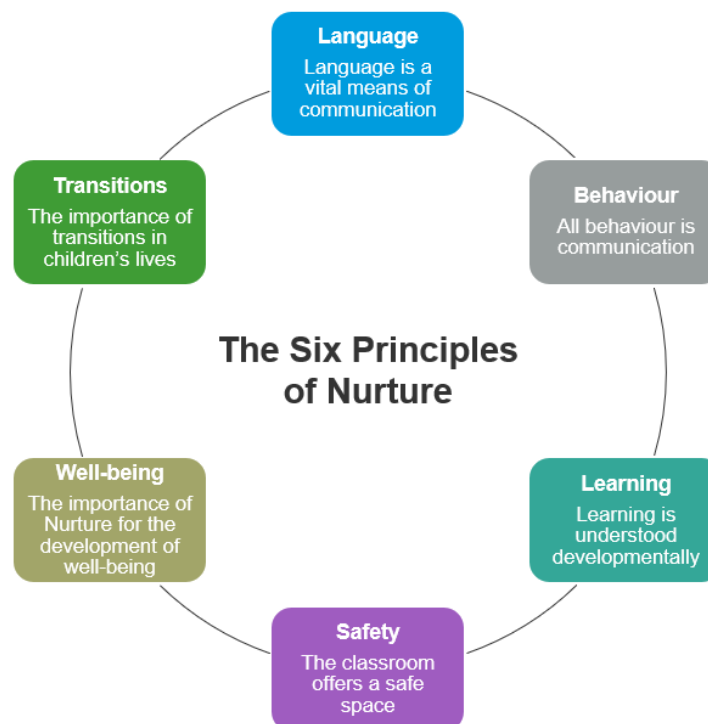
- Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland, which describes what Nurture is, its strategic fit in Northern Ireland and the current delivery model. This was used to refine our costed options for future support.
- Outcomes from Nurture Provision, which describes our findings in relation to the benefits of Nurture Provision for pupils, parents/ carers, staff and schools. These findings were used to inform our assessment of the return on investment of Nurture Provision.
- Impact and , which estimates the current and potential future return from DE's investment in Nurture Provision. It also provides costed options for future support.
- Conclusions, which presents our conclusions against each of the three research objectives.
- Appendices, which contain:
  - A flow diagram of the sources and screening process used in the rapid evidence review.
  - Questionnaire respondent profiles.
  - Analysis of pupil outcome data by sub-group.
  - Details of our modelling approach and assumptions.
  - A list of the existing research referenced in this project.

## 2. Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland

### 2.1 Overview

Nurture Provision is a globally recognised early intervention approach. It was first conceived in the modern form by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall in 1969 (Boxall, M. and Lucas, S., 2010). DE funding for school-based Nurture Provision began in 2012. The first 20 Nurture Groups were established via the Delivering Social Change (DSC) Signature Project in 2012, funded by DE and the Department for Social Development (now the Department for Communities). Nurture Provision expanded with the introduction of 11 new Nurture Groups in 2016 and a further 15 Groups in 2020. The latest set of 16 Nurture Groups were introduced after the Fair Start Action Plan in 2022 (Expert panel on educational underachievement, 2021). This brought the total number of Nurture Groups in Northern Ireland to 62.

Figure 2: The six principles of Nurture



Source: Nurture UK

Nurture Provision supports children and young people (CYP) with attachment related<sup>23</sup> social, behavioural, emotional and well-being (SBEW) needs that impede learning. It aims to address aspects of traditional classroom environments and school life that can be challenging for CYP with SBEW needs. This is done by creating supportive spaces and environments where CYP can develop the skills necessary to engage effectively with their education. Thus, reducing SBEW barriers to learning and improving outcomes in later life.

The core principles of Nurture (Nurture UK, 2023), overlap with other DE workstreams and strategic priorities in health, social care and justice. For example, Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) is embedded into the Nurture Provision delivery model (EA and DE, 2024). This ensures that Nurture Provision is focussed on addressing the link between ACEs and negative life outcomes (Hughes et al., 2017). This involves fostering trustworthy relationships between CYP and adults; enhancing child and family capacity for resilience and recovery; and reducing organisational practices that may exacerbate the impacts of trauma and ACEs (Bunting et al., 2018). Programmes such as The Attach Programme (TAP)<sup>24</sup> and the Reach Programme<sup>25</sup> implement Nurture principles. Other programmes focus on SBEW needs (e.g. Sure Start and Being Well Doing Well, as well as health programmes, such as Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE)).

<sup>23</sup> Attachment related SBEW needs are defined as the social, emotional and psychological difficulties that specifically derive from unmet, inconsistent or disrupted early attachments and relationships.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/primary-children-looked-after-advisory-service/the-attach-programme>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/reach>

Nurture Provision is also cited as a framework to tackle educational inequalities (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021), promote inclusive education, support pupils with SEN (IPSOS, 2023), and reduce the use of restrictive practices to address difficult behaviour (DE, 2023c).

As a policy domain, Nurture Provision is the responsibility of the Additional Educational Needs Team (AENT) which sits within the Raising Aspirations and Supporting Learning (RASL) Directorate within DE. Nurture Provision can be seen to contribute to the 2024-2027 Programme for Government (PfG) aim of giving every child *“the best start in life”* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). It is also aligned to the PfG’s focus on early intervention and support for SEN (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025) and DE’s wider SEND Transformation Programme<sup>26</sup>.

Nurture Provision is referenced under the Northern Ireland Executive’s Children and Young People’s Strategy for 2020-2030 (2021). It supports DE’s medium term strategic focus on Every CHILD (Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning and Delivering), primarily in terms of the priority of *“helping all our children and young people by supporting their well-being and learning”* (DE, 2023a).

There are two core components of DE funded Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland: DE funded Nurture Groups; and the NEP. Nurture Groups are a targeted, school-based, early intervention approach for primary school pupils in Years 1 to 3. They aim to reduce SBEW barriers to learning and prevent needs from becoming more complex and entrenched over time (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021), therefore, reducing the need for more costly intervention later in the child’s life (Sloan et al. 2016). This is complemented by the NEP. NEP is a universal intervention that focusses on capacity building within schools to develop a WSNA. This is a whole school culture and ethos of well-being for all (EA and DE, 2024).

All schools with a DE funded Nurture Group should also have or be working towards NEP. Schools can have or be working towards NEP without having a DE funded Nurture Group. We are aware that some schools have developed their own nurture approach and/ or targeted group support, independent of DE funded Nurture Provision. This research focuses on DE funded Nurture Provision only.

The research team developed a draft logic model to provide a framework for this research. This was then refined in consultation with stakeholders (see Figure 3). It sets out the following aspects of Nurture Provision:

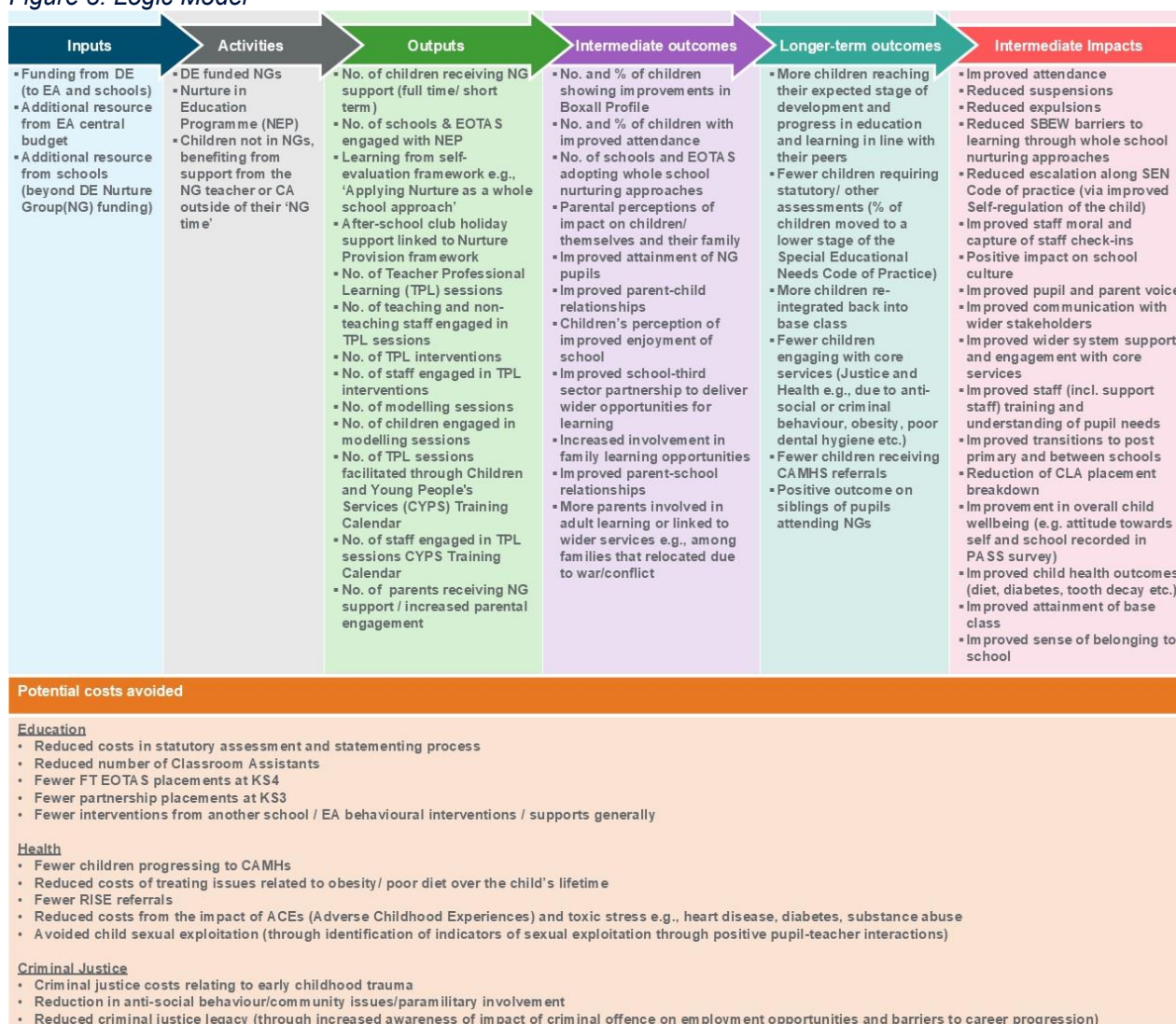
- Inputs – The resources that go into delivering Nurture Provision
- Activities – The specific services or support delivered through Nurture Provision
- Outputs – Quantifiable products, events, services etc. delivered through Nurture Provision activities
- Outcomes – The changes created by Nurture Provision
- Intermediate impacts – The effect or result of changes arising from of Nurture Provision in the medium term
- Potential costs avoided - Public sector costs avoided because of improved outcomes and impacts.

Each aspect is explored in more detail throughout the remainder of the report alongside the findings from our analysis of the primary and secondary data.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/educational-transformation/send-transformation-programme>

Figure 3: Logic Model



## 2.2 Service implementation

### 2.2.1 Inputs

Nurture Provision is funded by DE and delivered by the EA through NASS. NASS sits within the Primary Behaviour Support and Provisions (PBS&P) service of the EA. NASS works directly with schools to provide advice and training on Nurture Provision. It collates monitoring information about DE funded Nurture Groups and reports it to DE along with the progress of schools within the NEP training and implementation pathway. DE also provides funding directly to 62 Primary Schools for Nurture Groups (one group per school). This is for the costs of delivering a Nurture Group. Specifically, it aims to support the cost of the full time Nurture teacher and classroom assistant (CA) salaries. Nurture Group funding is conditional on both the teacher and CA having completed training on the Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups and having received or be working towards Nurture UK accredited training (EA and DE, 2024).

DE provided £4.52m funding per year for Nurture Provision in 2023/24 and 2024/25<sup>27</sup>. This included:

- £0.67m for NASS management operations, and
- £3.84m for delivery of 62 Nurture Groups in schools (£62,000 per Nurture Group).

This was a 20% reduction, from £5.64m in 2022/23, due to wider budgetary pressures. Allocation of the reduced funds was based on engagement with the sector and appraisal of potential options. The approach taken by DE to manage the funding reduction for Nurture Provision aimed to prioritise protecting funding for delivery of Nurture Groups as far as was deemed possible within the reduced funding envelope. Nurture Group funding decreased from £70,000 to £62,000 per Nurture Group (11%). In contrast, funding for NASS management operations was approximately halved. Additional funding for NEP was provided indirectly

<sup>27</sup> The funding position for 2025/26 has been confirmed at the same level as 2024/25.

through additional staff resource from the EA central budget. Schools also allocated additional resource from their school budget to the delivery of Nurture Groups.

We invited written responses from SLTs who had accessed DE funded Nurture support. When asked whether they currently had enough resources to deliver Nurture Provision as intended, 86% of respondents from DE funded Nurture Group schools said no. More specifically, 80% said that the funding to deliver Nurture Provision was inadequate. Funding constraints also emerged as the most referenced challenge in the qualitative data gathered through consultations with stakeholders, Nurture Group staff and SLT members. Nurture Group schools supplemented Nurture Group funding with funding from their school budget (see Section 4.5.3 for more details). Although this is also funding provided by DE through the school funding formula, using it to deliver their Nurture Group means that it cannot be used elsewhere in the school. Some schools were also cutting back on certain Nurture Group activities due to a lack of funding to pay for trips, food, resources and other expenses.

*“The school's core allocation is being used to support the invaluable work of our Nurture Room. Unfortunately, this means that we are in a 'rob Peter, to pay Paul' scenario.”* (Principal of a DE funded Primary school)

*“We have had to fundraise to cover snack expenses and have not been able to subsidise Nurture outings. Funding cut of eight thousand pounds is a huge obstacle. The impact of this cut can be seen; breakfast, trips, replenish fidget toys teddys, external visitors etc.”* (Vice Principal of a DE funded Primary school)

*“Once staff are paid, we are already in a deficit for food and resources. This makes things very challenging as we're hampered by a lack of proper funding to run the provision in line with the guidance given. We would love to take the children on more outings where they can learn about the world around them through experiences, but unfortunately this is rarely achievable due to lack of funding.”* (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group)

In self-funded Nurture Groups, an additional input was the time spent applying for grants and sourcing funding. Some schools with Nurture Groups, including those who received Nurture funding from DE, were also sourcing funding from school benefactors and charities.

### 2.2.2 Activities

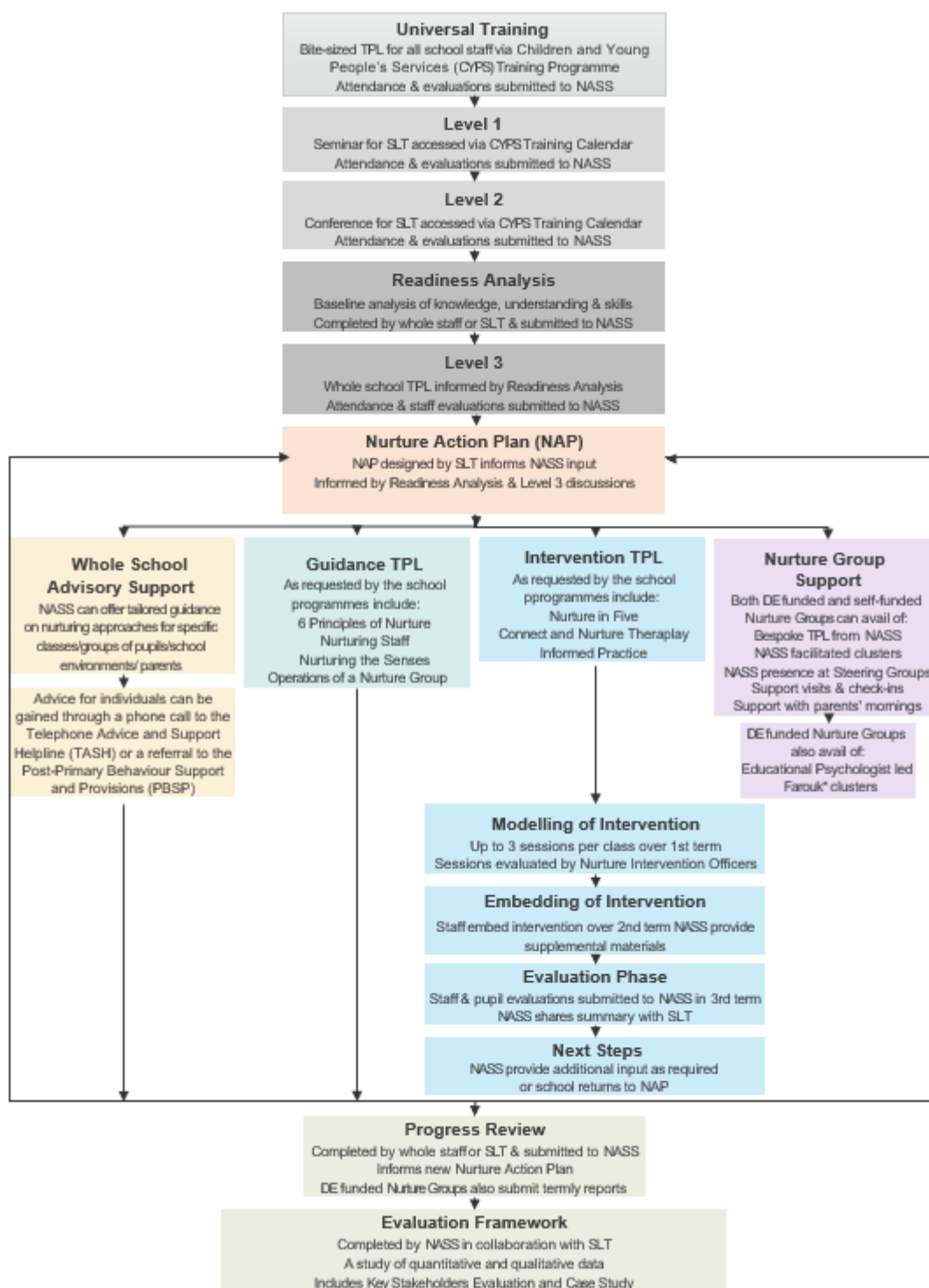
The core components of DE funded Northern Ireland Nurture Provision are Nurture Groups and the NEP<sup>28</sup>. The NEP is an early intervention and preventative framework that focusses on capacity building within schools to develop a WSNA. Through the NEP NASS provides training for school staff in the theoretical aspects of Nurture (summarised in Figure 4). This includes the six principles of Nurture, TIP, SBEW, neuroscience, attachment, eco-systemic perspective, psychological safety, resilience and therapeutic supports. NEP schools should also develop supportive spaces for pupils to self-regulate (NASS, 2024). Therefore, Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is a key input of the NEP.

Training data from NASS (2024d) showed that 560 schools had participated in at least one Nurture related training since 2018. This represented 53% of all schools and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings in Northern Ireland (DE, 2025). Additional training is also available from Nurture International, Nurture UK and Field Studies Ireland for outdoor education.

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<sup>28</sup> See Nurture programme and support. Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/nurture-programmes-and-support#:~:text=The%20Nurture%20Advisory%20%26%20Support%20Service%20%28NASS%29%20aims,people%20within%20a%20whole%20school%20nurture%20approach%20framework.>

Figure 4: Overview of NEP



\*Farouk problem solving is a methodical approach that emphasises clear identification of problems, innovative thinking, and collaborative solutions.

Source: NASS (2024a). *Nurture in Education Programme – Support for Schools. Primary Sector*. May 2024.

In 2024/25 there were 62 DE funded Nurture Groups across Northern Ireland, each with a capacity for eight to ten selected pupils at any one time. Selection of pupils for Nurture Groups is based on pupils' Boxall profiles, classroom observations of their behaviour, and an assessment of the balance of needs and expected dynamics of the proposed Group. Guidance also recommends consulting the school's Educational Psychologist before confirming the Nurture Group selection (EA and DE, 2024).

Nurture Groups provide physical and emotional space for pupils to develop positive and meaningful relationships with other children and adults. Pupil placements in Nurture Groups are intended to be short term, lasting a minimum of one or two terms and a maximum of four terms. The length of time spent in the Nurture Group depends on the assessed needs of the pupil. Data collected through this research showed

that, on average, pupils attended their Nurture Group for three terms. Each Nurture Group is run by a dedicated Nurture teacher and CA. They are specialised staff, responsible for providing a bespoke, responsive and preventative environment that supports pupils' social and emotional development. Specific activities within the Nurture Group include:

- informal conversation and relationship-building;
- providing the pupils with opportunities for sharing feelings;
- group activities for social skill development;
- snack routine (preparing, eating and cleaning as a group);
- sensory and/ or regulatory play;
- curriculum learning; and,
- assessment of progress towards targets.

### 2.2.3 Outputs

Table 2 presents the outputs from Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland in the 2023/2024 academic year. It separates the outputs from Nurture Groups and NEP. While output data is also available for previous academic years via the Outcomes Based Accountability Scorecards, many of the training delivery and engagement metrics are not specified consistently across academic years. Therefore, a direct comparison of these metrics across different years is not possible.

*Table 2: Outputs from Nurture Provision*

Nurture Groups	Value	Nurture in Education Programme	Value
Number of Nurture Groups	62	Number of TPL sessions facilitated	139
Number of children attending Nurture Groups	557	Number of staff attending TPL sessions	3,299
Additional children supported by Nurture Group staff	2,110	Number of TPL intervention sessions	458
Support visits conducted by NASS	152	Number of staff attending TPL intervention sessions	2,412
Steering group meetings attended by NASS	110	Number of TPL modelling of intervention sessions	1,806
		Number of pupils attending TPL modelling of intervention sessions	18,908
		Number of parent sessions facilitated	24
		Number of TASH calls supported by NASS officers	353
		Number of Nurture-related school meetings attended by NASS officers	140

## 2.3 Effectiveness of provision

This section summarises feedback we have gathered on the effectiveness of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. Insights were gathered from people involved in the governance and management of Nurture Provision, delivery staff, teachers, parents, and children, highlighting both successes and areas for improvement. The findings have been used to inform our potential options for future support.

### 2.3.1 Strengths

The majority of the stakeholders who were interviewed felt that Nurture Provision was very effective. They reported substantial improvements in pupils' social, behavioural, emotional, and academic outcomes. They were confident that Nurture's early intervention and preventative approach was key to its effectiveness. This allowed schools to address the individual pupils' needs before they became more entrenched or worsened. Respondents from NASS felt the current model of NEP provided sufficient structure and consistency whilst encouraging flexibility in practice to meet individual needs of pupils. However, they expressed concerns about their capacity to support all sectors with NASS's current staffing levels.

Nurture Group staff felt that Nurture Groups were a very effective model for addressing needs. This was for numerous reasons. They felt that the model of having two full time staff provided enough capacity to fully support Nurture Group pupils. It also allowed one member of staff to respond spontaneously to issues or individual pupils while the other covered the rest of the group. Having dedicated Nurture Group staff allowed them to provide effective, specialised support to staff in the base class. It also helped to promote a whole school approach. More specifically, it was reported that the Nurture assistant enabled the Nurture

teacher to: “*build capacity for developing nurturing approaches*” across the school; and “*identify and support students who need additional provision*” (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group). On a separate note, one parent highlighted the effectiveness of the ‘Bring a friend’ day. This is a suggested strategy which allows pupils to invite a friend from their base class into the Nurture Group for specified activities (EA and DE, 2023). This socially connects the two environments from the pupil’s perspective, helping with inclusion and reintegration. Some Nurture Group staff who participated in our research emphasised that, without Nurture Provision, many schools would be “*failing children*”. This was because they felt that there was no alternative approach that would meet those attachment-related, complex SBEW needs.

*“[Nurture Provision is] invaluable! An essential part of school life in the current climate. We are in an area where drug abuse is rife, and Nurture Provision is a lifeline for many children and their families.”* (Nurture teacher from a DE funded Nurture Group primary school)

*“Nurture and the Nurture Room is the beating heart of our school, and we would be lost without it. That applies to pupils, teaching and non-teaching staff!”* (Principal from a DE funded Nurture Group primary school)

Similar to feedback on the NEP, flexibility was seen as a strength of Nurture Groups. Nurture Group staff praised the flexibility to introduce pupils to their Nurture Group on a termly basis. This was said to help meet the changing needs of pupils and was preferable to selecting pupils once a year.

More generally, Nurture Groups were felt to be a suitable model for addressing a range of SBEW needs. Nurture Groups were rooted in understanding that, “*a lot of the children’s and parents’ issues are circumstantial.*” They provide the space and time for open, non-judgemental discussion and specific adjustments. This is often not possible within mainstream classes, where staff are more focussed on teaching the curriculum and have less capacity for targeted intervention.

Parents felt that communication from the schools regarding Nurture Groups was effective. Parents were consistently informed about their children’s progress and details of events, such as parents’ breakfasts, Stay and Play sessions, coffee mornings and teddy bear picnics. Nurture Group staff felt that involving parents in Nurture activities and generating buy-in from parents was an important component of Nurture Provision. This required time on a consistent basis for Nurture Group staff to build relationships, foster trust and open dialogue with parents using empathetic and attentive social skills. Some Nurture Group staff reported that at first, parents can feel judged, worry that Nurture Groups lead to involvement from social services, and think their child will fall behind since they are being taken out of their base class. The ability of Nurture Group staff to address these concerns and explain the benefits of Nurture Provision was, therefore, key to engaging parents in Nurture and embedding Nurture principles in the home environment.

Parents felt that school staff were approachable. They said they could contact the school and the Nurture Group staff easily to discuss any issues. Parental engagement was encouraged through invitations to attend and take part in certain Nurture Group activities. This was complimented by a welcoming environment and an increased sense of community: “*It is a real good community and family setting*”.

One aspect of Nurture Groups that some parents highlighted to be particularly effective was learning through play. Nurture Groups were felt to create a fun environment at school for these selected pupils. This increased engagement with learning activities and also increased the pupil’s enthusiasm about learning in the long-term.

*“A lot of learning was done through play, which was fantastic too because it was giving them it at their level in the way they enjoyed to learn... it does make a big difference.”* (Parent of a child who previously attended a Nurture Group)

Nurture Group staff and respondents to the SLT questionnaire said that Nurture Groups helped parents engage with school and their child’s development, for example, through ‘Stay and Play’ sessions. However, a minority of staff felt that the current level of parental engagement was still not enough. This issue is discussed in more detail below in relation to Challenges.

Other features specific to Nurture Groups were felt to be effective. Nurture Group staff found Nurture Group steering groups to be a useful way to ensure accountability. Furthermore, peer-support cluster meetings (small groups of Nurture Group staff from different schools with Nurture Groups who meet every half term) were highlighted as a strength of the Nurture Group model. Through cluster meetings, Nurture Group staff from different schools learnt and shared best practice, connected with peers with similar experiences, and received regional updates. Nurture Group staff described them as “*invaluable*” and a “*lifeline*” when seeking support. Another labelled them as of “*paramount importance*” for sharing ideas and discussing difficulties with people who understand and can suggest good strategies that can be built upon.

### 2.3.2 Challenges

Despite the overall positive sentiment regarding the effectiveness of Nurture Provision, many challenges were identified through our consultations. Most of these challenges were associated with funding constraints, especially since the funding cut in 2023/24. This was true for both DE funded Nurture Group schools and schools without direct DE funding for Nurture. The key issues are listed below:

- Nurture Group staff and SLT respondents voiced concerns over the inadequacy of funding for Nurture Groups. They said that the funding did not cover the full costs of employing Nurture Group staff. Respondents estimated that the £62,000 funding per group per year left a shortfall of between £20,000 and £40,000. This is supported by RSM analysis of the costs of running a Nurture Group (see Section 4). Furthermore, there was no annual budget for resources such as food, toys, art materials, cooking equipment, sensory materials and trips. Nurture teachers often bought these themselves, which has a negative financial impact on them. In acknowledgement of these challenges, we have estimated the total cost of delivering a Nurture Group (see Section 4).
- Many respondents felt that basing funding on generalist teacher and CA salary points did not reflect the specialised nature of Nurture roles. They noted that Nurture CAs were paid a standard CA salary, despite doing a more specialised role that required additional training. NASS and school staff reported cases where Nurture CAs had moved to Specialist Provision in Mainstream School (SPIMS) units for higher pay. One Principal noted that the uncompetitive salary was, “*making it difficult to attract candidates*” for their Nurture CA role. In agreement with DE, we have also modelled the cost of delivering a Nurture Group based on Nurture Group staff receiving higher rates to reflect their specialist roles and training (see Section 4).
- NASS reported a reduction in capacity following funding cuts. This resulted in a waiting list for Level 3 training, and reduced capacity to support post-primary and special schools. This may have contributed to the perception of some SLT respondents from post-primary and/ or non-DE funded Nurture Groups, that there was limited training or development opportunities to meet their needs. The challenges in relation to NASS’s capacity come within the context of increased and increasing level of needs for Nurture-related support in schools. This is discussed further in *training and skills development* below.

*“The fact that we are concerned for the medium-term sustainability of such a worthwhile and effective programme is, frankly, chilling.”* (Principal of a DE funded Nurture Group primary school)

More generally, SLTs, Nurture Group staff and stakeholders alike felt that Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland suffered from a lack of long-term, statutory commitment at the government level. The Northern Ireland Executive’s annual budget cycle means that decisions about earmarked funds have to be taken annually. This restricts Departments’ abilities to provide multi-year budgets for non-statutory earmarked funds. For DE funded Nurture Group schools, this has created uncertainty and insecurity, which may negatively impact delivery of Nurture Groups: *“The annual uncertainty regarding funding is challenging as we are unable to effectively plan from one year to the next.”* (Principal of a DE funded Nurture Group primary school). There were also concerns that current provision did not sufficiently cover the total level of SBEW need within schools. These needs are said to have increased, and be increasing, in terms of both frequency and complexity. They have been further compounded following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feedback collected showed that it was commonplace for schools to fund some or all of their nurture activities and resources from the school’s wider budget. There was some anecdotal evidence that this was negatively impacting other school activities:

*“To accommodate our Nurture Unit, we had to repurpose our School Library into a classroom and move a P4 class into it. That [old Year 4] classroom was then turned into the Nurture Unit. While this is not ideal Nurture needed access to water and space for ‘Home’ like provision, which was not available in our school library space. The P4 class has no running water in the room and is next door to our music practice room, which is far from ideal.”* (Principal of a self-funded Nurture Group primary school).

In other cases, the costs of running a Nurture Group were adding to budget deficits. One principal of a self-funded Nurture group, noted that it, *“accounts for approximately half of the school’s overall financial shortfall”*. Since the reductions in funding to DE Nurture Groups, there have been tangible reductions in activities provided by Nurture Groups. Specifically, Nurture Group staff and SLT members from DE funded Nurture Group schools reported no longer being able to provide regular trips and certain activities.

There were also various challenges within the model of Nurture Provision that were not directly associated with funding. A minority of Nurture Group staff felt that they were not achieving the intended level of parental engagement. Many parents were initially hesitant or defensive about their child being selected for the Nurture Group. While some gradually warmed to the idea and purpose of the Nurture Group, other parents did not. Although this was not found to be a widespread issue, staff felt that where parent engagement was low, the spread of nurturing practices into the home environment was limited. Staff felt

that, for some parents, negative past experiences with the school system during their youth resulted in distrust, while others were resistant to the idea that their child needed additional support.<sup>29</sup>

A minority of Nurture Group staff felt that smaller groups were needed to fully nurture each pupil (e.g. less than eight pupils). They felt that having groups of more than eight pupils “watered down” the impact. This was especially the case when new pupils entered the group with unique traumas, making the group’s needs more diverse. At times, this included behaviours which were unfamiliar to Nurture Group staff and required additional attention to handle positively. This added to the pressures on staff’s delivery and planning time. In a minority of cases, these challenges were compounded by a poor relationship between the school’s Nurture Group staff and base class teachers.

### 2.3.3 Training and skills development

The feedback from Nurture Group staff indicated that the training and support provided by NASS was of a high quality. It described professional growth in trauma-informed practices, child psychology and behaviour management. One participant said: “NASS support/training has been super... [they] give us strength”. Other Nurture Group staff reported NASS as being “very approachable” and “just a phone call away”. In particular, staff said that training CAs in Nurture practices worked well because they typically built the closest relationships with pupils. Thematic findings and aggregated ratings from different Nurture training modules are presented in Table 3. These show that, overall, Nurture related training was rated excellent.

Data on the quality of Nurture training was positive. **The main difference between the feedback provided by schools with and without a DE funded Nurture Group was their perceptions about capacity.** Like DE funded Nurture Group schools, schools with a self-funded group or no group generally found NEP support to be useful and high quality. However, they were more likely to report that the current amount of training provision was inadequate when compared to the scale of their needs. This was particularly the case for special and post-primary schools, but also primary schools without a DE funded Nurture Group. Respondents from these schools also felt less aware of what training was available to them. Other issues raised in relation to Nurture training included:

- A lack of staff time to arrange, attend and disseminate training;
- A perception that NASS focused on sharing best practice amongst DE funded Nurture Groups, more than with self-funded Nurture Group schools;
- A perception from a minority of non-DE funded Nurture Group respondents that the online, freely available, video-based trainings (e.g. webinars on the EA website) were useful and easy to access, but insufficient to develop staff skills alone; and
- A lack of funding to pay for private training provision, which a minority of respondents considered to be among the highest quality training.

**Post-primary settings were also more likely to report a lack of access to training and skill development opportunities. This supports the point made earlier about reduced capacity of NASS as a result of decreased funding.** A minority of respondents to the SLT questionnaire also felt that while initial support was good, there was a lack of capacity to meet ongoing training needs. As a result, they said new staff had not received any training on Nurture approaches. This could weaken the whole school approach over time. This highlights some of the consequences of reduced funding in terms of NASS’s reduced delivery capacity.

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<sup>29</sup> The focus groups with parents did not identify any barriers to engagement. However, this does not imply that these barriers do not exist. The focus groups were susceptible to self-selection bias. Parents who were willing to participate in the focus groups are less likely to have experienced barriers to engagement.

Table 3: Analysis of NASS training feedback (July – October 2024)

Training session	Strengths	Recommendations and future considerations	Aggregated rating*	Sample size
NEP Level 2**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The vital importance of relationships and attachment.</li> <li>• Emphasis on a Whole School Approach.</li> <li>• Building trust with pupils.</li> <li>• Ian Wright video, where he is surprised to meet his old teacher, was “incredibly powerful”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More examples of training in action.</li> </ul>	4.94 (Excellent)	16
NEP Level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on connection and brain development.</li> <li>• Patience and love as foundational principles.</li> <li>• Practical examples for building meaningful relationships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More practical strategy, scenario planning / case study analysis</li> </ul>	4.77 (Excellent)	460
Six Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the six principles.</li> <li>• Consistency and kindness with children</li> <li>• Practical strategies for nurturing and supporting children.</li> <li>• Importance of knowing children in your care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include a robust delve into data and scientific research.</li> <li>• Allow more time for Q&amp;A.</li> </ul>	4.63 (Excellent)	13
Nurturing Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on staff well-being and mental health.</li> <li>• Building connections within the team to enhance collaboration.</li> <li>• Importance of self-care in promoting effective nurturing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further supports and strategies for protecting mental health and well-being.</li> </ul>	4.81 (Excellent)	12
Operations of a Nurture Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insights into nurturing principles for group settings.</li> <li>• Emphasis on creating supportive learning environments and understanding individual student needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more examples of group dynamics and management.</li> <li>• More hands-on tasks/scenarios.</li> </ul>	4.70 (Excellent)	15
Connect and Nurture (CAN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding connection and its impact on learning.</li> <li>• Strategies to regulate emotions effectively.</li> <li>• Recognising the importance of play in building relationships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate new activity ideas.</li> <li>• Focus on practical applications for classrooms.</li> <li>• Offer more examples of nurturing in action.</li> </ul>	4.71 (Excellent)	180
Nurture in 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health and regulation strategies.</li> <li>• Key components of nurturing principles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop collaboration sessions for shared learning.</li> <li>• Include resources on mental health frameworks.</li> </ul>	4.78 (Excellent)	341
Puppets workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of puppets as a tool for building relationships and understanding emotions.</li> <li>• Practical methods to integrate puppets into classroom activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring ways to bring up specific conversations or topics through puppets.</li> <li>• Emotions planning/scripts to guide work with specific pupils.</li> </ul>	4.94 (Excellent)	14

Training session	Strengths	Recommendations and future considerations	Aggregated rating*	Sample size
Theraplay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practical strategies for integrating Theraplay techniques.</li> <li>Role of structured play in building emotional resilience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A list of available resources (e.g. lesson plans) would be useful.</li> <li>Videos to demonstrate practical implementation.</li> </ul>	4.75 (Excellent)	199

Notes: Feedback on other training modules was excluded because the sample size was less than 10.

\*Aggregated participant ratings across six measures: 1. degree to which training aims were met; 2. how worthwhile the training was; 3. appropriateness; 4. relevance; 5. delivery; and 6. quality of handouts/resources.

\*\* The most recent data for NEP Level 2 training was from 2022. Data for other training sessions was from July to October 2024.

Source: NASS Training Feedback Data 2024/25. Accessed by RSM on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2024

## 2.4 Other models

RSM interviewed representatives responsible for Nurture Provision in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. The purpose of these interviews was to compare models of provision, identify best practice and learning from other jurisdictions. This comparative analysis along with data collected from Northern Ireland representatives forms the basis of our Options for future support (see Section 4).

The Scottish model of Nurture Provision has some similarities to the Northern Ireland model. Both countries delivered Nurture Groups alongside a whole-school nurturing approach. Both had an emphasis on trauma informed delivery, specialist training for assistants and the evaluation of outcomes. However, there were also many differences. Education Scotland provided support, guidance and best practice, but the 32 Local Authorities (LAs) were responsible for managing provision. This meant there were different approaches at a local level. This was said to foster more buy-in and innovation. However, it has made it challenging to standardise their approach to evaluating Nurture outcomes. This was because the LAs were using different measures and frameworks. Funding sources for Nurture Provision in Scotland were also more varied. Funds came from a combination of LA central budgets, central school budgets and pupil equity funding under the Attainment fund of Education Scotland. There was also a stronger emphasis on in-house Nurture training and “growing their own” in Scotland. Training was delivered by the psychological services with LA officers and school staff. A representative from Education Scotland discussed how only a minority of Scottish LAs reported using external training providers for Nurture.

Nurture UK felt that Nurture Provision in Scotland was more culturally embedded within schools compared to Northern Ireland. They also felt it was more strongly linked to Scotland’s behaviour supports programme and approach to tackling educational disadvantage. This coincides with Education Scotland’s sense that the focus of Nurture Provision in Scotland had shifted towards developing whole school approaches. This was said to have led to a more embedded and sustainable nurturing culture within schools. However, Nurture Groups remained an important part of their approach, and some secondary schools had recently opened Nurture Groups.

The approach to Nurture in the Republic of Ireland was inspired by early examples of good practice in Northern Ireland. In particular, the representative from Nurture in the Republic of Ireland referenced the Queen’s University Belfast evaluation (Sloan et al., 2016), which examined the initial set of DE funded Nurture Groups and their subsequent expansion. The Republic of Ireland used the Boxall profile<sup>30</sup> to measure impact. Educate Together received funding to provide Nurture training to schools in the Republic of Ireland. This aimed to follow the Northern Ireland model and contributed to increasing the number of schools receiving Nurture training over time. However, the interviewee noted similar challenges to those faced in Northern Ireland in terms of capacity. Specifically, they reported lack of personnel and capacity to maintain Nurture Groups because schools are expected to use a combination of core funding and other grants to fund their Nurture Groups. This was said to be particularly challenging at post-primary level, where schools often found it challenging to run daily sessions, so they delivered Nurture Groups on an ad-hoc basis depending on the students’ needs instead.

In all three regions, Nurture Provision was adapted to fit the local context. For example, in Scotland LAs were responsible for their local provision, whereas Northern Ireland and Ireland took a more centralised approach. Interviewees from all three areas felt that effective Nurture Provision relied on the right

<sup>30</sup> The Boxall profile is an assessment tool that provides a score for a child’s social, emotional, and behavioural development.

personnel, consistent monitoring, and a whole school approach. Having school management support and ensuring consistency in approach were also seen as crucial for success. This supports the case for centralised funding of Nurture Provision to maintain consistency and ensure it is being delivered in line with DE guidance and Nurture principles.

Interviewees from all three areas reported that Nurture had led to positive changes in school culture and student outcomes. This included **improvements in student behaviour, attendance, and engagement**, as well as a reduction in school refusal and challenging behaviour.

## 2.5 Options for future support

Some Nurture Group staff and SLT members felt that Nurture should be included in the training curriculums for all school staff. This included Initial Teacher Education (ITE), CA training, and post-graduate educational qualifications. This would ensure that new staff had a baseline understanding of Nurture, helping to embed the whole school approach. In time, this could free up more NASS resource allowing them to focus on school level rather than individual level training. At the time of writing NASS was working with Stranmillis University College and Ulster University to integrate Nurture into their curriculums. This included their PGCE, BEd, MEd, BA Early Years and Teacher Assistant qualifications. However, this was being undertaken by both institutions on a voluntary basis in recognition of the benefits of Nurture Provision. **As the Department with policy responsibility for teacher education, DE should consider encouraging all local training providers to include an understanding of Nurture principles and approach within initial teaching and CA qualifications, including TIP and relational approaches.** This would help accelerate the work already being done to embed Nurture training in curriculums at Stranmillis University College and Ulster University. It would also help mitigate the challenge of staff turnover leading to a loss of Nurture knowledge within NEP schools, since newly qualified staff would have a baseline understanding.

*“Many newly qualified teachers entering the workforce do not have any prior experience or training in Nurture Provision. There is a general consensus that Nurture training should form a core part of teacher training at a university level. This will help to embed the whole school approach.” (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group)*

**Another option for improving NEP training in the future would be to combine the Levels 1 and 2.** This would accelerate progression towards readiness analysis, a NAP and completion of NEP. This was supported by the NASS staff we interviewed.

Nurture Group staff reported positive **benefits from participating in the NASS Nurture Group clusters. These included sharing learning and good practice.** Cluster groups are an effective and popular medium of engagement. They represent a low-cost solution for spreading best practice and improving access to training and skill development opportunities. **Cluster groups may, therefore, be one mechanism to help increase the relatively limited support for post-primary schools.** Some SLT respondents felt that the facilitation of post-primary nurture clusters would help to address some of the capacity issues noted earlier. A designated ‘Nurture Lead’ in each school could help to arrange these clusters and embed WSNA within the school. Like their primary school counterparts, post-primary clusters would be used to spread best practice and learning. The effect could be more post-primary schools embedding a whole school nurture approach. This would expand the reach and potential impact of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. Where cluster groups do exist, the feasibility of having more frequent meetings should be considered: *“Clusters are important, would like to meet more than twice termly”* (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group). It is acknowledged, however, that neither of these options could be delivered without increasing NASS’s capacity.

The inclusion of Nurture in initial training, and facilitation of post-primary Nurture clusters, would help strengthen the WSNA within schools. These options could further embed Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland.

Finally, NASS noted that regional demographics change over time. It is therefore important to **regularly reassess need to ensure that schools receiving DE Nurture Group funding are those with the highest levels of need.** In practice, this could lead to some schools having their current DE Nurture Group funding discontinued. Therefore, the implications on existing provision would need to be carefully considered.

# 3. Outcomes from Nurture Provision

## 3.1 Overview

This section of the report explores the evidence of outcomes from Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. This includes direct and indirect outcomes on pupils, parents and families, school staff and the whole school. Findings include outcomes from both Nurture Groups and NEP provision. They are based on: consultations with 109 stakeholders<sup>31</sup>; empirical research with 40 children who were participating, or had participated, in a Nurture Group; and written feedback from c.70 Nurture Group staff<sup>32</sup>, 125 SLT members and 1,052 pupils. Quantitative evidence on the impact of Nurture Provision is provided in Section 4.

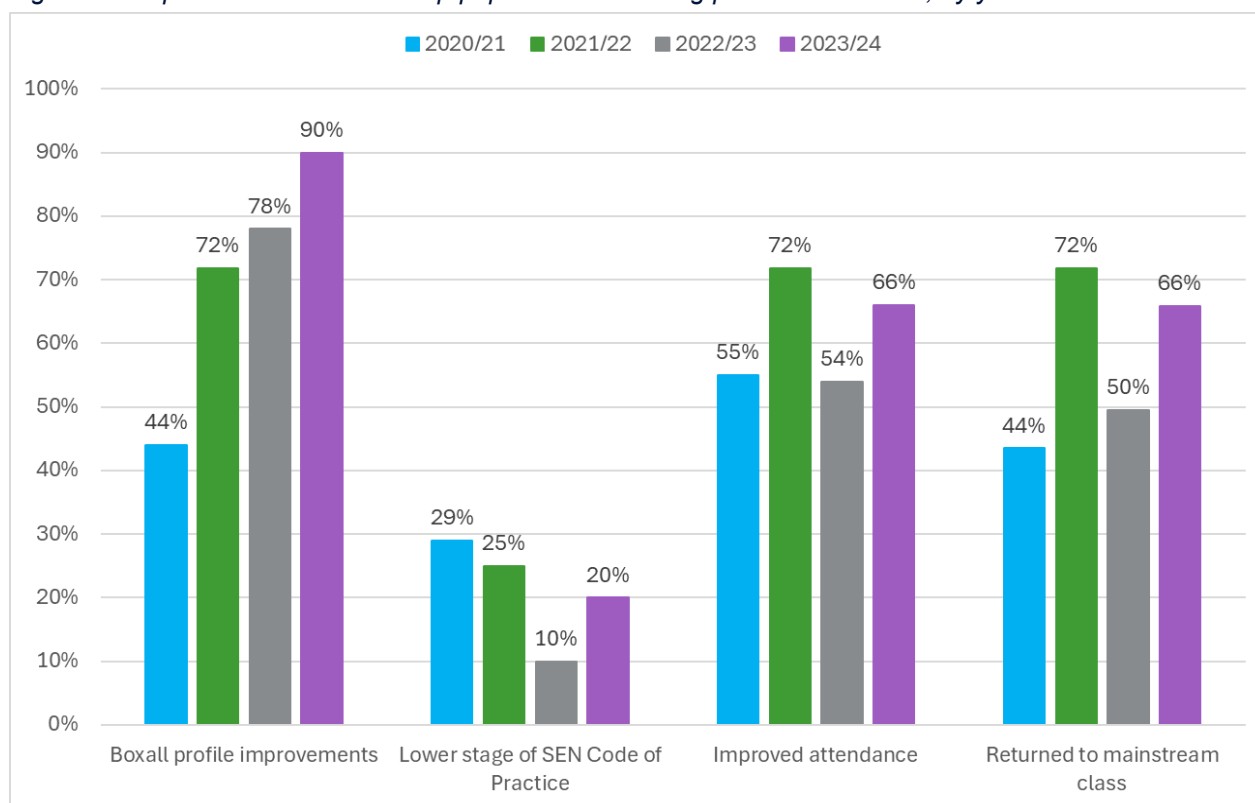
## 3.2 Pupil outcomes (Nurture Groups)

NASS worked with DE funded Nurture Group schools to collect standardised pupil-level outcome data. NASS collects this data from all 62 DE funded Nurture Group schools on a termly basis throughout the academic year. Our analysis of the data for the 2023/2024 school year showed that:

- 557 pupils attended a Nurture Group full time;
- 90% (500) of Nurture Group pupils had improved Boxall profile<sup>33</sup> during the academic year;
- 66% (367) re-integrated back into their base class in 2023/24;
- 20% (113) moved to a lower stage of the SEN Code of Practice, compared to 8% (45) who moved to a higher stage<sup>34</sup>; and,
- 66% (366) had improved attendance during the academic year.

These outcomes are shown visually below, alongside the Nurture Group outcomes from previous years.

Figure 5: Proportion of Nurture Group pupils demonstrating positive outcomes, by year



Source: Department of Education. Nurture Groups Annual Statistical Return, 2020 – 2024.

<sup>31</sup> This includes: 20 representatives from DE, ETI, EA, Nurture UK, NINGN; 5 Educational Psychologists; 8 SLT members; 27 Nurture teachers; 19 Nurture CAs; 34 parents and carers of children who are (or were) part of a Nurture Group.

<sup>32</sup> Collated and shared by NASS via their Nurture Group Cluster network.

<sup>33</sup> The Boxall profile is an assessment tool that provides a score for a child's social, emotional, and behavioural development.

<sup>34</sup> While analysis of school data returns to RSM showed that children, on average, were on a higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice after Nurture Provision compared to before, this likely reflects that many children receive diagnoses and/ or have their SEN formally recognised around the ages that Nurture Group support takes place. Therefore, the increase in average SEN Code of Practice stage is unlikely to reflect an impact of the Nurture Provision itself. The researchers' assessment was that NASS data returns, which reported a fall in average SEN Code of Practice stages following Nurture Group participation, were more likely to be reflective of the impact of Nurture Groups. Qualitative data gathered also suggested that Nurture Groups reduced the need for additional SEN support. Consequently, the NASS data was used to inform assumptions of changes in SEN Code of Practice stages used in the return on investment analysis.

These results demonstrate positive outcomes for pupils in the year they attended the Nurture Group. In particular, the proportion of children showing **improvements in their Boxall profile** has increased consistently in the last four academic years. Analysis of outcome data provided directly to RSM by Nurture Group schools also showed that the proportion of Nurture Group pupils with Boxall improvements was higher in the 2023/24 academic year compared to earlier years. It also showed that the average (mean) change in Boxall development score was the same in all three years for which the data was collected (2016/17, 2019/20 and 2023/24). Therefore, the evidence is mixed on whether Nurture Groups have become more effective in recent years. We note the limitations of this data. It is from a non-random, voluntary sample of 27 Nurture Group schools (44% of the total). However, it included data on 223 pupils in 2023/24, which was sufficient to analyse where statistically significant changes in outcomes had occurred. The sample was approximately balanced by geographical area, which helped to strengthen the reliability of the results.

When comparing results between 2023/24 and previous years, the Covid-19 pandemic must be taken into consideration. The pandemic and associated lockdowns had negative medium-term effects on student outcomes across the UK generally. It is possible that, to some degree, the negative and persistent effects of the pandemic offset positive effects of Nurture Group participation.

We conducted a comparative sub-group analysis using the pupil-level outcome data provided by 27 Nurture Group schools (see data tables in Appendix C). It yielded the following results:

- There was no statistically significant difference in the outcomes achieved by girls and boys.
- Pupils who attended a Nurture Group for longer typically had lower Boxall development scores (i.e. for positive attitudes and behaviours) before joining the Group. Pupils who attended for three terms started with lower scores than pupils who participated for two terms. Pupils who participated for two terms started with lower scores than pupils who participated for one term. Despite their different starting points, all three groups achieved similar Boxall Development scores after participating in the Nurture Group. This result was statistically significant and indicates that longer intervention was required to support pupils with lower initial scores to reach the same outcome.
- Pupils who participated in Nurture Groups for longer had larger increases in their attendance rate. However, this result was not statistically significant.
- Older Nurture Group pupils, in Year 3 or above, typically had a higher Boxall diagnostic score (for negative behaviours and attitudes) than pupils in Years 1 and 2 before taking part in a Nurture Group. However, on average, they experienced the biggest change and ended with a lower diagnostic score compared to pupils in Year 1 and 2. This result was statistically significant. Year 3 pupils also tended to achieve higher Boxall Development scores than pupils in Year 2 or Year 1 after participating in a Nurture Group. This suggests that, before taking part in Nurture Groups, older pupils had fallen further behind their expected level of development, compared to children from earlier year groups and that participation in Nurture Groups helped them to close that gap. The differences by year group were statistically significant, which reinforces the benefits of intervening at the earliest opportunity.

During our school visits, parents also reported that attending a Nurture Group had a positive effect on their child. Various positive outcomes were cited. Increased confidence and **better emotional regulation** were frequently referenced. This included an increase in their child's ability to articulate their feelings and express themselves. For instance, one parent remarked: *"It was perfect for [our child] ... for confidence and helping with smaller stuff"*, whilst another parent reported: *"He has come out of his shell big time since he has joined the [Nurture Group]"*. Many parents said that their child was calmer and had better strategies to deal with intense emotions. They expected that this would help their child re-integrate into their base class and **reduce their barriers to learning**. One parent reported that the time taken for their child to come out of a *"tantrum"* has reduced from 60-90 minutes to 10-15 minutes. Another parent felt that without the Nurture Group, their child *"would have been expelled"* because they were unable to self-regulate.

*"If I am having a bad day, I know that there is always someone that I can talk to. There are lots of teachers and staff who care for me. My Nurture teacher helps me to calm down when I am feeling angry or upset. I know that I am loved in my school."* (Primary school pupil)

Nurture Group staff and SLT members also spoke positively about the effect that Nurture Groups were having on selected pupils. Anecdotal evidence from one principal highlighted the importance of Nurture Groups in helping children process trauma and self-regulate. This was said to have had wider benefits for the whole family:

*"There's a child in our Nurture Unit [who experienced a traumatic family bereavement last year]. He has many struggles with his emotions but is learning to talk about how he is feeling... it is making a difference to him and his whole family. Before he accessed Nurture he kicked, hit, destroyed classrooms and was a ball of emotions that he just couldn't begin to understand. He still feels very sad and angry but now that he*

*is talking about it, he is beginning to calm and regulate himself, with help. It's impacting his whole family, and they are very appreciative of the support that he is getting.”* (Acting Principal of a primary school with a self-funded Nurture Group)

Parents also reported **positive learning outcomes, which should contribute to increased educational attainment** in the long-term. In one case, a parent referred to an improvement in attitude to learning: *“He wants to learn as well. He is eager to learn. Before, he was not keen, he did not really care, but now he wants to learn”*. Another parent said that their child was now finishing books that they previously would not have started. Other positive effects reported by parents included:

- Progression in holding a pencil and writing.
- Confidence to take part in class (e.g. putting hand up to answer a question).
- Willingness to complete homework, often independently.
- Moving to above average in spelling and maths.

**Nurture Groups also had a positive effect on pupils in the base class.** In the short term, moving selected pupils into the Nurture Group reduced challenging behaviour within the base class and **increased the staff to pupil ratio in the base class**. This meant staff had more time to devote to each pupil. In the longer term, Nurture teachers and SLT felt that Nurture Group pupils returned to their base class more able to regulate themselves, which also reduced challenging behaviour and interruptions. This was felt to have increased the amount of focussed time during lessons where the base class teacher could effectively deliver the curriculum. It also reduced the amount of time the base class teacher spent supporting the needs of the Nurture Group pupil on a one-to-one basis. Furthermore, respondents to the SLT questionnaire reported that Nurture Group participation had led to a **calmer classroom environment which was more conducive to learning**. Ultimately, these factors were expected to **improve attainment for the whole class**.

*“A child who needs support can be disruptive in mainstream class, so the base class benefits when those pupils leave or re-integrate after Nurture Provision. Base class staff do not have to spend as much time dedicated to children who are unable to self-regulate.”* (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group)

**Improved social skills** were another positive outcome for Nurture Group pupils. Parents mentioned that their children developed better soft skills, like making eye contact, and had improved communication. Furthermore, a minority of parents noted that their children were more willing and able to join groups and make friends. This coincided with **improved life skills**. For example, being able to pay for items in the shop, cleaning up after themselves, making their own breakfast and being more open to try different foods. One child who used to spend their time at home playing their games console had joined a football club. Others had taken up swimming and boxing lessons. Their parents attributed these changes directly to their participation in Nurture Groups. The parents consulted also noted improvements in their own ability to understand their child's behaviour and communicate with them in a way that fosters a more positive relationship as a result of Nurture support.

*“My son went in there basically non-verbal and was still able to turn it around; make friends, manage to do stuff and I was basically taught to communicate with him. So, hats off to them”* (Parent of Nurture Group pupil)

There was also some evidence to suggest that Nurture Groups improved pupils eating habits and diet. In many schools, Nurture Groups formed breakfast clubs, **provided healthy food** options such as fruit and baked fresh bread. In some cases, this was felt to have reduced food insecurity, subsiding pupil concerns about being hungry. On the whole, improved nutrition could have **positive effects on pupils' concentration in class and subsequently their attainment**, given the association between diet quality and academic attainment (Florence et al., 2008).

*“I know I won't feel hungry as there is always food to eat in the Sunshine Kitchen. I love the toast and the fruit.”* (Pupil from a DE funded Nurture Group primary school)

Evidence provided by Nurture UK from the Nurturing Kent Programme found that 81% of teachers observed **improvements in engagement and learning of pupils with SEN** after Nurture Provision<sup>35</sup> (ResPeo, 2024). This positive effect of Nurture Provision was further supported by interviews with SLTs. They mentioned activities such as breakfast, Storytime and games provided a positive routine and established relationships which helped SEN children regulate their emotions and engage in learning. Quantitative evidence on the effect of Nurture Groups on pupils' stages in the SEN Code of Practice is discussed further in Section 4.2 [Existing evidence on impacts of Nurture Provision](#)

In the long-term, many stakeholders agreed that the early intervention provided by Nurture Groups would have long-term benefits for pupils. This included **reducing the need for more intensive support later in**

<sup>35</sup> Survey sample of 58, whereby 81% (47) of respondents agreed that CYP with SEND had improved engagement and learning from the Nurture Programme.

**the child's life.** EA Educational Psychologists noted that many of the children who received Nurture support, did not require any further intervention. This is despite them having been chosen to receive Nurture support specifically because they had very challenging SBEW needs to begin with.

Some parents expressed concerns about what would happen after their child left the Nurture Group. Some questionnaire respondents said that some children *“do not want to return to their base class”*. Some parents were concerned that their children would revert to heightened SBEW needs after their time in the Nurture Group ended. This parental concern is understandable given the short-term nature of Nurture Group intervention. It should be noted that Nurture Group staff develop a re-integration plan, involving parents, and often continue to support pupils who have finished their full time Nurture Group cycle. The quantitative and qualitative data identified positive examples of reintegration (NASS, 2024c). This suggests that some reassurance might be required at the outset to help reduce these initial concerns for parents. Perhaps **sharing anonymised examples of positive reintegration and progression could help achieve this aim.**

### 3.3 Parent outcomes (Nurture Groups)

Overall, parents felt very positive about the indirect benefits of Nurture Groups on themselves. Many parents said it had made their lives easier in many tangible ways. Specifically, their children were more engaged in getting ready for school, **attended school more frequently, completed homework and demonstrated improved self-regulation.** For some, their child exhibited less challenging behaviour, which made it much easier to do things together outside of the home and school environments. These factors had made parents feel proud of their child and led to a better bond with them.

*“It has been a game changer.”*

*“Life is easier”*

*“[The Nurture Group] has helped him in school and at home”*

(Parents of Nurture Group pupils)

Furthermore, some parents reported feeling less worried about their children at school. In the past, some parents reported daily concern that their children would get overwhelmed with a range of negative emotions. These concerns gradually subsided once their children began to look forward to school and learnt coping strategies through the Nurture Group. **This demonstrates the positive effects Nurture Groups can have on parents' emotional well-being too.**

The consultations also indicated that Nurture Provision had **improved parents' understanding of their child's communication needs.** It also helped some parents to move away from more punitive disciplinary approaches in the home. Many Nurture Group staff and principals felt that Nurture Groups helped to **increase the level of parental engagement** with the school for Nurture Group parents. However, it was also acknowledged that the level of engagement was still not as high as staff would have liked (see earlier section on Challenges).

*“Having a DE funded Nurture class really helps with parental engagement”* (Staff member in a DE funded Nurture Group)

These positive outcomes ultimately led to a **more affectionate relationship and stronger bond between parent and child.** When parents visited the Nurture Group to take part, it made children *“really, really happy”*, and many parents said these visits made them feel proud of their child.

### 3.4 Pupil outcomes (NEP)

Schools that were involved in Nurture Provision were asked to complete SLT and pupil questionnaires to share their experiences and perceptions. This included schools that had taken part in NEP, as well as those with DE funded Nurture Groups. This provided evidence of the positive effects of Nurture Provision on pupils in Northern Ireland. The SLT questionnaire received 125 responses. School staff helped groups of pupils to complete the pupil questionnaire. Over 1,000 pupils were engaged in this way.

The majority of pupils expressed feelings of **happiness, confidence, and self-worth** in relation to Nurture Provision. Many pupils noted that their school's approach to Nurture made them feel *“good”* or *“happy”*. Some described having a greater sense of belonging and positivity about their personal abilities.

*“My self-esteem has increased immensely. My attendance has improved, and I like coming to school now. I like the person I am becoming.”* (Year 12 pupil from a post-primary school)

Other feedback included enjoying life more, feeling appreciated, and finding joy in participating in Nurture activities. Figure 6 shows the words pupils used to describe how their school's approach to Nurture made them feel about themselves. Many pupils expressed a sense of **safety, enjoyment, and pride in their**



Figure 8: How does your school's approach to Nurture make you feel about the teachers and school support staff?



Figure 9: Has your school's approach to Nurture changed the way that you think or feel about other pupils?



### 3.5 Whole school outcomes (Nurture Provision)

As noted earlier in section 2.2.2 Activities, over half of all schools and EOTAS settings in Northern Ireland participated in at least one Nurture related training since 2018 (NASS, 2024d and DE, 2025). In 2024, DE conducted a survey to inform their future approach to Nurture Provision. All 231 survey respondents reported using WSNA. Is it not clear how faithful non-DE funded Nurture activity is to the six Nurture principles and DE Nurture guidance. However, it does indicate that at least a fifth (21%) of all schools were delivering some form of nurturing approach, with the actual number of schools doing so likely to be higher. This gives some indication of the scale of the effect of Nurture Provision on school cultures and ethos in Northern Ireland.

#### 3.5.1 Staff

Discussions with, and responses from, school staff demonstrated that Nurture had led to an **increased focus on the mental health and well-being of staff** themselves. It was widely acknowledged that staff well-being was important for effective Nurture Provision, and that you *“can’t pour from an empty cup”*. This was recognised, particularly by schools with well-being champions and mental health first aiders and often followed concerns around staff workloads. While many respondents to the SLT questionnaire felt there was more informal staff-to-staff mental health support, there was no evidence to suggest an increase in regular, systematic well-being check-ins.

Overall, the perceived effect of Nurture Provision on **staff morale** was positive. Some interviewees and respondents to the SLT questionnaire reported that the implementation of the WSNA equipped staff to **better manage challenging behaviour**. This has also **increased the staff members’ confidence** about working with pupils who have very challenging needs. Furthermore, in some cases it was reported that **Nurture Groups and the NEP helped to alleviate teacher stress**. This was because pupils with SBEW issues were less volatile and confrontational. Many SLT respondents reported that implementation of the NEP improved the school environment for staff. This was because there was an increase in staff sharing experiences, collaborating on positive solutions to challenging behaviour, and extending support to one-another. This **strengthened relationships and developed a supportive network between staff**, boosting morale.

*“From personal experience, NEP helps support a sense of collegiality. There is a relaxed, warm atmosphere where staff share ideas, resources, work together, support each other and aren’t afraid to ask for help. Staff feel minded and supported that their well-being is also important.”* (Teacher from a non-Nurture Group NEP primary school)

Nurture Provision had led to **some increased engagement between schools**. A good example of this was increased networking between local schools through the Nurture Group clusters, co-ordinated by NASS. Respondents from Nurture Group schools were more likely to engage with experts, groups and organisations from outside their school than those without a Nurture Group<sup>36</sup>. Lack of funding and staff capacity were often cited as constraints to working with people from outside their own school.

Nurture Group staff reported that Nurture training and experience supported them to reflect on their pedagogy and how they build relationships with pupils. All of which contributed to a **better understanding**

<sup>36</sup> These included Nurture UK, the EA Children Looked After Service, clinical specialists like educational psychologists and speech and language therapists.

**of children's needs and how to address them.** DE staff commented that NEP and the whole school approach had given school staff a better understanding of children's EHWP needs. This enabled them to recognise the emotional state of a child and tailor their approach accordingly. This was supported by the SLT interviewees, who said Nurture had led to an increase in staff understanding and empathy. They pointed to a shift from punitive discipline measures, towards supportive ones as a result.

### 3.5.2 School culture

There was evidence of **improved attendance** in DE funded Nurture Group schools from multiple sources. Firstly, statistical return data held by DE showed that most pupils demonstrated improved attendance after participating in a Nurture Group (see Figure 5). This occurred in each of the last four academic years. This is supported by evidence from other jurisdictions:

*"In the 300 schools we work with [across the UK], we have seen average attendance rates increase from 84.8% to 88.7%." (Stakeholder interviewee)*

It should be noted, however, that data collected by RSM from Nurture Group schools indicated that the increase in mean attendance rate was only statistically significant in 2023/24 (see Table 4).

Analysis of Boxall profile data (see Figure 5) showed that Nurture Provision supports Nurture Group pupils to better regulate themselves through Nurture Groups and WSNA. This **reduces SBEW barriers to learning**, which allows them to engage with learning. Interviews with SLT members, feedback from Nurture Group staff cluster sessions and written responses from SLTs showed that pupils who received Nurture support saw improvements in emotional regulation, self-confidence, resilience and **academic achievement**.

Responses to the pupil questionnaires also emphasised how Nurture Provision contributed to a welcoming and supportive atmosphere in the school. School staff felt that conflicts between pupils in class were less likely, since pupils were better able to regulate their own emotions. Furthermore, the **calmer class environment** fostered relationship-building between pupils and staff and created a culture of *"empathy, kindness and inclusion"* (Principal of a DE funded Nurture Group Primary School). There was said to have been a dual effect from Nurture Groups, which addressed the needs of pupils with the most challenging behaviour, and the NEP, which spread the ethos of Nurture across the whole school for the benefit of all pupils. The whole school ethos has the potential to affect every pupil, staff member and family that engages with the school.

*"Northern Ireland couldn't survive without Nurture Provision. It is so impactful. It changes how schools operate, the expectation of every teacher and the standard required." (Stakeholder interviewee)*

While there was no empirical evidence available that Nurture Provision has reduced the frequency of **suspensions and expulsions** in Northern Ireland, stakeholders widely regarded this to be true. This was because Nurture Groups and the NEP were shown to improve self-regulation and reduce challenging behaviour that may lead to punitive action. Furthermore, Nurture principles encouraged more supportive and empathetic management of challenging behaviour. Therefore, stakeholders and staff from NEP schools felt that Nurture training led to schools resorting to punitive action less often. This was supported by consultation with Nurture UK, which cited a borough in London where permanent exclusions (called expulsions in Northern Ireland) fell substantially (from seven to four a year).

There was some evidence to suggest that Nurture Provision had **increased the pupil voice** in participating schools. Pupils reported feeling actively listened to by school staff, and pupil voice questionnaires were used by some schools to capture pupil feedback.

There was also some evidence to suggest that Nurture Provision increased the parent voice within school settings when it came to their child's education. Focus groups with parents strongly supported the claim that **Nurture Groups increased parental engagement** with the school. Parents felt they had many opportunities to voice their concerns with Nurture and base class teachers. Furthermore, parents felt like it was easy to contact the school, that they had multiple "touch points", and that their opinions were listened to. The evidence suggests that any initial concerns parents may have had about Nurture Group participation were heard and addressed through empathetic communication and relationship building with staff.

*"You can pop in anytime yourself, to speak about your own concerns."*

*"This school is great for getting in contact in my experience."*

*(Parents with children participating in DE funded Nurture Groups)*

# 4. Impact and return on investment

## 4.1 Overview

The primary aim of Nurture Provision is to support pupils with attachment related SBEW needs and reduce barriers to learning. However, there are several ways that Nurture may generate future cost-savings for schools, DE, other departments, the Northern Ireland economy and society in general. This section reviews existing evidence on the impact of Nurture Provision and associated cost savings. It then draws on estimated short-term impacts of Nurture to project current and future cost savings. This will enable an estimation of the return on investment of Nurture Provision. The final sub-section considers potential future funding scenarios and how these may affect the return on investment.

## 4.2 Existing evidence on impacts of Nurture Provision

This section highlights existing information on the potential impacts of Nurture Provision to inform our estimation of its return on investment. It includes a summary of our rapid evidence review of the long-term impacts, associated cost savings, and estimated return on investment of Nurture interventions. Literature linking short-term measurable impacts of Nurture Provision with long-term monetizable<sup>37</sup> impacts was also reviewed to support the return on investment modelling.

### 4.2.1 Evidence on benefits and cost savings of Nurture Provision

Multiple studies provided information on the long-term impacts of Nurture Provision. Some also developed additional methodologies on how these impacts can be monetised to calculate wider value for money. We have summarised the main findings from these studies below.

A systematic review (Nolan et al., 2021) found that nurturing approaches can have a positive impact on:

- Pupils' SBEW;
- Academic progress for the pupils who were directly supported;
- Other pupils' educational attainment in the base class or wider school;
- Parents' perception of their home life;
- Calmer classrooms; and
- Reduction in the overall level of behavioural disruptions in the whole school.

Additionally, the length of time a nurturing approach was in place in a school was found to contribute to its long-term effectiveness (Nolan et al., 2021).

The authors estimated a monetary value of the benefits of these interventions to pupils by estimating an expected increase in their future earnings associated with the value of the social and emotional skills they gained through the intervention. They assumed that *“one standard deviation increase in [self-reported] self-esteem leads to a 30.46% increase in real wage”* (Belfield et al., 2015, p.514). This increase was mostly mediated through **attainment, which was estimated to be 1.5 years greater for those with higher self-esteem**<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, higher self-esteem can increase educational attainment, which can in turn increase future income.

Another study explored the cost-effectiveness of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), a school-based social and emotional intervention in Greater Manchester (Turner et al., 2019). The average additional cost of the PATHS curriculum, compared with standard practice, was £32 per child. The average additional quality-adjusted life-years (QALYs) were positive. The authors estimated a monetary value of the benefits to pupils, using a standard value of £20,000 per QALY. They found that the programme provided a net benefit of £5.56 per child (95% CI – 14.68 to 25.81). Based on the uncertainty about benefits to pupils, they estimated that there was an 84% chance the benefits outweighed the costs of the programme.

A fourth study estimated the costs saved by Nurture Provision instead of monetising the benefits. Crowley and Jones (2017) provided a framework for better organising information about the impact of Nurture Provision on public spending. The monetisation framework focuses on preventative interventions. It aims to reduce the number of pupils repeating school years to reduce wasted public resource. It takes into account: the reduction in spending requirements from an intervention; the years of repeated or skipped school of the

<sup>37</sup> Monetizable impacts are those that can easily be translated into monetary terms for use in return on investment analysis.

<sup>38</sup> Higher attainment of 1.5 years means that, on average, pupils with high self-esteem attain the level expected of someone who is 1.5 years older than they are.

intervention group, compared to a control group; and the cost of sending a pupil to school for a year adjusted for inflation.

#### **4.2.2 Estimated return on investment of Nurture interventions**

Our review examined the value for money and economic impact of Nurture Groups and Nurture interventions. We used our rapid evidence review to explore a wide range of Nurture interventions. Our search terms included key words related to all six Nurture principles (see Figure 2).

Relatively few studies managed to successfully provide cost-benefit analysis (CBA) or cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) of Nurture interventions. However, there were some publications that calculated the return on investment of programmes that aimed to improve the SBEW of children. The results indicated a positive return.

For instance, Clarke et al. (2015) explored the effectiveness of UK based programmes to enhance social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence. This included a summary of the evidence on the costs and cost-benefits of these interventions. The paper found CBA evidence for five school-based social and emotional skill development programmes. The cost-benefit ratio results for all five programmes showed a positive return on investment. This included the whole-class intervention Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), which had an estimated BCR of 1:12. BCRs from other comparable programmes ranged from 1:3 for Families and Schools Together (FAST) to 1:1.56 for the Behavioural Monitoring and Reinforcement Program (BMRP) (Investing in Children, n.d.). While these programmes have important differences in delivery and purpose compared to Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland, they are useful benchmarks. They also support the notion that SBEW support programmes yield positive returns.

Similarly, in 2016, a DE evaluation assessed the cost-effectiveness of Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland (Sloan et al., 2016). The cost-effectiveness of Nurture Groups compared to mainstream education was analysed in terms of the child's socio-emotional well-being. The teacher-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used as the primary measure of effect. The evaluation provided an estimate of the cost of the programme per reduced case of difficult behaviour (£12,912.41). Although the evaluation did not directly compare this cost with a monetary benefit from reducing cases of difficult behaviour, it suggested that Nurture Provision is likely to pay for itself after just two years for each child whose problem behaviour is reduced to the normal range. It concluded that investment in Nurture Groups is likely to be cost-effective and has the potential to represent a significant return for society in the longer-term.

#### **4.2.3 Approaches to estimating return on investment to related interventions**

Whilst there was limited existing research on the return on investment of Nurture Provision, there were some helpful studies that are relevant to our analysis as they complete return on investment of similar interventions.

Previous research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2024) estimated the impact of Sure Start on the need for SEND support. While Sure Start is not a Nurture intervention, there are similarities (i.e. the target beneficiaries, focus on early intervention and SBEW needs). The report estimated that the government had to spend £504 less per child (over the course of their primary and secondary schooling) on additional support for children with SEN who attended a Sure Start centre<sup>39</sup>.

Another CBA framework was used to examine the economic value of teaching students social and emotional skills (Belfield et al., 2015). The analysis was performed on four interventions. It identified empirical challenges with estimating the net present value (NPV) of these interventions. Despite these challenges, the paper found that the benefits of these interventions substantially outweighed the costs. Monetizable outcomes were split into four categories, including (i) better ability to understand and handle feelings; (ii) reduced aggressive behaviours; (iii) health-related outcomes; and (iv) educational outcomes. A lot of these outcomes overlap with the outcomes of Nurture Provision explored in the section below. However, Belfield et al.'s paper (2015) did not provide any per child unit costs that we were able to draw on directly for our research.

Finally, in 2018, a study highlighted the importance of early intervention for reducing public sector costs. The research showed that the public sector spent £536m per year on late intervention for children and young people in Northern Ireland. The largest causes of spend were child protection, safeguarding, domestic violence, and youth economic inactivity (Fitzsimons and Teager, 2018). Such interventions were

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<sup>39</sup> Note, this does not take account of the cost of Sure Start occurred in the early years before school attendance.

considered 'late' because they were often treating issues rooted in ACEs. A recent study by Walsh et al. (2025) provided further evidence of the negative lifetime outcomes associated with ACEs. Results from their stratified random probability survey of 1,200 adults in Northern Ireland found that individuals with four or more ACEs:

- Had nine times higher levels of school exclusions;
- Were four times more likely to have SEN;
- Were ten times more likely to have a diagnosed mental health condition; and,
- Had statistically higher rates of alcohol consumption, smoking and drug use.

These findings showed that untreated ACEs are linked to negative child and adult outcomes which have costs to the individual, society and public services. This indicates potentially large benefits from early intervention and prevention focused approaches like Nurture, if they are proven to be effective.

#### **4.2.4 Evidence on the links between short- and long-term impacts**

To be able to calculate the return on investment for measurable short-term Nurture impacts, they need to be linked to longer-term impacts that have been monetised in previous literature. The below section showcases the theoretical and empirical linkages between short to intermediate impacts and long-term impacts that can result from Nurture Provision.

The two short-term measures explored in this section are changes in children's SBEW profile and children's attendance rates. These measures were selected as DE collects regular data on them as part of their Annual Statistics Return.

#### **4.2.5 Links between SBEW and long-term impacts**

Analysis presented in Section 3 showed that Nurture Group pupils experienced improvements in their Boxall profiles. This was supported by interviews with DE, EA, NASS, Educational Psychologists, SLT members, school staff and parents. They reported that Nurture Group pupils had experienced improved SBEW, including improved emotional resilience, social skills, and coping skills. This was confirmed by Nurture Group staff who stated that Nurture pupils had improved SBEW, emotional regulation, confidence and self-image.

**There is research linking children's SBEW profile with both concurrent and later educational outcomes**, anti-social behaviour and language development. For instance, evidence shows that children with higher levels of SBEW have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school (DfE, 2012). Furthermore, they make more progress in primary school and are subsequently more engaged in secondary school. In turn academic success has a strong positive impact on children's life satisfaction and well-being later in life (Chanfreau, 2013). Recently, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) estimated the annual cost of unresolved childhood trauma on the economy to be £1.3 billion (Knox, 2025). This estimate is supported by Walsh et al. (2025). The findings are presented in Section 4.2.3

Approaches to estimating return on investment to related interventions above.

For instance, research by the Department for Education in England (DfE, 2012) showed that, after controlling for other variables including speaking English as a first language, eligibility for Free School Meals (FSMs), and parental qualifications:

- Emotional, behavioural, social, and school well-being at ages 10 and 13 were significantly correlated with concurrent educational outcomes i.e., academic achievement at Key Stage 2 (age 11) and Key Stage 3 (age 14).
- For academic achievement, emotional, behavioural, social, and school well-being at ages 7, 10 and 13 were significantly correlated with later academic achievement at Key Stage 2 (age 11), Key Stage 3 (age 14) and Key Stage 4 (age 16), with the exception of the relationship between school well-being at age 7 and later academic achievement at Key Stage 2.

Furthermore, research has shown that poor SBEW can manifest itself in the school setting in a variety of ways, including inattentiveness in lessons, non-compliant behaviour and anti-social behaviour (Cefai et al., 2017). This has a further link with an increase in school suspensions. In autumn term 2023/24, persistent disruptive behaviour accounted for 50% of all reasons given for suspensions and 36% of reasons given for permanent exclusions in England in line with findings from previous years (DfE, 2024).

This is in turn supported by findings from interviews with DE staff. Interviewees mentioned that improved SBEW has reduced challenging behaviours and improved the children's mental health as a whole. Interviewees from the EA Behavioural Supports Service, as well as Nurture UK, also highlighted that

adopting a whole-school approach to Nurture Provision, has led to reduced school suspensions and expulsions due to reduction in dysregulated behaviour. As noted in Section 3.5.2, Nurture UK representatives stated that in a borough in London, permanent exclusions fell substantially (from seven to four a year).

There was also a link between children's SBEW and their language skills. Young people aged 12-18 referred to mental health services, are three times more likely than their non-referred peers to meet the criterion for higher order language disorders. This affects inferential thinking, understanding abstract concepts and the understanding and use of figurative language (Cohen et al, 2013). The Nurture Group staff interviewed also observed improved language skills in Nurture Group pupils as a result of improved SBEW, both in terms of talking and understanding. For instance, one Nurture Group staff member mentioned that pupils' speech and communication skills substantially improved because staff were more aware of pupils' SBEW needs and able to listen and accommodate them.

#### 4.2.5 Links between school attendance and long-term impacts

The consultations, and evidence presented in Section 3, highlighted that Nurture Provision led to improvements in attendance and punctuality. **There is research linking school attendance with academic achievement**, as well as interaction with the criminal justice system. Improvements in academic achievement are in turn linked to an increase in expected lifetime earnings. There are multiple evidence sources that consistently highlight the relationship between school attendance and academic achievement. Government statistical releases in England (DfE, 2025) showcase the link between absence and attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) in the 2022/23 academic year. The data shows that:

- In Year 2, pupils with more than 90% attendance were 11 times more likely to reach the expected level at KS2 compared to pupils who had less than 90% attendance.
- In Year 6, pupils with 95-100% attendance are 30% more likely to reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths compared to similar pupils with 90-95% attendance.

These results are based on a regression model that accounts for other factors that could influence attainment, such as pupil characteristics and prior attainment. This means the positive results linking attendance to attainment are more likely to be causal.

**Increased academic achievement is in turn linked to increased expected lifetime earnings.** Research from the Department for Education in England (Hodge, Little and Weldon, 2021) estimates that a 1 standard deviation increase in GCSE results will translate to an increase in discounted lifetime income of £96,111 (or £109,836 in 2022/23 prices).

A recently published study by Klein et al. (2024) showed that absenteeism also had both short- and long-term negative impacts. This included significant negative impacts on national exam performance and future employment prospects. Evidence showed that this negative impact was most detrimental in Years 6-10. A report from the Nuffield Foundation (2024) showed that missing five days of school at age 10 was associated with a 0.66 percentage point increase in the likelihood of having no qualifications at age 42. It was also associated with a 0.6 percentage point increase in the likelihood of being predominantly out of the labour force between the ages of 30 and 42.

**School attendance rates were also linked with the likelihood of young people interacting with the criminal justice system.** According to Census 2021 data (Office for National Statistics, 2022), just over half (52.5%) of young people in England who went on to receive a custodial sentence had been chronically absent from school (i.e., missing 10% of sessions or more in a single school year). Chronic absence declined to around one-third (35.8%) among those with non-custodial sentences or cautions, contrasting sharply with 10.9% among those with no criminal convictions.

Anecdotal evidence was also provided by SLTs from NEP schools, who stated that they observed a nurturing environment improving the SBEW of pupils in extreme crisis. Thus, leading to reduction in school absence and criminal activity.

### 4.3 Short-term outcomes of Northern Ireland Nurture Provision

For monitoring purposes, Nurture Group schools have collected data on the following set of outcomes for Nurture Group pupils:

- Boxall profile: an assessment tool that provides a score for a child's social, emotional, and behavioural development. The development score measures different aspects of the pupil's cognitive, social and emotional development that influence how well they are able to learn and function in the classroom. The diagnostic score measures challenging behaviours that prevent successful social and academic performance. These behaviours are directly or indirectly the result of impaired development in the early years and can be resolved once the social and emotional needs are identified and the necessary skills are developed.
- SEN Code of Practice stage – from 0 (no SEN support) to 3 (highest level of support).
- Attendance – percentage of school sessions attended.

Table 4 shows that children in the most recent academic year for which there is data (2023/24) saw large and statistically significant changes in each of these outcomes from before to after they participated in Nurture Groups<sup>40</sup>. It was not possible in this study to identify how much of these changes were a direct result of Nurture Provision. However, a previous evaluation of Nurture Groups in Northern Ireland (Sloan et al., 2016) found that there was no significant change in Boxall scores or attendance rates over the same period of time for a comparable group of children that did not participate in Nurture Groups. This implies that the changes observed in these outcomes for children who do participate in Nurture Groups are most likely due to Nurture Provision (rather than changes that would have happened without Nurture Groups). We therefore conclude that **participation in Nurture Groups has a large and significant effect on children's social and emotional well-being in school.**

The scale of impact on the Boxall profile is in line with the previous evaluation, which found 34 point and 27 point improvements in the developmental and diagnostic scores respectively. It is therefore reasonable to assume that recent improvements in academic attainment in literacy and numeracy would be in line with those found in the previous evaluation.

*Table 4: Impact of Nurture Group participation on short-term outcomes 2023/24*

Outcome	Average pre-Nurture Group	Average post-Nurture Group	Difference
Boxall development score	82.66	112.06	29.41***
Boxall diagnostic score	51.29	27.17	-24.12***
SEN Code of Practice stage	0.69	0.93	0.23***
Attendance rate	85.92	89.91	3.99***

*Notes: RSM calculations drawing on outcome data provided by Nurture Group schools. Sample of 223 pupils across 27 primary schools. \*\*\* denotes differences significant at 0.1% level; that is, there is less than 0.1% chance that the differences would appear in the sample by chance.*

As discussed in Section 3, NASS statistical returns indicated that more Nurture Group pupils moved to a lower stage of the SEN Code of Practice (20%), than a higher stage (8%) following Nurture Group support (DE, 2024a). This is supported by our consultations with EA Educational Psychologists and Nurture UK. **EA Educational Psychologists noted that many Nurture Group pupils, did not require any further intervention after participating in their Nurture Group.** This is despite them having been chosen to receive Nurture support because they had very challenging SBEW needs. In a survey of 58 teachers who took part in the Nurturing Kent Programme, 81% of teachers observed improvements in engagement and learning of pupils with SEND, including educational attainment after they engage with Nurture Provision

<sup>40</sup> In 2023/24, the average number of terms attended by Nurture Group pupils was 2.7. The majority (65%) of pupils attending Nurture Groups did so for three terms, while just over a quarter (28%) attended for either one or two terms, and 7% attended for four or more terms.

(ResPeo, 2024). In contrast, RSM's analysis of the additional data returns submitted to us by 27 Nurture Group schools found that, on average, children moved to a higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice after leaving the Nurture Group. The reason for this difference in the data received by RSM and NASS is unclear. It may be due to the profile of respondents (27 of the 62 schools (44%) responded to RSM's request for data<sup>41</sup>, compared to all 62 schools in the NASS returns). It may be because the requests were worded differently and, therefore, captured slightly different things<sup>42</sup>. The increase observed in RSM data returns may reflect pupils being placed at Stage 1 to access Nurture Group support or that many children receive diagnoses and/ or have their SEN formally recognised around the ages that Nurture Group support takes place. An increase in average SEN Code of Practice stage is unlikely to reflect an impact of the Nurture Provision itself. **It is our assessment, therefore, that the NASS data returns, which reported a fall in average SEN Code of Practice stages following Nurture Group support, were more likely to be reflective of the impact of that provision.** Consequently, the NASS data was used to inform assumptions of changes in SEN Code of Practice stages used in the return on investment analysis (see Section 4.4).

Analysis of the same outcomes for the 2019/20 and 2016/17 school years showed similar impacts on Boxall scores. **This suggests that the scale of impact has not changed over time, despite reductions to the level of funding schools received from DE to contribute to running Nurture Groups. This may be because schools contributed their own resources to Nurture Groups, with the share that schools self-fund growing over time.** Notably, there was no significant change in attendance rates reported in RSM data returns for 2019/20 or 2016/17, suggesting that this may have been a one-off impact in 2023/24. It could also be a reflection of the wider context of increased absenteeism. Around 98,000 pupils missed 10% of term time in 2021/22, compared to just 44,000 pupils in 2017/18 (NISRA, 2021). The increase in 2021/22 was partly, but not entirely, due to the Covid-related school closures in January 2022, and the associated change in attitudes to school attendance. It may be that Nurture Groups are helping to reverse that trend for Nurture pupils.

#### 4.4 Estimated return on investment

Return on investment analysis was conducted to compare the expected current and future benefits of Nurture Group provision with its costs to provide an assessment of its value for money. It was not feasible to conduct a similar return on investment analysis of NEP provision, due to a lack of outcome data that could be used to attribute changes in outcomes to that provision<sup>43</sup>.

Estimating the full benefits of Nurture Groups is challenging. Many of the benefits, particularly to children themselves, will only materialise several years in the future and so cannot be measured directly. A second challenge is that, even where outcomes can be measured, there is some uncertainty over how much of these changes can be attributed to Nurture Groups alone rather than subsequent interventions and/ or support that they may receive throughout their life.

The return on investment analysis presented here draws on the measured short-term outcomes of Nurture Groups (covered in Section 4.3) and wider evidence on the likely relationship between these short-term outcomes and long-term outcomes and impacts (covered in Section 4.2). Drawing on these data sources, the analysis provides a best estimate on the basis of the evidence available of the value of short- and long-term benefits of Nurture Group provision.

##### 4.4.1 Social return on investment

**Nurture Group provision delivers substantial improvements in social and emotional well-being for participating pupils.** On average, the programme delivers substantial improvements in Boxall scores (as shown in Table 4), which measures social, emotional and behavioural development, at a total cost of around £9,978 per pupil<sup>44</sup>. This is more than double the per pupil funding which primary schools receive through the common funding formula (£3,938), reflecting the intensity of Nurture Group support.

<sup>41</sup> This provided data on 223 pupils in 2023/24, which was sufficient to analyse where statistically significant changes in outcomes had occurred.

<sup>42</sup> NASS statistical returns asked Nurture Group staff to provide the number of pupils who moved to a lower or higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice following Nurture Group support. RSM asked staff to provide each child's SEN Code of Practice stage before attending the Nurture Group and the following term after leaving the Nurture Group.

<sup>43</sup> It was found to be much more challenging to attribute changes in outcomes to NEP provision than to Nurture Groups. This is because NEP provides whole school support, therefore, it was not possible to identify changes in outcomes for specific pupils as it was for Nurture Groups. What is more, there has been no previous quasi-experimental evaluation of the NEP (as there had been for Nurture Groups) that could be used to inform estimates of what would have happened in the absence of NEP provision.

<sup>44</sup> The unit cost per pupil was estimated as the estimated total cost of Nurture Group provision (see Section 4.5.1) including both DE funding and school's own contribution, divided by the number of children participating in 2023/24 (557).

The short-term improvement in social and emotional well-being for Nurture Group pupils is likely to generate wider benefits for their families, school staff and other pupils. These **include reduced stress and anxiety for parents** and a **calmer environment within the base class** (see Section 3). It should also lead to longer-term improvements in Nurture Group pupils' well-being. **The large potential impact on life-long well-being of pupils is shown by the literature on the large negative impacts of ACEs on well-being in adulthood** (Fitzsimons and Teager, 2018 and Walsh et al., 2025). Large costs were associated with spending on late intervention relating to child protection, safeguarding, domestic violence, and youth economic activity (as covered in section 4.2.3).

It was not possible to estimate how much of the damage to life-long well-being from ACEs may be reversed through participation in Nurture Groups. However, Walsh et al. (2025) show that benevolent childhood experiences, which Nurture Group provision could be classed as, can 'dampen the effects of ACEs'. **Nurture Group provision therefore likely leads to lifelong well-being and reductions in depression and anxiety.**

#### 4.4.2 Educational return on investment

Nurture Group provision is likely to improve educational performance in two ways. Improved SBEW for pupils of primary school age is correlated with educational performance aged 16 (Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012). It was estimated that the **improved SBEW of Nurture Group pupils increased their expected GCSE grades by between 1.5 and 2.7 grade per pupil**<sup>45</sup>.

Participation in Nurture Groups also improves education performance by improved attendance. Department for Education in England data shows that attendance rates are highly correlated with educational performance at Key Stage 2. In 2023/24 chronic absence (10% or higher) fell from 49.7% to 36.9% following participation in Nurture Groups, and severe chronic absence (20% or higher) fell from 22.3% to 8.5%. It was estimated that participation in Nurture Groups led to an additional 34 children (6.1%) reaching the expected standard at Key Stage 2, and an additional seven children (1.3%) reaching the higher standard. Improved Key Stage 2 performance also has a knock-on impact on GCSE performance. It was estimated that, **for each case of reduced chronic absence, GCSE performance improved by on average 4.5 grades**<sup>46, 47</sup> (DfE, 2022 and DfE, 2014).

It is also reasonable to assume, based on the qualitative evidence collected through our consultations, that the calmer classroom environment (see Section 3.2) will have a **positive impact on the education of other pupils in the base class**. However, it is not possible to quantify this improvement given the data available<sup>48</sup>.

#### 4.4.3 Economic return on investment

The economic return on investment of Nurture Group provision was assessed by identifying – where possible – all monetary benefits of Nurture Groups. Monetary benefits include those that accrue to schools, DE or other government departments, and to pupils themselves both in the short-term and throughout their life. **The analysis does not attempt to provide a monetary valuation to non-monetary benefits, such as pupils' emotional and social well-being. It is important to note that these non-monetary benefits may be very substantial and mean that the value of Nurture Groups is, in reality, even greater than the value of monetary benefits estimated here.**

Table 5 presents estimates of the scale of monetary benefits. Due to the uncertainty around estimates, benefits are estimated based on a range rather than precise estimates.

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<sup>45</sup> There is some uncertainty in this estimate as it is not known how persistent the well-being impacts of Nurture Provision are, or how much of the correlation between pupil well-being and educational performance is a causal impact of well-being on educational performance.

<sup>46</sup> Authors' calculations based on school data returns.

<sup>47</sup> A one grade improvement means moving to the next grade up (e.g. from a D to a C) in one subject, a four grade improvement could mean moving up one grade in four subjects or moving up four grades in one subject.

<sup>48</sup> Identifying the impact of Nurture Groups on other pupils in the base class would require individual level data on pupils' outcomes (such as attendance or attainment) across a set of schools both with and without Nurture Groups, including both before and after Nurture Group provision was first implemented in Nurture Group schools. This data was not available for this evaluation, but if it were available it could in principle be used to identify the impact of Nurture Groups of other pupils in the base class.

Table 5: Estimated monetary benefits of DE funded Nurture Groups' 2023/24 cohort

Benefit	Nature of benefit	Estimated Value: real, discounted values (2024-25 prices)
<b>Reduced need for SEN spending</b>	Nurture Provision leads to some children requiring a lower level of SEN support in schools than they would have required in the absence of Nurture Groups. <sup>49</sup> This reduces the cost of SEN provision required both in the year following Nurture Provision and in future years (assuming that this effect persists)	£0.8m - £1.2m
<b>Higher lifetime income of pupils through improved attainment</b>	Nurture Groups raise both social and emotional well-being and attendance. Both of these are strongly associated with improved performance at KS2, which in turn predicts improved GCSE performance, which increases pupils' expected future lifelong earnings.	£8.4m - £14.6m
<b>Higher net government revenues</b>	By increasing pupils' future lifelong earnings, part of this benefit accrues to the state in higher net government revenues (taxes less benefits).	£3.8 - £6.7m
<b>Total benefits</b>		<b>£13.0m - £22.5m</b>

Note: Reduced SEN spending is modelled as accruing across the five years following Nurture Group participation. Higher lifetime income of pupils and higher net government revenues accrue across pupils' years of labour market participation i.e. approximately between the ages of 16 and 66, or between around 9 to 59 years following Nurture Provision (for the median child that attends a Nurture Group in Year 2).

There are several other monetary benefits that are potentially substantial, but were not possible to estimate as part of this analysis. These benefits include:

- **Reduced costs of managing behavioural incidents** - There is evidence that Nurture Provision has a significant impact on social and emotional well-being, as measured by the Boxall profile. This is a strong predictor of behavioural incidents. Managing these incidents draws in school resource, such as costs of disciplinary actions up to and including suspensions and exclusions. However, it was not possible to collect data on the costs to schools of managing these incidents. DE has confirmed that there are no specific budgets allocated to managing such incidents.
- **Reduced costs of physical and mental health services** - For example, if the positive impacts of Nurture Groups on pupils' SBEW persist into teenage years, then this may reduce the number CAMHS referrals and intervention costs.
- **Reduced costs to the criminal justice system** - Section 4.2 highlighted that there is a strong correlation between chronic absence from school and receiving criminal or custodial sentences in later life. However, it is not known how much of this relationship represents a causal impact of absenteeism on likelihood of committing crimes. Therefore, while Nurture Provision appears to have reduced chronic absence, it was not possible to estimate whether this is likely to reduce the number of crimes committed – or the associated costs saved – in future.
- **Reduced costs of late intervention** from ACEs, including spending on child protection, safeguarding, domestic violence, and youth economic inactivity. While the financial savings from

<sup>49</sup> As described in Section 4.3, while analysis of school data returns to RSM showed that children, on average, were on a higher stage of the SEN Code of Practice after attending a Nurture Group compared to before, this likely reflects that many children receive diagnoses and/ or have their SEN formally recognised around the ages when Nurture Group support is provided. Therefore, the increase in average SEN Code of Practice stage is unlikely to reflect an impact of Nurture Group participation. The researchers' assessment was that NASS data returns, which reported a fall in average SEN Code of Practice stages following Nurture Group support, were more likely to be reflective of the impact of that provision. Qualitative data gathered also suggested Nurture Groups reduced the need for SEN provision. Consequently, the NASS data was used to inform assumptions of changes in SEN Code of practice used in the Return on Investment analysis.

Nurture Group provision may be substantial it was not possible to estimate the share of the costs of late intervention that Nurture Group participation may mitigate.

- **Improved SBEW of pupils outside the Nurture Groups** - In addition to the pupils attending Nurture Groups, staff in each of the 62 DE funded Nurture Groups directly supported over 2,000 additional pupils in 2023/24. The type of support provided to these additional pupils is determined by the nature of their individual circumstances and needs. In the absence of outcome data for this cohort it is not possible to estimate potential return on investment from this support.

It is estimated that the total cost of Nurture Group provision in 2023/24 was £5.56m, made up of £3.84m of funding from DE and an estimated £1.72m contribution made from schools' own budgets<sup>50</sup>. As shown in Table 5, the total estimated value of the monetary benefits that it was possible to estimate lies between £13.0m and £22.5m. **Based on these estimated benefits, Nurture Group provision has a benefit to cost ratio (BCR) of between 2.34 and 4.05<sup>51,52</sup>. These estimates imply that, for every £1 invested in Nurture Group provision, between £2.34 and £4.05 is generated in reduced need for SEN spending, increased lifetime earnings of pupils and higher tax revenues.**

The estimated BCR implies that the measured monetised benefits of Nurture Groups were between 134% and 305% larger than the costs of provision. It is important to note – as outlined above – **these BCRs only include benefits that were possible to estimate based on the available evidence, and there are likely to be additional monetary benefits from Nurture Groups that were not possible to estimate.** If it were possible to estimate these additional benefits, this would further increase the estimated BCR.

## 4.5 Potential future scenarios

This section considers the costs of maintaining Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland. It also explores potential future funding scenarios to inform the Department's long-term approach. We first present estimates of the average costs of delivering a Nurture Group. We then estimate the average cost of delivery if Nurture teachers and CAs were paid higher rates to reflect their specialist roles and training. The section then considers three potential funding scenarios for the division of funding for Nurture Groups between DE funded Nurture Provision and wider school budgets (allocated to schools by DE via the common funding formula). Finally, we estimate the cost of increasing NASS's capacity to facilitate provision of more NEP training to post-primary and special schools.

Analysis also considered how the estimated return on investment would change under these different scenarios. Analysis of how paying specialist rates to Nurture teachers and CAs would affect the return on investment is presented in Section 4.5.2. However, the other scenarios (presented in Sections 4.5.1, 4.5.3 and 4.5.4) do not have any implications for the overall estimated return on investment of Nurture Provision. Sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.3 cover estimated costs and scenarios to fund continuation of existing provision. Section 4.5.4 relates to expanding NEP provision. It was not possible to estimate the return on investment of NEP provision, therefore, this analysis has no implications for the estimated return on investment.

### 4.5.1 Average cost to deliver a Nurture Group

The average cost of delivering a Nurture Group was estimated assuming that each Nurture Group requires one full time Nurture teacher and one full time CA. The total direct employment cost of the teacher and CA was estimated based on the mid-point of teacher and CA salary grades, with an uplift for pension and national insurance contributions. The total average cost also includes an estimated £2,000 in annual running costs to cover stationary, trips and extra-curricular activities. **The total average annual cost per Nurture Group was estimated as £89,645.**

In 2022, new Nurture Group schools were also provided with an additional £4,000 for Nurture room set-up resources. Up-rating this amount by the rate of inflation since 2022 to account for increasing prices of resources, it was estimated that new Nurture Groups would need to be provided with £4,450 to cover

<sup>50</sup> This estimate is based on subtracting DE funding per Nurture Group (£62,000) from the estimated total average cost of running a Nurture Group (see Section 4.5.1), to provide an estimate of the average funding provided by schools from their central budget, allocated by DE via the common funding formula (£27,645). This figure was then multiplied by the number of Nurture Groups (62) to provide an estimate of the total school contribution.

<sup>51</sup> The benefit-cost ratio is calculated as the estimated benefits divided by costs. For the lower estimate of benefits, £13.0m divided by £5.56m gives a BCR of 2.34. For the higher estimate of benefits, £22.5m divided by £5.56m gives a BCR of 4.05.

<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that Nurture Group placements are intended to be short-term, lasting a minimum of one or two terms and a maximum of four terms. The length of time spent in the Nurture Group depends on the assessed needs of the pupil. The RSM data returns showed that, on average, pupils attended Nurture Groups for 2.75 terms. Analysis of pupil-level outcome data found that pupils attending a Nurture Group for more than two terms typically began with lower Boxall development scores. This suggests that school staff often decided to keep these pupils in the Nurture Group because they had greater needs.

similar one-off set-up costs. Based on this estimate, **the per unit cost of setting up and running a new Nurture Group in the first year is £94,095.**

#### 4.5.2 Cost for delivering a Nurture Group reflecting specialist roles and training

Nurture Group funding is conditional on both the teacher and CA having completed training on the Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups and receiving or working towards the Nurture UK accredited training (EA and DE, 2024). **Qualitative evidence supports recognising the specialist roles and training of Nurture Group staff by renumeraling them on a pay scale in line with SEN-specific roles.** If both staff members were paid on the SEN-specific pay scales (for teachers and CAs respectively), then **the per unit cost of running a Nurture Group would equate to £98,429<sup>53</sup>.** This is £8,784 higher than the costs of running a Nurture Group with members of staff not on SEN-specific pay scales.

If overall costs and funding were increased to account for teachers and CAs being paid at specialist rates, but the monetised benefits remained the same, then **this would reduce the estimated BCR – based on measured, monetised benefits – of Nurture Groups to between 2.18 and 3.76.**

#### 4.5.3 DE contribution to Nurture Group funding

In 2024/25, DE provided £62,000 funding per Nurture Group to support their annual running costs. There is a recognition, by DE and schools, that this **Nurture funding does not cover the full costs of running a Nurture Group.** This reduces the school's ability to fund other activities and is contributing to some schools running budget deficits. It has also caused reduced spending on out-of-school trips, food and resources for the Nurture Group. Three funding scenarios were considered for the split of funding for Nurture Groups between DE and schools (see Table 6). The estimated average cost of running a Nurture Group is £89,645. Therefore, if DE were to fund the total average costs, this would imply a DE contribution of £89,645 per Nurture Group. Note that, while schools would contribute nothing if their Nurture Group staff were on mid-point teacher and CA salary grades, some schools may have to contribute towards Nurture Group costs if their staff are on higher salary grades.

The estimated average cost of £89,645, implies a DE Nurture funded contribution in 2024/25 of 69% of the total costs of running the Nurture Group. This suggests that schools contributed on average £27,644 (31%) from their wider budgets, which are also DE funded.

In recognition of the additional funding these schools attract for supporting disadvantaged pupils, we have developed a scenario where that funding is considered to contribute to the costs of running a Nurture Group. The school funding formula allocates additional funding to schools to support tackling educational disadvantage and differentiated need (e.g. pupils eligible for FSMs (FSME), children looked after (CLA) and newcomer pupils). Therefore, schools with higher numbers of FSME pupils, CLA and newcomer pupils will be allocated additional funding. The 62 Nurture Group schools were selected because they had high levels of pupils who might benefit from Nurture Provision. It may, therefore, be reasonable for schools to contribute the additional funding they receive through the funding formula, for pupils attending the Nurture Group, to the running of the Group. This is similar to the model used by the Republic of Ireland and some Scottish LAs. The schools' contribution in this scenario is based on an estimate of the average share of pupils participating in Nurture Groups that are FSME pupils, are CLA and/ or newcomer pupils, and multiplying this by the per pupil funding received for pupils in each category. On this basis, it is estimated schools may be able to contribute £11,090 (12%) towards the cost of running a Nurture Group with DE making up the remaining £78,555 (88%). This is less than schools appear to be contributing, on average, to the running of the 62 DE funded Nurture Groups in 2024/25.

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<sup>53</sup> Assuming they are paid at the mid-point of the salary scale, and uplifts for pensions contributions and employer national insurance contributions included in the same was as Section 4.5.2.

Table 6: Scenarios for potential funding splits between DE Nurture funding and school budgets

Costed using:	Scenario	DE funding per Nurture Group	Total DE Nurture Group fundings (assuming 62 Nurture Groups)	Average school funding per Nurture Group
Current Nurture staff pay scales	<b>Maintaining 2024/25 split in funding between DE and schools</b>	£62,000 (69%)	£3.844m	£27,645 (31%)
	<b>Schools' contribution based on additional funding to support tackling educational disadvantage and differentiated need</b>	£78,555 (88%)	£4.870m	£11,090 (12%)
	<b>DE 100% funding</b>	£89,645 (100%)	£5.558m	£0 (0%)
SEN-specific pay scales	<b>Maintaining 2024/25 split in funding between DE and schools</b>	£62,000 (63%)	£3.844m	£36,429 (37%)
	<b>Schools' contribution based on additional funding to support tackling educational disadvantage and differentiated need</b>	£87,339 (89%)	£5.415m	£11,090 (11%)
	<b>DE 100% funding</b>	£98,429 (100%)	£6.103m	£0 (0%)

#### 4.5.4 Increasing NEP provision

The reduction in DE funding for NASS management operations has resulted in reduced capacity within NASS compared to 2022/23. With fewer staff to deliver NEP, training for the primary sector has been prioritised to support earlier intervention. A final scenario for consideration is to increase NASS's capacity to facilitate provision of more NEP training and support. The nature and scope of this additional resource should be informed by the agreed model of future Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland.

## 4.6 Summary

**Nurture Provision has substantial social, educational and economic benefits.** One year of Nurture Group provision has estimated lifetime monetizable benefits of between £13.0m and £22.5m. These benefits are large relative to the costs of provision (£5.56m per year including schools' contribution). Nurture Group provision has an **estimated BCR of between 2.34 and 4.05**. The BCR would likely be higher if it were to include benefits that were not possible to estimate, including schools' cost savings from managing fewer behavioural incidents, and cost savings resulting from improved mental and physical health. **Nurture Group provision, therefore, has shown the potential to offer value for money, especially when non-monetary benefits and risks avoided are considered.**

Estimates of benefits have been made only where there is reliable data on outcomes that can be attributed to Nurture Provision. These benefits have been based on the best evidence available to forecast future benefits through educational performance and lifetime earnings based on the measured short-term impacts of the programme on SBEW and attendance. The wide range given for the estimated BCR reflects the degree of uncertainty about the scale of those benefits. Further developing the evidence base on the long-term impacts of Nurture Groups would enable a more precise estimate of the BCR to be made. **One option for further consideration would be a cohort study that would compare the trajectories of pupils participating in Nurture Groups to a matched comparator group** (based on variables such as prior attendance, SEN level, attainment and CLA status, as well as other key factors such as CAMHs referrals).

DE has confirmed that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Administrative Data Research Centre in Northern Ireland (known as the ADR NI) hosts the Education Outcomes Linkage (EOL). The EOL is a longitudinal relational database comprised of a range of tables containing post-primary schools' data for pupils aged 14 and over in Northern Ireland. As such the EOL provides a resource that would enable accredited researchers<sup>54</sup> to investigate the educational outcomes for pupils that had previously attended a Nurture Group.

Currently, **Nurture funding provided by DE covers the majority but not all of the full cost of provision**, so schools make some contribution towards the running of Nurture Groups from their school budget (which is also DE funded). This makes it challenging for DE to be directive about how Nurture Groups are delivered (i.e. aligned to DE Nurture guidance and the six Nurture principles). If DE were to cover the full cost of provision, this would cost £89,645 per Nurture Group per year. If teachers and CAs running Nurture Groups were paid SEN-specific rates, to reflect their accredited Nurture Group training, then this would cost an additional £8,784 per year per Nurture Group.

Another scenario for consideration is to increase NASS's capacity to provide NEP training and support. The nature and scope of this additional resource should be informed by the agreed model for future Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>54</sup> Researchers must be accredited to access data made available for research under the Digital Economy Act 2017 (DEA) and the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (SRSA). The UKSA and ONS use the criteria set out in the Research Code of Practice and Accreditation Criteria to award accredited and approved researcher status.

# 5. Conclusions

## 5.1 Overview

This research set out to address the following objectives. The remainder of this section presents our findings against each objective to help inform DE's development of future options.

Research objectives

- Consideration of the strategic fit of Nurture Provision in the Northern Ireland context.
- Identifying evidence of the social, educational and economic return on investment to measure short and long-term outcomes of Nurture Provision.
- Providing evidence for DE to use to develop options for its future support of Nurture Provision.

## 5.2 Strategic fit

Nurture is an internationally recognised, early intervention approach. It draws on TIP and relationship-based approaches to address the SBEW needs that can adversely impact teaching and learning. A recent report by SBNI estimated the annual cost of unresolved childhood adversity and trauma in Northern Ireland to be £1.3 billion (Knox, 2025). By reducing these barriers to learning Nurture aims to improve attendance, tackle educational disadvantage and raise attainment for all pupils. The whole school ethos has the potential to affect every pupil, staff member and family that engages with the school.

The principles of Nurture (Nurture UK, 2023) are aligned to the 2024-2027 PfG's aim of giving every child "the best start in life" (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). It is also aligned to the PfG's focus on early intervention and support for SEN and the SEND Transformation Programme<sup>55</sup>. It fits with other DE workstreams and strategic priorities in health, social care and justice. These include the use of TIP (EA and DE, 2024) and addressing the link between ACEs and negative life outcomes (Hughes et al., 2017). Programmes such as TAP<sup>56</sup> and the Reach Programme<sup>57</sup> implement Nurture principles. Other DE and health funded programmes focus on SBEW needs, such as Sure Start, Being Well Doing Well and RISE. Together they represent substantial investment under the Northern Ireland Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy for 2020-2030 (2021). It supports DE's medium term strategic focus on Every CHILD (DE, 2023a). Our consultations confirmed Nurture's strategic fit within the Northern Ireland context. The number of people who willingly contributed their time to this research and the findings from those consultations (summarised below) indicates the perceived value of Nurture Provision.

## 5.3 Return on investment

The consultation and desk research undertaken for this study found evidence that Nurture Provision:

- **Reduced barriers to learning for Nurture Group pupils and across the school** - This was supported by numerous existing studies as well as our consultations with school leaders, staff and parents/ carers (DE, 2021; DE, 2022a; DE, 2023a; DE, 2024a; Sloan et al., 2016; Nolan et al., 2021; Cefai et al., 2017; DfE, 2024);
- **Improved attendance for most Nurture Group pupils** – Indicated by DE statistical returns and supported by published research (DE, 2021; DE, 2022a; DE, 2023a; DE, 2024a; Sloan et al., 2016) and consultations. There was also evidence from the pupil questionnaires that Nurture Provision had improved children's attitudes to coming into school;
- **Improved SBEW** (DE, 2021; DE, 2022a; DE, 2023a; DE, 2024a; Sloan et al., 2016), which should lead to a reduction in challenging behaviour for the individual, their base class and the whole school - This was supported by desk research (Nolan et al., 2021; Cefai and Cooper, 2017; DfE, 2024) and findings from our consultations with school leaders, staff and parents/ carers. They reported that children were more resilient and were using coping strategies that substantially reduced challenging behaviour. This led to more time spent on teaching and learning for the whole class.
- **Reduced the need for more intensive support later in the child's life** (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021; IPSOS, 2023: DE, 2021; DE, 2022a; DE, 2023a; DE,

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/educational-transformation/send-transformation-programme>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/primary-children-looked-after-advisory-service/the-attach-programme>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/reach>

2024a; Sloan et al., 2016; Office for National Statistics 2021, 2022) – This is supported by our primary research. Many stakeholders agreed that the early intervention provided by Nurture led to long-term benefits for some of Northern Ireland’s most vulnerable children. EA Educational Psychologists noted that many Nurture Group pupils, did not require any further intervention despite having been chosen to receive Nurture support due to SBEW needs;

- **Improved attainment** (Panayiotou et al., 2019; DfE, 2012; Nolan et al., 2021; DfE, 2025; DfE, 2022; Klein et al., 2024; Nuffield Foundation, 2024) – This was supported by school leaders, staff and parents who said that pupils who received Nurture support saw improvements in emotional regulation, self-confidence, resilience and **academic achievement**. Calmer classrooms, and a reduction in the overall level of challenging behaviour in the whole school have the potential to positively impact other pupils’ educational attainment too (Nolan et al., 2021); and
- In turn academic success has a strong positive impact on children’s **life satisfaction and well-being later in life** (Chanfreau, 2013) - This was supported by SLTs from NEP schools, who observed improvements in the SBEW of pupils in extreme crisis as a result of their nurturing environment.

We have estimated the monetizable benefits of Nurture Groups. This is based on the best evidence available to forecast future benefits through educational performance and lifetime earnings based on the measured short-term impacts of the programme on SBEW and attendance. It is estimated that the total cost of Nurture Group provision in 2023/24 was £5.56m<sup>58</sup>. **We estimate the monetizable benefits of Nurture Group provision to be between £13.0m and £22.5m, resulting in an estimated BCR between 2.34 and 4.05. The BCR would likely be even higher if it were able to include benefits that were not possible to estimate, such as schools’ cost savings from managing fewer behavioural incidents, and cost savings resulting from improved mental and physical health. Nurture Group provision, therefore, has shown the potential to offer value for money, especially when non-monetary benefits and risks avoided are considered.** However, the evidence leaves a degree of uncertainty, reflected by the wide range given for the estimated BCR. Further developing the evidence base on the long-term impacts of Nurture Groups, for example using a cohort study, would enable a more precise estimate of the BCR.0

#### 5.4 Costed options for future support

Currently, **Nurture funding provided by DE covers the majority but not all of the full cost of Nurture Group provision**. Schools make some contribution towards the running of Nurture Groups<sup>59</sup>. If Nurture funding were to cover the full cost of provision, this would cost £89,645 per Nurture Group per year.

Many respondents felt that basing funding on generalist teacher and CA salary points does not reflect the specialised nature of Nurture roles. Therefore, we have also modelled the cost of delivering a Nurture Group based on both staff receiving higher rates. It would cost an additional £8,784 per year per Nurture Group to pay Nurture Group teachers and CAs SEN-specific rates, to reflect their specialised roles and accredited training.

Another scenario for consideration is to increase NASS’s capacity to facilitate provision of more NEP training and support in the future. The nature and scope of this additional resource should be informed by the agreed model of future Nurture Provision in Northern Ireland.

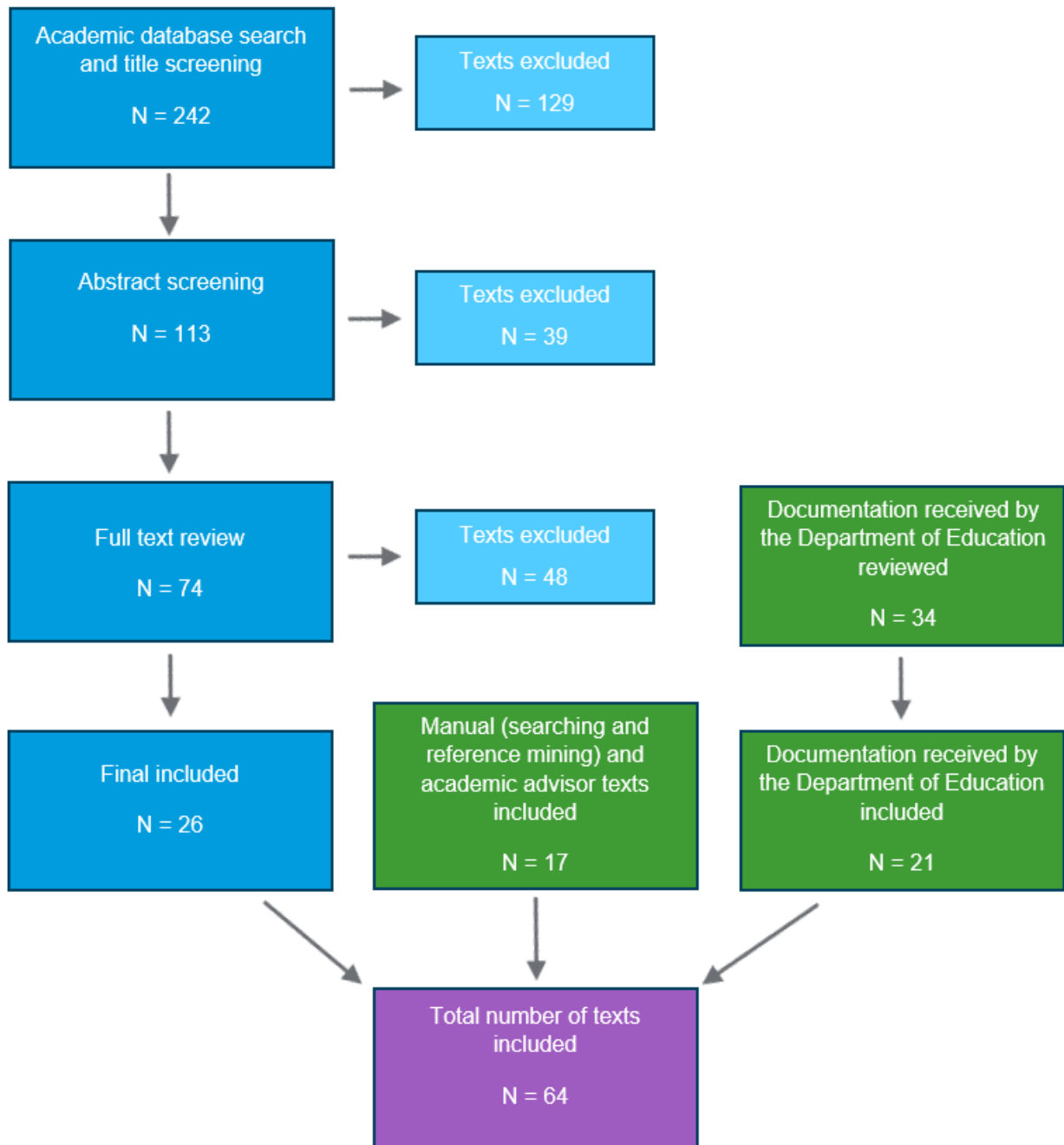
<sup>58</sup> This includes £3.84m of funding from DE and an estimated £1.72m contribution made from schools’ own budgets.

<sup>59</sup> Primarily from DE funding allocated to the school through the common funding formula.

# Appendices

# A. Rapid evidence review process

Figure 10: Flow diagram of sources and screening process of the rapid evidence review



## B. Questionnaire Respondent Profiles

Table 7: Responses to the SLT questionnaire, by school type and Nurture Group status

	Primary school	Post-primary school	Special school	Total
No Nurture Group	48 (38.4%)	3 (2.4%)	6 (4.8%)	57 (45.6%)
Self-funded Nurture Group	10 (8.0%)	11 (8.8%)	2 (1.6%)	23 (18.4%)
DE funded Nurture Group	45 (36.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	45 (36.0%)
Total	103 (82.4%)	14 (11.2%)	8 (6.4%)	125 (100.0%)

Table 8: Responses to the pupil questionnaire, by school type

	Primary school	Post-primary school	Special school	Total
Number of responses	66 (84.6%)	10 (12.8%)	2 (2.6%)	78 (100.0%)
Number of pupils engaged	1,018 (96.8%)	30 (2.9%)	4 (0.4%)	1,052 (100.0%)

## C. Sub-group analysis of Nurture Group pupil outcomes, 2023/24

Table 9: Change in outcome measures before and after Nurture Group participation, total sample

Outcome	Before	After	Change	Significance	n
Boxall development score	82.7	112.1	29.4	***	210
Boxall diagnostic score	51.3	27.2	-24.1	***	210
SEN Code of Practice stage	0.69	0.93	0.23	***	197
Attendance rate	85.9	89.9	4.0	***	181

Note: The sample used in this analysis is non-random, based on the voluntary submission of data, and only includes pupils from 44% of all Nurture Group schools. The values within 'Before' and 'After' columns represent the average (mean), and the values in the 'Change' column represent the difference in the average before and after. For Tables 10, 11 and 12, the significance results indicate whether the outcome changes are statistically different between subgroups. Due to low sample sizes, comparative analysis by geographical area was not possible.

\*\*\* the result is highly significant (P Value < 0.001)

\*\* the result is moderately significant (P Value < 0.01)

\* the result is statistically significant, but it is weak (P Value < 0.05)

Table 10: Change Nurture Group outcome measures, by gender

Gender analysis	Male (n=130)			Female (n=80)			Comparison between males and females	
	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	P-Value	Significance
<b>Boxall development score</b>	80.5	109.6	29.1	86.5	116.1	29.6	0.885	Not statistically significant
<b>Boxall diagnostic score</b>	54.7	31.4	-23.3	45.5	20.0	-25.5	0.389	Not statistically significant
<b>SEN Code of practice stage</b>	0.75	1.07	0.31	0.59	0.68	0.09	0.055	Not statistically significant
<b>Attendance rate</b>	86.2	90.7	4.5	85.4	88.7	3.2	0.263	Not statistically significant

Table 11: Change in Nurture Group outcome measures, by number of terms attended

Outcome	1 term (n=18)			2 terms (n=34)			3 terms (n=134)			4 or 5 terms (n=16)			Comparison by number of terms attended		
	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Anova F Value	P-Value	Significance
Boxall development score	94.6	113.5	18.9	88.4	112.4	24.0	80.3	111.2	30.9	78.4	117.1	38.6	3.0	0.033	*
Boxall diagnostic score	51.7	30.8	-20.9	54.2	26.2	-28.0	48.8	27.6	-21.2	66.0	21.8	-44.3	3.1	0.026	*
SEN Code of Practice stage	0.40	0.80	0.40	0.97	0.80	-0.17	0.64	0.99	0.34	0.81	0.75	-0.06	4.3	0.0055	**
Attendance rate	85.6	86.9	1.3	83.6	87.5	3.9	86.7	90.8	4.0	82.7	87.9	5.2	0.5	0.68	Not statistically significant

Table 12: Change in Nurture Group outcome measures, by year group

Outcome	Year 1 (n=20)			Year 2 (n=120)			Year 3 or above (n=71)			Comparison between year groups		
	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Anova F Value	P-Value	Significance
Boxall development score	71.7	100.9	29.3	87.7	113.1	25.4	79.7	118.7	39.1	4.443	0.005	**
Boxall diagnostic score	45.9	34.1	-11.9	47.1	28.1	-19.0	63.6	24.9	-38.7	6.638	0.0003	***
SEN Code of Practice stage	0.85	1.00	0.15	0.54	0.76	0.22	0.63	1.28	0.66	3.260	0.023	*

Attendance rate	88.3	93.8	5.5	85.5	88.7	3.1	85.4	90.6	5.1	0.960	0.413	Not statistically significant
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# D. Modelling and assumptions

## Return on investment modelling

Table 7 provides full details of the methodology used to estimate monetary benefits of Nurture Provision. All costs and benefits estimated as real, present values. That is, they have been adjusted to take account of inflation to estimate future costs and benefits in today's prices, and then discounted using discount rates suggested by the HM Treasury Green Book<sup>60</sup>.

*Table 13: Methodology used to estimate benefits and benefit to cost ratio of Nurture Provision*

Benefit	Detail of calculations and assumptions made	Scenarios	Value (2024/25 prices)
Reduced need for SEN spending	The number of children moving to a higher or lower level SEN code of conduct level due to their participation in a Nurture Group was taken from data returns provided by schools. There is some ambiguity over how schools completed the data return, and so different estimates were included in the conservative and optimistic scenarios. The number of children moving down from each SEN level was multiplied by the difference between the per pupil cost of SEN provision at their original level and their new level, drawing on data provided by DE. It was assumed that the reduction in need persists for up to five years following Nurture Group provision, with some attrition between years.	Conservative: no. children moved to lower SEN Code of Practice = 12%; attrition of SEN benefit = 20%  Optimistic: no. children moved to lower SEN Code of Practice = 20%; attrition = 0%	£0.8m - £1.2m
Higher lifetime income of pupils from improved school attendance	Data provided by Nurture Group schools suggests a 13.8 percentage point reduction in the number of children with school attendance below 80% and a 12.8 percentage point reduction in the number of children with school attendance below 90%. This was linked to expected performance at KS2, drawing on evidence from the Department for Education in England <sup>61</sup> on the relationship between attendance and attainment at KS2. While this evidence is correlational, different estimates of the share of the relationship that is explained by a causal impact of attendance on attainment were included in the conservative and optimistic scenarios. The impact on KS2 scores was linked	Conservative: persistence of attendance to KS2 = 0.8; Share of relationship between attendance and KS2 performance that is assumed causal = 0.5  Optimistic: persistence of attendance to KS2 = 1; Share of relationship between attendance and KS2 performance that is assumed causal = 1	£3.5m - £4.9m (of which estimated £2.4m - £3.3m accrues to individuals, £1.1m - £1.5m to government in higher net revenues)

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government/the-green-book-2020>

<sup>61</sup> Available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4>

Benefit	Detail of calculations and assumptions made	Scenarios	Value (2024/25 prices)
	<p>to expected changes in pupils' lifetime income drawing on the relationship between KS2 performance and GCSE performance<sup>62</sup> and the estimated increase in lifetime earnings from a one grade improvement in GCSE performance (uprated to reflect inflation)<sup>63</sup>. It was assumed that the share of this gross increase in lifetime earnings that was received by the state in higher tax revenues was at the average UK personal income tax rate<sup>64</sup>.</p>		
<p>Higher lifetime income of pupils from improved social and emotional well-being</p>	<p>Drawing on school data returns, it was estimated that Nurture Provision improves a pupil's Boxall profile – which measures social and emotional well-being) by an average of 29 points. This is a large and significant effect. This impact was linked to expected performance at KS2, drawing on existing evidence from the Department for Education<sup>65</sup> in England<sup>66</sup>. While this evidence is correlational, different estimates of the share of the relationship that is explained by a causal impact of social and emotional well-being on attainment were included in the conservative and optimistic scenarios. KS2 performance was further linked to GCSE performance and expected lifetime income changes using the same methodology as for the benefit above.</p>	<p>Conservative: Share of relationship between Boxall score and KS2 performance that is assumed causal = 0.5</p> <p>Optimistic: Share of relationship between Boxall score and KS2 performance that is assumed causal = 1</p>	<p>£8.8m - £16.4m (of which estimated £6.0m - £11.3m accrues to individuals, and £2.8m - £5.1m to government in higher net revenues)</p>
<p><b>Total benefits</b></p>			<p><b>£13.0m - £22.5m</b></p>
<p><b>Total costs</b></p>	<p>Made up of £4.5m in DE funding plus an estimated £1.7m in contribution by schools.</p>		<p><b>£5.56m</b></p>
<p><b>BCR (of monetary benefits)</b></p>			<p><b>2.34 – 4.05</b></p>

<sup>62</sup> See [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/373286/RR352\\_-\\_Influences\\_on\\_Students\\_GCSE\\_Attainment\\_and\\_Progress\\_at\\_Age\\_16.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/373286/RR352_-_Influences_on_Students_GCSE_Attainment_and_Progress_at_Age_16.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> See [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c36f0cd3bf7f4bd11a2326/GCSE\\_Attainment\\_and\\_Lifetime\\_Earnings\\_PDF3A.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c36f0cd3bf7f4bd11a2326/GCSE_Attainment_and_Lifetime_Earnings_PDF3A.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> See [oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issues/tax-policy/taxing-wages-united-kingdom.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issues/tax-policy/taxing-wages-united-kingdom.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219638/DFE-RR253.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219638/DFE-RR253.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219638/DFE-RR253.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219638/DFE-RR253.pdf)

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