**Executive Summary: A survey of Nurture Groups and Nurturing Practice.**

**A Snapshot study within the county of Gloucestershire**

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Gloucestershire Nurture Groups
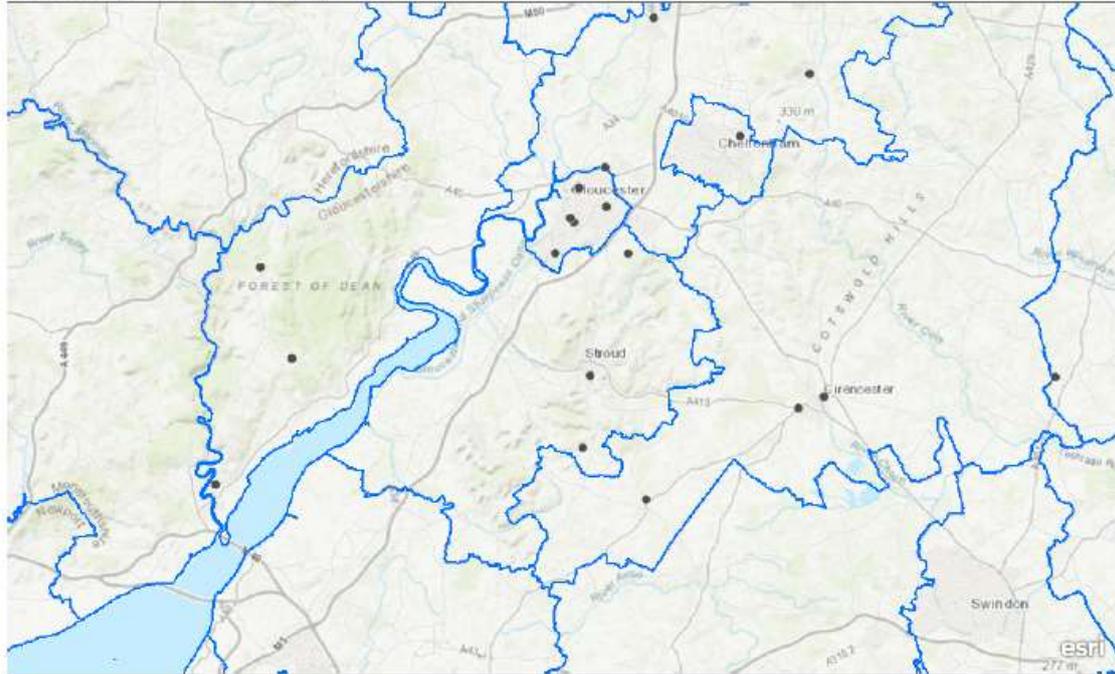
Map showing Gloucestershire Nurture Groups by Type

DoBH, OS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, NGA | Office for National Statistics

## Introduction

### What are Nurture Groups?

Nurture Groups (NG's) were first developed by Marjorie Boxall in the 1960's for young children (Boxall, 2002). NG's are a focused, evidence-based intervention typically in mainstream schools, aimed at pupils with additional Social, Emotional and/or Mental Health (SEMH) needs. The intervention strives to compensate for missed nurturing experiences in the early years through provision of small-group teaching in a home-like environment (Davies, 2011). In short, the classic NG model is described by Bennathan & Boxall (2000) as a class in a primary or infant school where two adults, usually a teacher and a teaching assistant, work with 8-12 children who are considered "unable to respond in a normal class and often at risk of exclusion or special educational placement". NG's provide a carefully structured day and predictable environment (DfEE, 1997), typically with registration and afternoon sessions in mainstream, and NG attendance for the remaining time. However, NG's can and have been shown to deviate from the classic structure and can be divided into four types; Classic, New variant, Groups informed by NG principles and non-NG's (See appendix I). The DfE (2018 p.30) describe how "the intention of these groups is to ensure that young people are emotionally prepared for learning and to support the development of their social skills".

### The effectiveness of Nurture Groups

There has been an extensive amount of research into NGs and how effective the intervention appears to be (see Hughes and Schlösser, 2014). Areas of effectiveness have been identified as: an improvement in attention, SEMH needs, academic achievements, increased school attendance and social skills (Lyon, 2017; Binnie and Allen 2008, Cooper, Arnold and Boyd, 2001; Doyle, 2005). The DfE (2018) describes how Nurture groups are "one popular response to what are seen as the personal development needs of pupils in danger of being excluded" (the DfE, 2018 paper references Cooper and Whitebread, 2007; Cooke, Yeomans and Parkes, 2008; Binnie and Allen, 2008 as examples of this). Many of the above papers focus on NGs within primary settings, but increasingly NG-type interventions are being used within secondary settings, and with supporting the transition

from primary to secondary school (Kourmoulaki, 2013). Many published papers suggest that NGs in secondary schools are also effective (Cooke, Yeomans and Parkes, 2008; Garner and Thomas, 2011; Grantham and Primrose, 2017; Kourmoulaki, 2013; Perkins, 2017; Lyon, 2017; Chiappella, 2015), however, Hughes and Schlosser (2014) argue that there needs to be further research on the effectiveness of nurture groups, especially in secondary schools.

In a recent DfE paper, Mills & Thomson (2018) summarise the research on alternative provision, reporting that "one cohort study (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007) indicated that schools with nurture groups appeared to work effectively with those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) needs" although highlighted that on leaving the Nurture Group children continued to need support "to maintain their improved behaviour". Binnie and Allen's (2008) research also demonstrated the positive impact a nurture group can have on a school's overall ethos, through improving relationships and 'supporting a culture of care' and (Doyle's 2003) research which reported the positive effects of a NG on whole school ethos and inclusion.

**Nurture Groups in the national context**

NGs are endorsed by the UK government in various reports and Ofsted documents:

> "*The care, guidance and support of pupils are outstanding in nurture groups. Staff are committed to assessing the particular needs of all pupils and providing well-organised and intensive support to overcome barriers to learning. As a consequence, many pupils who have found school challenging are attending regularly and enjoying what school has to offer.*" (Ofsted, 2011).

NGs have also received recognition from Education Scotland for developing positive relationships and behaviour, the Welsh Department for Education and Skills as an effective strategy for pupils with behaviour and attendance issues and finally by Northern Ireland's department for Social Development, as an effective tool in challenging barriers that contribute to low educational attainment (Nurture Group Network, 2017).

West Dunbartonshire's evaluation (Moran, 2015) found that by attending NG's, pupils experienced lower levels of stress, attention difficulties and emotional distress, and reported an improvement in pro-social behaviour. The NG children made greater improvements overall and the pupils who attended for the largest number of sessions made greater improvements compared to a control group. Staff data showed that 80% reported that their NG was effective in maintaining inclusion, that nurture was a key factor of ensuring that children remained in mainstream school, and staff requested further training and information.

Buckinghamshire's evaluation (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2013) found that Boxall Profile data increased significantly in all developmental strands and there was a desirable decrease in all diagnostic strands. Data from parents and carers suggested that there was a positive trend in results and the subscale "attitude to school" nearly reached significance. Lastly, the results from NG pupils were statistically significant across all subscales.

**Nurture Groups in the local context**

At present, Gloucestershire's Educational Psychology Service (EPS) facilitates training delivered by an accredited Nurture Group Network (NGN) trainer. The training is advertised locally and nationally, and the EPS arrange venue etc. The EPS also offers free practitioner support groups, ran termly, to those who are running a NG in the county.

Within Gloucestershire, practitioner groups are attended by any members of staff, usually teaching assistants and SENCO's, who have a NG in their setting. The practitioner groups are facilitated by an

Educational Psychologist (EP) and hosted by a voluntary NG practitioner in their NG room and tend to last around 3 hours. Generally, a practitioner session begins with a group check in, where members discuss any progressions or challenges. Sessions also contain an element of 'Continual Professional Development', often provided by an EP or Advisory Teacher, which relates to NG practice and gives the opportunity for resources to be shared. Recently, the practitioner groups have been opened up to 'any practitioners providing nurturing practice/interventions' in order to encourage more collaboration between those offering similar and complementary interventions e.g. THRIVE, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) etc. and also to help staff move away from the perception of Nurture Groups as a within-child, specialist intervention or 'add-on', to seeing such provision as part of a whole school nurturing approach (see recent change of Nurture Group Network to NurtureUK).

Similarly, the Nurture Group Steering Committee has changed its focus from primarily promoting Nurture Groups, to promoting Nurture Groups and other Nurturing and Relational-Based Approaches more generally. The Steering Group recognise the interaction with and position of Nurture Groups within the wider school system. Davies' (2011) research identified a variety of contexts and mechanisms that affect outcomes at the community, whole school, mainstream class and nurture group levels, and these will be included in Gloucestershire EPS' training packages on whole school approaches to embedding nurturing and relational-based practice.

Data prior to this report suggests that 25 schools in Gloucestershire have received NGN training in the local authority and/or have set up a NG within their setting. The majority of these are primary settings, but also one college and two junior settings and most of the NG's are run by two members of staff and range from 4-12 pupils in each group.

The current Gloucestershire database was missing information such as:

- Have settings received training outside of the county and subsequently set up a NG?
- What does their NG practice look like?
- Are schools running NG's without receiving training from the local authority?

**Aims of the report**

This report aims to capture a current snapshot of nurturing practice across the Local Authority which will inform the service of how to plan for the future. A more contemporaneous picture will allow the LA and EPS to ensure that good nurturing practice is shared, encouraged and developed.

**Method**

A survey was designed and peer-reviewed by members of the NG steering committee. Once agreed, the survey was sent to all settings (N = 313) in Gloucestershire for Nurture practitioners, Senior Management Teams and/or the current members of the Nurture Group Practitioner Group to complete. The survey was widely shared via the EPS and ATS and advertised on the website 'SENCo Spot'. Respondents were given a month to complete the survey.

**Results**

**Background**

- From the 82 settings, 22 did have a NG. Out of these, 19 NG's were in primary settings and 3 NG's were in secondary settings. (Fig 1.) Types of NG's can be seen in table 1.
- The majority of NG sessions appeared to take place in afternoon sessions, with other sessions being at lunch time, mornings and whole day sessions.
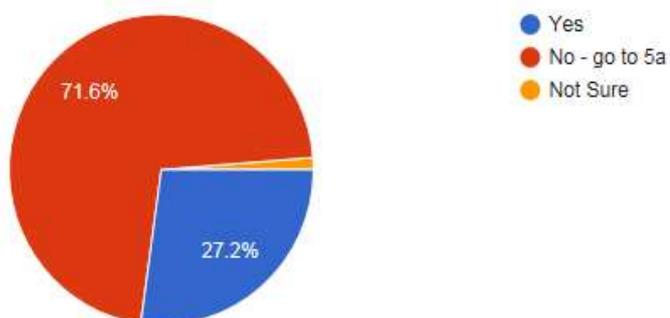
Figure 1. Settings with a NG



Table 1. Types of Nurture Groups

| Type of Nurture Group | N |
|---|---|
| Type 1 | 5 |
| Type 2 | 9 |
| Type 3 | 6 |
| Type 4 | 2 |

*Selection process and Assessment Tools*

- To select NG pupils, the majority of respondents mentioned the use of staff recommendations and assessment tools such as Boxall Profile, THRIVE questionnaires and observations.
- It was found that a range of assessment tools were being used to assess NG pupil progress and the majority of these were being completed by the class teachers and NG staff. 68% of respondents were trained in the assessment tools they were using. The assessment tools being used to record progress included:
  - *The Boxall Profile*
  - *Strength and Difficulties questionnaire*
  - *Inclusion provision assessment tools*
  - *Screening through THRIVE*
  - *Talkabout*
  - *TME*

*Re-attendance following reintegration*

- In regards to re-attending the NG, it was found that pupils needed more time before leaving the NG and re-integrating back into the mainstream classroom.

- For the pupils that did re-attend the NG following reintegration, respondents reported that this was due to external factors in their personal lives.
- For some settings, reintegration was not needed i.e. NG attended for a short period of time and still has contact with mainstream.
- 4 participants reported successful reintegration. For some, successful reintegration was supported with a celebration of pupils' successes, or other interventions that target specific needs. Also, respondents illustrated the benefits NG's have had for helping pupils in reintegration with "children coping better within the classroom environment" and them being "more resilient".

**Outcomes**

*Positive outcomes*

- The highest rated outcomes were improved social skills, increased enjoyment of school and increased attention in class. On the whole, all outcomes were rated highly (see figure 3).
- Further analysis of the data suggested that other positive outcomes were:
  - Positive attachments
  - Pupils being aware of their behaviour
  - Improved home-life and parental engagement
  - Time and space

Figure 3. Positive outcomes for Nurture Group children
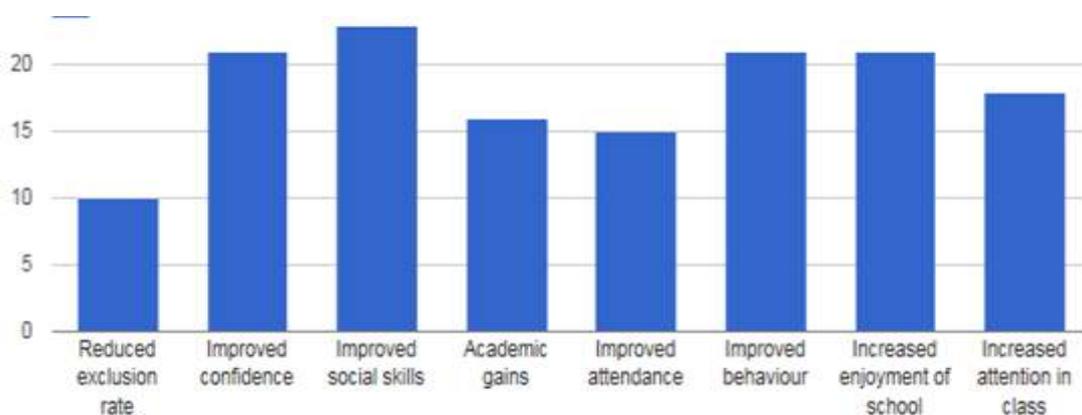


*Negative outcomes*

- The thematic analysis of data also found that the negative outcomes of Nurture Groups included:
  - **Integration:** issues around integration seemed to be around the transition from NG back into the classroom, but also some pupils struggling to reintegrate back into peer groups as 'they feel left out'.
  - **Dependency:** respondents reported an issue of pupils not having the boundaries of going to NG when they are supposed to and attending compulsory lessons, and not using NGs as an "excuse".
  - **Mix of the group/incorrect placement:** for some, pupils with high needs were selected for the NG but found it wasn't suitable for working in groups and some pupils were not at a level to be working in a group. It was highlighted that a good way to select pupils was to think about "*the mix of children and how they will support each other*".

*Ensuring effectiveness*

- All factors for ensuring an effective NG were regarded as important, but the highest scoring factor was 'a supportive senior management and/or governors'. (See fig 4.)

Figure 4. How do you ensure that your Nurture Group is effective?
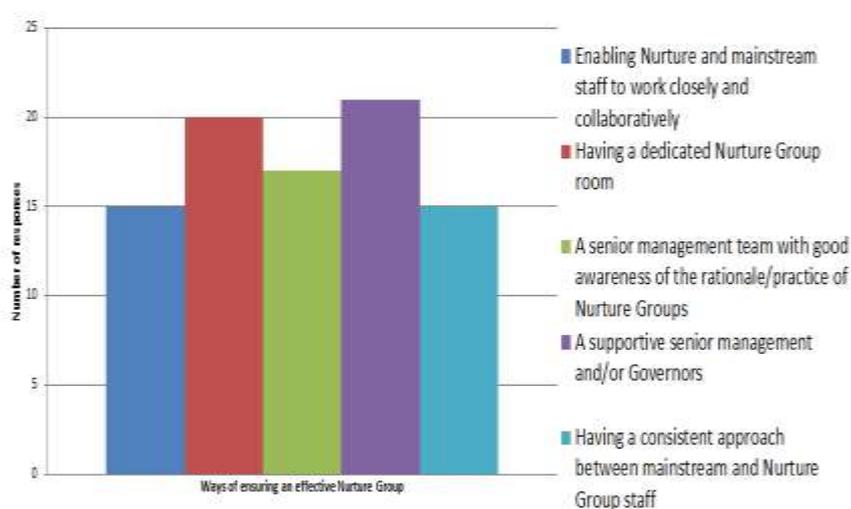


*Perceived benefits*

- 100% of respondents selected '*encouraging children's emotional and social development'* and 91% selected '*close relationships developed with pupils'*. These factors were also highlighted in comments from the respondents. The lowest perceived benefit was keeping children at risk of exclusion in school. (See fig 5.)
- Another theme of '*less constriction'* emerged from respondent comments. Due to mainstream teachers being under extreme pressure to deliver the curriculum, it was found that the NG's were providing a safe space for pupils with no pressures to achieve and pupils could go at their own pace and express their emotions.

Figure 5. What do you think are the main benefits of running a Nurture Group?
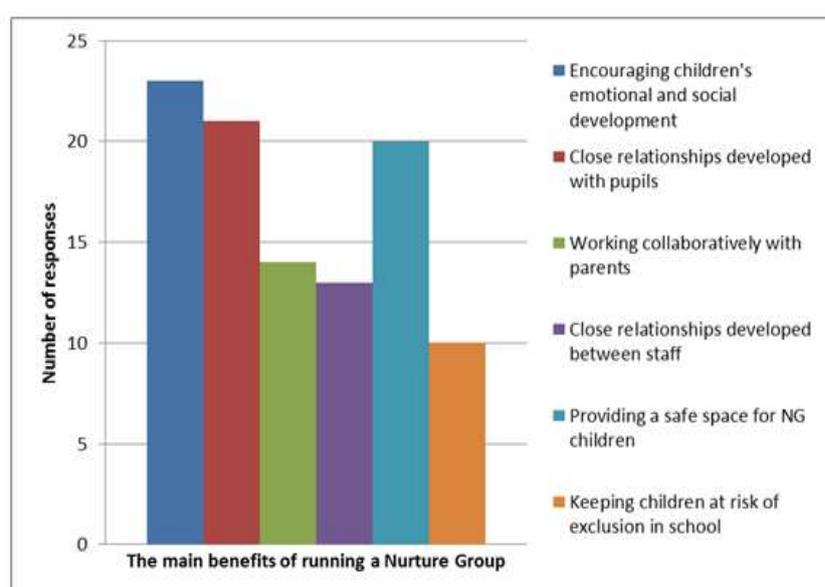
*Perceived challenges*

- The main challenge for running Nurture Groups appeared to be '*resources'* and '*time'.* These factors, alongside '*pupils missing curriculum lessons*' and '*staff/school understanding*' were highlighted as challenges in the respondent's comments.
- The lowest perceived challenge was '*Lack of support from Head teacher and wider school community*' which highlights the importance of having an understanding Senior Management Team to support the NG.

Figure 6. What do you think are the main challenges of running a Nurture Group?
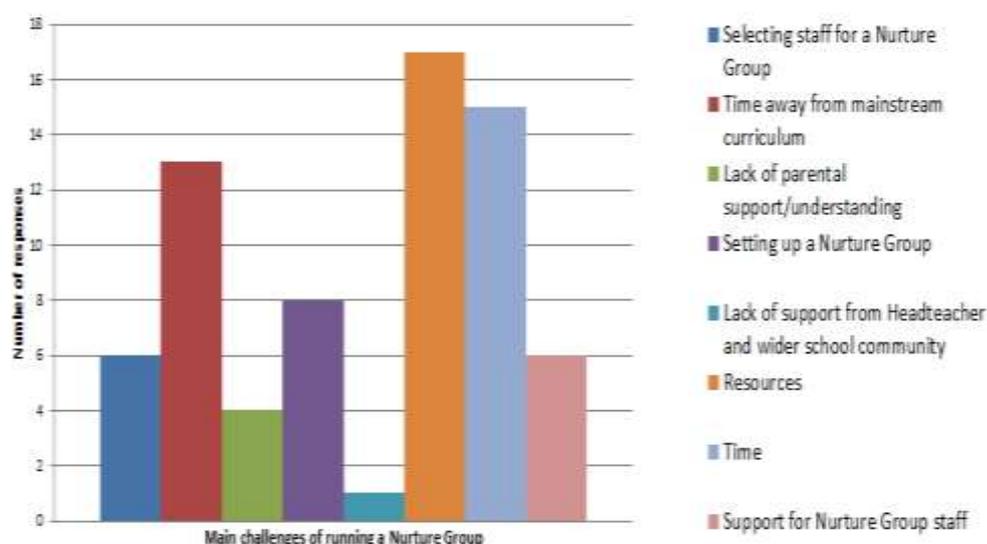


*Measuring outcomes*

- The main methods of measuring outcomes for NG pupils were the Boxall profile, practitioner observations, strengths and difficulties questionnaires and alternative tools such as THRIVE, Lego Therapy and Talkabout.

*Impact on exclusions*

- NG's were found to have impacted on exclusions in various ways. One way was giving pupils the ability to control their emotions. Coping strategies and resilience were mentioned as ways that pupils have learnt to control their emotions which has helped them manage stressful situations in school.
- The safe space that the NG provides was seen to have an impact on exclusions. It was found that having the option for pupils to go to a safe space can prevent situations from escalating and resulting in an exclusion.
- Having the school working as a team was highlighted as supporting pupils. This relates to having a whole school understanding of mental health and behaviour issues so that the child can be efficiently supported.

*Outcomes for parents/carers*

- Having their child attend a NG appeared to benefit parents/carers by being able to see their child's progress, which in turn, improved family relationships.
- An increased amount of communication, trust and confidence with the school. Having their child attend NG's had opened up conversations between parents and staff about pupil progress, worries and concerns they had.

*Outcomes for staff*

- **An improved class environment:** NG's had a positive impact on peers and staff as well as the child. The reduced stress levels enabled pupils to have improved relationships with peers in the classroom and allowed the teacher to "*teach the class and establish a positive learning environment".*
- **Staff valuing each other:** Mainstream staff valued the NG staff as they can turn to them to "*share strategies"* for the pupil.
- **Improved understanding of pupil behaviours:** It appears that NG's have enabled staff to understand the factors surrounding the pupil's behaviour which may help in engaging them in a *"more positive approach"* towards behaviour. It was found that staff were also "*more empathetic towards pupils"* in the classroom environment too.

*Improving Nurture Groups*

- **Increased amount of resources:** The main way to improve NG's was resources. This included funding for the NG, an improved space for the current NG and space to run additional NG's, more members of staff and the time capacity to run more than one NG and plan NG's.
- **Increase in training and trained staff:** Some respondents wanted additional training or to have staff not trained enrolled onto a training course. One respondent mentioned receiving "*CPD linked to mental health"* to improve knowledge of mental health issues.
- **Staff working collaboratively:** Some staff members can misinterpret the purpose of NG's which can create reluctance of engaging in the Nurturing approach. From the responses, it was evident that staff having improved understanding of NG's and working collaboratively would improve NG's significantly.

**Training**

*Have staff received relevant training*

- Out of 21 respondents who have an established NG, 73% had received NG training, 23% had not received training and one respondent did not answer. (See fig. 7)
- Out of 21 respondents who have an established NG, 64% had someone in their setting attend the NGN training, 27% did not have anyone who attended the NGN training, one respondent said 'not sure' and one respondent did not answer. (See fig. 8)

Figure 7. Have your Nurture Group practitioners or other staff receiving training specifically on Nurture Groups?
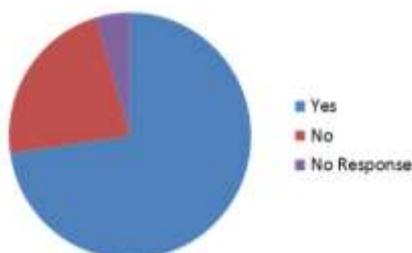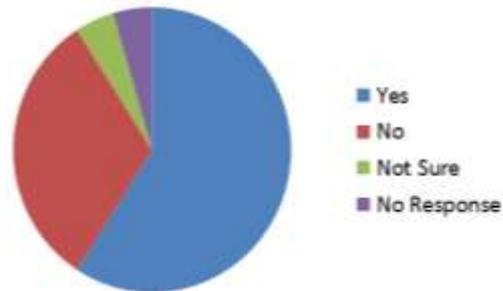


Figure 8. Did someone in your setting attend the Nurture Group Network accredited training?

*Training in Gloucestershire*

- Out of 21 respondents, 59% had attended training in Gloucestershire and 32% had not.

Figure 9. Did someone in your setting attend Nurture Group Network training in Gloucestershire?



*Feedback of training*

- There was a range of positive feedback in the survey data regarding training in Gloucestershire, including having a good overview of Nurture Groups and gaining a deep understanding.
- There were negative aspects of Gloucestershire's training, which mainly included a lack of support post-training, which we will consider in the recommendation section.

*Whole school training*

- The majority of respondents (N=32) were interested in a whole school approach to nurturing practices and Nurture Groups training package and 15 respondents were definitely interested.

Figure 10. Would you be interested in a whole school approach to Nurturing Practices and Nurture Groups training package?
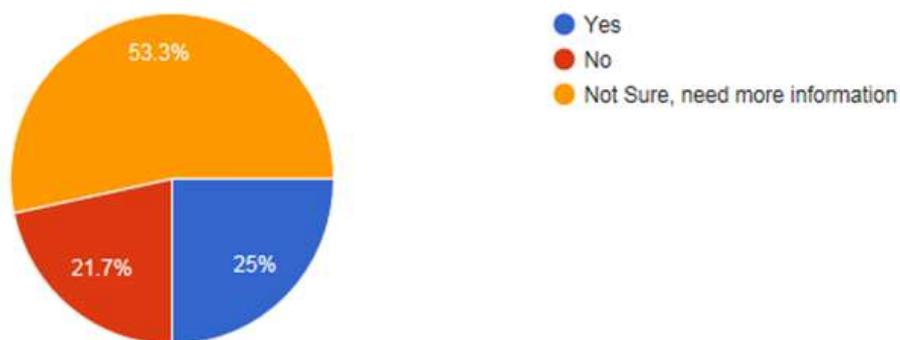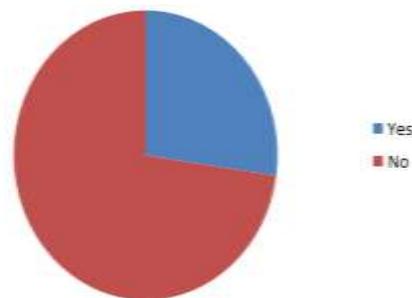
**Practitioner Groups**

*Attendance*

- 27% of NG staff attend the practitioner group and 73% of NG staff do not attend the practitioner group. (See fig 11).
- Further analysis showed that a large number of respondents who do not currently attend would like to attend, or requested further information regarding the practitioner group. We will be following this up, over the coming year.

Figure 11. Do the Nurture Group Practitioners attend Gloucestershire's Nurture Group Practitioner group?



*Views*

- **Positive:** Listening to advice and networking with others to share resources was regarded as very important when attending the NG practitioner groups.
- **Negative:** The distance of the practitioner groups was mentioned as an issue. As Gloucestershire is a large county, it was found that some practitioners fail to attend due to this reason.

**Discussion**

Summary of Results

Out of the 82 responses received, 22 settings in the county had NG's. These settings described extremely positive outcomes, which were mainly; improved social skills and relationships, improved behaviour at home and school, improved attention, reduced exclusion rates and improved attendance. Effective NG's were mainly due to having a supportive SMT and a dedicated NG room. The main negative aspects reported were; some children struggled to re-integrate and found old habits returned and resources and time were the main challenges.

**Recommendations**

These recommendations will be included in the next 3 year plan by the SSEPs for SEMH:

- Promote school partnerships to develop a whole school relational-based nurturing approach. For example:
  - share relevant resources and links with organisations such as the ATS, EPS, GHLL and NurtureUK;

- open up the Nurture Group Practitioner Support groups to those offering similar relational-based interventions such as THRIVE and ELSA etc;
- change Nurture Group Practitioner Groups to Nurturing and Relational-Based approaches.
- link the development and delivery of the Nurturing and Relational-Based approaches practitioner groups with the Local Inclusion Clusters to support collaborative working between schools.
- continue to work to promote understanding that Nurture Groups are positioned within a framework/continuum that includes other evidence-based relational-based approaches and interventions.
- continue to promote effective, evidence-based inclusive practice that will help reduce exclusions.

- Work with colleagues across the Local Authority, Health and Public Health
  - For example e.g. Virtual School, EPS, ATS, EIO, Restorative Approaches Lead and GHLL to create effective signposting for practitioners to evidence-based approaches and training that supports the development of relational-based interventions/ practice.
  - Ensure that Nurture Groups and nurturing approaches are seen as part of a broader offer of support and training from the Local Authority and EPS e.g. including and linking with those developing inputs on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Trauma Informed Schools and Restorative Approaches. Where possible ensure that EPS training dovetails with this.
  - Invite relevant CYPS and Public Health colleagues to Nurturing and Relational-Based Steering Group.
  - Collaborate with other local authority colleagues in promoting a nurturing approach. Feedback from schools/settings is very welcome, so we can share this learning with colleagues in the Local Authority e.g. via the Nurturing Approaches Steering Group or via attendance at Practitioner Groups.

**Practitioner Groups**

- Work to overcome the challenge of resources and time: e.g. supporting practitioners to share ideas of 'what works' in terms of seeking funding and support for their Nurture Group or nurturing provision. Search for opportunities to be able to subsidise or provide 'free' training.
- Encourage settings and practitioners to create links with cluster partners to 'share' training and/or commission bespoke training relevant for their cluster, and (as above) link the development and delivery of the Nurturing and Relational-Based approaches practitioner groups with the Local Inclusion Clusters to support collaborative working between schools.

- Encourage practitioners to attend the Nurturing Practice/Relational-Based Approaches practitioner groups and to network with each other to share resources and ideas.
  - For example, hosting future practitioner groups in Gloucester EPS base so that it is at a central location, but then asking practitioners to offer 'open afternoons/mornings' once a year, where other staff can come and visit their setting to see the space/talk to staff.
  - Offer CPD opportunities
  - Continue to offer 'free' structured group supervision within Practitioner Groups

- EPS to continue to develop traded training/support offer for early years primary and secondary settings wishing to adopt whole school/setting approaches to nurture/relationship-based interventions. Work collaboratively in the Steering Group (e.g. EPS, EOI, UoG, Virtual School and ATS) to develop a training package on 'whole school approaches to nurture/relational-based interventions', that includes an on-going supervision/implementation support, not just one off 'training days', in order to develop appropriate school-based provision and promote inclusion and evidence-based practice. Ensure that training offer is seen within the 'wider context of the school system inclusion journey' e.g. via effective liaison/communication with other Local Authority Teams who are already looking at whole school inclusion for children with SEMH, and ensuring that training offer fits with wider LA priorities.
- Ensure training promotes awareness that in some cases children and young people may need additional individual support and/or interventions before being 'ready' for a group or relational intervention such as a Nurture Group e.g. include this in training for settings, ensure that this message is promoted by ATS and EPS, by including an awareness of trauma informed approaches.

If you would like to be involved with the Steering Group or Practitioner Groups, or have feedback regarding this report, please email nurture@gloucestershire.gov.uk

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**Appendix**

Table 1. The different variations of Nurture Groups

| Type 1 | The Classic Boxall NG | Staffing by two appropriate members of staff, a group of 8 to 12 children, children are all on roll in the same mainstream school where the NG is located, children usually return to their mainstream class within two to four terms. |
|--------|------------------------|------|
| Type 2 | New Variant NGs | Adheres to same theoretical principles, but some organisational elements are altered. Groups do not tend to run to the same routines. The key principles apply whereby it comprises of a small group managed by two members of staff and there is an emphasis on development and following the holistic NG Curriculum. |
| Type 3 | Groups informed by NG principles | Claim some similarities in concept and approach, however have a different organisation and structure. The group may take place at lunchtime or may have different students joining at different times. The group focuses on social and emotional skills rather than having any academic element |
| Type 4 | Non-NGs | These groups might report to be a NG but significantly depart from the core principles and theoretical underpinnings of the NG philosophy. They do not necessarily promote the developmental approach that is fundamental to the NG concept or use relevant measures to chart progress. They may focus on 'controlling' and managing behaviour, rather than focus on the unmet emotional needs communicated by behaviour. They may be seen as a supportive intervention, but are not technically a 'Nurture Group'. |

(Adapted from Cooper & Whitebread, 2007)