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Guidance

Experts at Hand: what those leading and working in mainstream settings need to know

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Applies to England

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We're re-shaping the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system to help make all mainstream education settings – where most children learn – truly inclusive. We're investing to train teachers, educators and assistants and bring more

experts such as, speech and language therapists into mainstream nurseries, schools and colleges.

This guide is to support those working in or leading a mainstream setting, plus childminders, to understand the Experts at Hand offer.

What we mean by mainstream settings

Mainstream settings are:

- mainstream state-funded schools - for example, not specialist and alternative provision or private schools
- early years education - all nurseries, including nurseries specialising in SEND provision, and childminders
- all mainstream, post-16 providers such as school sixth forms, further education (FE) colleges and organisations commissioned by local authorities or funded by the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver 16 to 19 education

We are also asking local areas to consider how they reach young children who are not in early education, including through Best Start Family Hubs and health visitors.

What is Experts at Hand

Experts at Hand is a new service, being launched from September 2026, to help identify children's needs earlier and make sure they're receiving the best possible support in their everyday education environments.

Experts at Hand works by bringing health and education experts like educational psychologists, specialist teachers, and speech and language therapists directly into mainstream settings, working closely with early years educators, teachers and staff. Children will not need a diagnosis to access support – it is based on the child's need.

Experts at Hand is a core pillar of SEND reform, but it does not replace existing statutory duties, including mainstream settings' responsibilities under the SEND code of practice or education, health and care plan (EHCP) processes. Instead, it is

intended to enhance and build on what settings already do.

The Experts at Hand offer is designed to:

- strengthen the ability of mainstream settings to identify and meet need earlier
- support children, without the need to rely on intensive individual referrals
- be delivered in and alongside mainstream settings, bringing health and education expertise closer to where children and young people are
- support settings to deliver high-quality inclusive practice consistently
- focus primarily on group, class or whole-setting approaches

Settings will be able to get advice and support from professionals including:

- speech and language therapists
- occupational therapists
- educational psychologists
- specialist teachers – for example in speech, language and communication or sensory needs – who will provide expertise from alternative provision and specialist settings, such as delivering support and advice to mainstream settings, and provide short-term placements when required

The type of support provided includes:

- observing children in their learning environment to assess their needs
- training and coaching staff to be better able to identify needs, develop appropriate support and embed inclusive practice in everyday teaching and learning
- providing access to advice to help teachers deliver effective strategies to support children with additional needs
- working with parents to co-produce inclusive support, including developing resources, workshops, and approaches that help parents understand their child's needs and ensure their voices shape practice and provision
- providing support in small groups or across the whole class, with one-to-one help provided occasionally where it's most needed

This type of effective, early support prevents needs from escalating wherever possible and builds the skills and confidence of staff.

What that means for you and your staff

Staff should expect specialists working alongside them in the setting meaning:

- more opportunities for coaching, modelling and shared problem-solving
- practical strategies that can be embedded into everyday setting and classroom practice
- increased confidence in identifying and responding to needs early
- less reliance on waiting for external assessments
- access to specialist advice earlier to support graduated response
- help to strength relationships with health services and parent carers

Training and coaching delivered through Experts at Hand is intended to support staff to better meet a range of needs by building their confidence and skills in specific approaches and interventions for SEND. It is not about instructing educators or teachers in pedagogy.

How it is being delivered

DfE has published guidance for local authorities and integrated care boards (ICBs), to develop and deliver their local Experts at Hand offer from September 2026 to 2027 (known as year 1). This sets out how they must work together with local partners, including setting leaders and parent-carer groups.

Local areas, including local authorities and health services, are working together to improve support for children and young people with SEND. They are creating local plans, which explain:

- what support is already available
- what will be improved first
- how new help will start to be offered

National guidance has been developed to support local areas in putting these plans into action and developing them over time. As new services are introduced, the local Experts at Hand offer will be regularly reviewed and improved, so it:

- works well for settings and families
- meets local needs
- reflects what has been learned along the way

Delivery will follow a phased approach, with each area focusing first on the services most needed locally and then building on this over time. The offer will continue to be refined and strengthened to improve local SEND services.

Local authorities and ICBs are expected to ensure that:

- support is effectively targeted to settings who need it most, rather than being concentrated among the most proactive settings
- smaller settings, early years (including private, voluntary and independent providers, and childminders) and further education providers will also benefit
- clear governance and accountability arrangements are in place

Experts at Hand sits alongside other reforms, including the Inclusive Mainstream Fund. This provides settings with additional resource to embed inclusive whole-setting practice and targeted interventions, and translate expert advice into day-to-day teaching and support

As our SEND reform programme develops further, we will publish more guidance and information on how to make mainstream settings as inclusive as possible.

What Experts at Hand year 1 will look like

In year 1, support will be focused on groups and classrooms to have the greatest impact and support more children.

That means support will be:

- delivered alongside mainstream setting staff
- focused on things that help many children at once, such as:
 - language development
 - attention and understanding – including listening and following instructions
 - emotional regulation

- sensory processing
- fine motor skills – for example, handwriting readiness

Local areas must publish their Experts at Hand offer in a clear menu of support setting out:

- a training offer for mainstream setting staff involving coaching and modelling to build baseline understanding, which could include drop-in support, delivered by health or specialist education experts
- a clear and accessible route for staff to seek bespoke advice and guidance from experts
- practitioner-supported audits of communication or sensory environments within settings, undertaken in collaboration with setting staff and leaders
- a support offer to develop and strengthen relationships between settings and parent carers

This is intended to make support easier to navigate and ensure consistency across mainstream settings.

To find out more, you can read:

- [Developing and delivering the Experts at Hand offer in year 1](#)
- [Experts at Hand and local authority SEND transformation fund](#)
- [Every child achieving and thriving in schools white paper](#)
- [further information and fact sheets](#)

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