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Guidance

Experts at Hand: what parents of children and young people with special educational needs 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.

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 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.

Mainstream settings will be able to get advice and support from professionals including assistants such as:

- 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 available to mainstream settings includes:

- observing children in their learning environment and working alongside educators to identify children's needs and develop strategies and approaches that will better meet them
- providing support in small groups or across the whole class, with one-to-one help provided occasionally where it's most needed
- 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

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

This is the start of the programme and we will work with education and healthcare staff alongside local authorities to learn and improve the service as it develops.

If your child already has support

Experts at Hand is about strengthening support in mainstream settings and is in addition to existing statutory support. This must be provided on top of any existing support that children currently receive and should never be used to replace the support provided through an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

Experts at Hand will also draw on the expertise of special schools and alternative

provision to make the support provided in mainstream education is as strong as possible.

The Experts at Hand offer is in addition to other health services who may already be supporting children and young people with SEND locally.

How Experts at Hand will be delivered

We're backing Experts at Hand with £1.8 billion of investment over the next 3 years, and have published [detailed guidance on how it should be delivered](#). Local areas, including local authorities and health services, are creating local plans which explain what support is already available, what will be improved first, and 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 families
- meets local needs
- reflects what has been learned along the way

Local areas will begin to introduce their Experts at Hand offer from September 2026. 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.

Your local integrated care board (ICB) (responsible for your local health care services) and your local authority are responsible for the design of Experts at Hand in your area. Local parent carer forums have a vital role in shaping the Experts at Hand offer, ensuring lived experience and parent voices are at the centre of what is offered. Our guidance to local authorities and ICBs makes it clear how they must work with local partners when developing the local service.

When this will happen

From September 2026, we expect areas to begin delivery of their Experts at Hand offer for the first year.

What Experts at Hand will look like in the first year

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

That means support will be:

- delivered alongside mainstream setting staff
- focused on areas of need that help many children, such as:
 - talking and understanding words – how your child learns to speak and communicate their needs and ideas
 - listening, attention, and following instructions – how well your child can focus, understand what's said, and carry out simple directions
 - managing emotions – how your child copes with feelings like frustration, excitement, or upset
 - how your child responds to their senses – how they react to sounds, touch, movement, and other sensations around them
 - small hand movements – skills like holding a pencil, drawing, or getting ready for writing

DfE will issue updated guidance informed by learning from the first year of delivery and evidence of what has worked in practice to help shape the service moving forward.

The difference you will see

You are a vital part of this. Experts at Hand encourages settings to:

- share advice and strategies you can use at home

- offer workshops or resources to help you understand your child's development

Instead of waiting for diagnosis or to meet a threshold for support, your child can benefit from:

- earlier identification of needs by staff in settings
- support built into everyday life in mainstream schools, colleges and nurseries
- adjustments and strategies put in place quickly

Support is focused where children are, so you may notice:

- changes in setting approach or routines
- small group activities targeting language, communication or regulation
- education staff explaining how they are adapting learning to meet your child's needs

Where changes affect your child directly, settings should involve you and keep you informed about how support is being delivered and adapted.

Further information

To find out more, you can read:

- [SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First](#)
- [Developing and delivering the Experts at Hand Offer in Year 1: guidance](#)
- [Experts at Hand and local authority SEND transformation fund](#)
- [Every child achieving and thriving in schools white paper](#)
- [further information and fact sheets](#)
- [National Network of Parent Carer Forums](#)

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