



Briefing Note

Supporting SEND Reform: Developing the Experts at Hand Offer

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What The Experts At Hand Offer Is

Experts at Hand is a new national programme designed to ensure that mainstream schools can access timely, specialist advice to identify needs earlier and support children more effectively.

It is a core part of the SEND and AP Improvement Plan and is being rolled out from 2026 - 2027.

The offer aims to ensure:

- Early identification of SEND
- Evidence-based support delivered *in mainstream settings*
- Rapid access to specialist expertise (education, health, care)
- Stronger multi-agency collaboration
- A more confident, capable workforce

This is not a new service to refer into, it is a local, integrated support model that every area must design and deliver.

What local areas must do (Year 1 expectations)

Local authorities and Integrated Care Boards must:

- Develop a clear, locally tailored Experts at Hand offer
- Ensure schools can access:
 - Specialist coaching
 - Consultation
 - Observation and modelling
 - Advice on reasonable adjustments
 - Support for early intervention
- Build a multi-agency workforce around the offer
- Provide consistent pathways for mainstream settings
- Use the transformation fund to build capacity and capability
- Publish clear information for:
 - Parents
 - Schools

- Professionals

What this means for DSLs

Although the offer is SEND focused, DSLs have a critical role because unmet need, behaviour, attendance and safeguarding are interconnected.

Earlier identification = earlier safeguarding intervention

Experts at Hand is designed to reduce:

- Escalation to crisis
- Behaviour-related safeguarding concerns
- Persistent absence
- Exclusions
- Misinterpreted behaviour linked to unmet need

DSLs must ensure safeguarding and SEND systems are aligned.

DSLs will have faster access to specialist advice

This includes:

- Speech and language
- Autism and neurodevelopment
- SEMH
- Occupational therapy
- Educational psychology
- Health and social care practitioners

This should strengthen decision-making around:

- Thresholds
- Early Help
- Reasonable adjustments
- Behaviour plans
- Safety planning

DSLs must influence how the school uses the offer

DSLs should work with SENCOs to:

- Prioritise children where vulnerability and unmet need overlap
- Ensure relational and safeguarding factors are considered
- Use specialist advice to reduce risk and increase protective factors
- Strengthen multi-agency chronologies

DSLs must ensure staff understand the new expectations

Staff need to know:

- What Experts at Hand is
- How to access it
- How to use specialist advice in practice
- How early identification links to safeguarding

Key changes for mainstream schools

Schools will be expected to:

- Use the Experts at Hand offer before escalating to statutory assessment
- Evidence early intervention and reasonable adjustments
- Work more closely with health and care professionals
- Embed specialist advice into daily practice
- Strengthen inclusive classroom strategies
- Improve communication with parents

This aligns with the wider shift towards inclusive, relational, early-help-driven practice.

Implications For Safeguarding Practice

Behaviour and unmet need

Experts at Hand should reduce behaviour-related safeguarding referrals by addressing underlying need earlier.

Attendance

Specialist advice should support schools to understand and respond to emotionally based school avoidance and SEND related absence.

Child-on-child harm

Better identification of neurodevelopmental and SEMH needs should reduce risk and improve safety planning.

Multi-agency working

DSLs will have clearer pathways and more consistent access to specialist input.

Recording and analysis

DSLs should ensure:

- Chronologies reflect unmet need
- Patterns of concern are analysed through a SEND lens
- Early intervention is evidenced

Practical actions for DSLs (immediately implementable)

- Meet with SENCO to map how the school will use the Experts at Hand offer.
- Identify pupils where safeguarding and unmet need overlap.
- Update safeguarding training to include early identification and SEND safeguarding links.
- Strengthen joint DSL / SENCO oversight of:
 - Behaviour
 - Attendance
 - Exclusions
 - Pastoral support
- Ensure staff understand how to access specialist advice.
- Review whether current systems allow for:
 - Early identification
 - Evidence-based intervention
 - Multi-agency collaboration

Key Message For DSLs

Experts at Hand is a major opportunity to reduce risk by identifying need earlier, strengthening inclusion, and ensuring children get the right support at the right time. DSLs must work hand-in-hand with SENCOs to embed this into safeguarding culture and practice.

For more information please see the guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-send-reform-developing-the-experts-at-hand-offer>