

Parents hail specialist school as first sixth formers leave

‘My daughter has thrived and we are so disappointed her time here is at an end’

■ Chatten opened in 2021 to support young people with autism and complex needs, and families have nothing but praise

THE first cohort of sixth formers is preparing to leave a specialist school in Witham.

Students are set to leave Chatten Free School, which opened in 2021 and supports young people with autism and complex needs who are unable to access other SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) settings.

Many of the students had previously been out of education or faced the prospect of entering care due to a lack of suitable provision.

Among the three who are preparing to move on is Aidan Woodhouse from Great Tey.

Aidan's father, Lee, said: "We chose Chatten because we could see the staff were dedicated, the class sizes were small, and there was provision for one-to-one learning."

"There was a calm, quiet and relaxed atmosphere with sensory rooms."

"They also take students out into the community, shopping and bowling."

"This is how Aidan's previous school was – we were very pleased Chatten was just as good or, perhaps, better."

Mr Woodhouse said the family would have withdrawn Aidan from education at 16 if he had not been offered a place at Chatten, as other settings were not suitable.

He said: "We were prepared to accept any consequences from the local authorities for pulling our son out of the education system if not accepted at Chatten."



‘EXCELLENT’ - Chatten Free School in Witham. Right sixth form student Aidan Woodhouse has thrived at the school

"You have to do right by your child."

"Chatten has taken it to another level; he has progressed massively."

"He will never play a fully

active part in the community, but his tolerance of it has increased."

"Aidan is calm and happy."

Aidan, who is non-verbal and communicates through

an iPad, will now move on to a day care facility.

Another student, Imogen Appleford, has travelled from Suffolk each day since 2022.

Her father, Christian, said: "Imogen had attended specialist provisions in Suffolk, but at the end of Year 11, there was no Suffolk educational provision that could meet her needs for post-16 education."

"We have nothing but praise for the school, staff and support teams."

"Imogen has thrived and we are so disappointed her time now is coming to an end as she enters the minefield of adult services."

"Imogen has progressed and developed important life skills that will assist us as we

work with her throughout life."

"We could not praise the school highly enough."

Luke O'Brien, from Copford, joined the school in 2021.

His father, Sean, said: "When we first looked at Chatten, we were impressed by the facilities."

"The resources and activities available are excellent."

"Our gut feeling was good."

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Dad Sean O'Brien

"I can't speak highly enough of the staff; nothing is too much trouble."

Nicola Knights, careers and community lead at Chatten, said the students had made "fantastic progress".

She said: "Chatten Free School is a unique and specialist setting."

"Staff support and nurture their learners while also providing a progressive, individualised programme to suit each pupil's development."

"Many of our learners have been out of education for extended periods of time as there was nowhere that was suitable for their needs."

"I'm glad Chatten is able to provide the education these young people and their parents deserve."

About Chatten Free School

Chatten Free School has 75 places with children on a Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan given places at the school by Essex County Council. Every pupil will have a tailored daily experience but there are some consistent elements which will go across all elements of the school. Pupils come into school at 9am

and the school day ends at 2.30pm. There are no traditional play or lunch breaks. Pupils access breaks on an individual basis in a way which is appropriate to them. For example, some pupils may receive a short break of five minutes every 20 minutes while some may need a more formal break time.

Lunch is done on a similar basis with pupils often making their own lunch or practising relevant skills which are pertinent to those times. Ofsted rated the school Outstanding for the quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management.