

# Adventure holiday helping to break down barriers for pupils

A HIGHLY specialist school is ensuring young people enjoy the same experiences as their peers by embarking on a residential trip.

Chatten Free School opened in Witham in 2021 to provide a highly specialist day school for children who cannot access education in any other SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) settings.

All students have an autism diagnosis and associated complex needs - and many were previously out of the education system or facing no alternative but to live in care.

As the school year came to an end, a group of 14 students in Years 10 to 13 spent four nights at Essex Outdoors in Danbury.

During the trip, students experienced the zip line and climbing wall, as well as cooking s'mores on a campfire and making their own dinner.

The trip is just one of the areas where the school is keen to ensure barriers are removed and families are supported to ensure their children can experience - and cope with - society.

Ashleigh Cambridge, deputy head of school, said: "This annual trip gives our young people experiences they would simply not have if they went to any other school. Their parents are not always able to do these things with them, either, as their behaviour can be quite challenging.

"We have a group of 25 adults go on the trip and it gives us a week to work on things the whole time, like getting them dry overnight, gaining independence around getting their own food, coping with different environments and being with other



A group of 14 students in Year 10 to 13 at Chatten Free School spent four nights at Essex Outdoors in Danbury



children. It is really nice for our staff to get to know other children and build those relationships.

"We are really flexible. If someone wants to come for just one day, that is fine.

"If they want to come along and eat with the other children, but not take part in activities, that is also okay. We had more children than ever before go this year, which shows

how much our families trust us.

"It says a lot about us as a school and the relationships we have built with our families.

"People do not know about our children because they are not out in society, they are kept in schools or other provisions.

"It is important people know our children exist; they are cheeky and full of joy, and they deserve to have

the same experiences as any other child."

Essex Outdoors has worked with Chatten Free School for the last couple of years to ensure the trip is accessible for students with additional needs.

Mrs Cambridge said: "They have been amazing; so accommodating. The trip is amazing. It's beautiful.

"Everyone who goes loves it. We

see the joy in children's faces; it is just lovely."

Sharon Carr, senior instructor at Essex Outdoors Danbury, said: "At Essex Outdoors, we're incredibly proud of our inclusivity, so it was great to see the children from Chatten Free School enjoying our activities, learning new skills and achieving new heights. So, a big 'well done' to all the young people."

## Music festival helps autistic students to build up tolerance

A MUSIC festival at Chatten Free School in Witham is helping young people with autism build up tolerance to society.

As part of its work to support young people to thrive in the world around them, the school has held an end-of-year festival, Chattenbury.

Exposing students to musical instruments, decorations, bubbles, inflatables, an ice cream van and the general noise and atmosphere of a big event is helping to build up tolerance, so that their families can enjoy days out together which they

may have previously avoided.

Ashleigh Cambridge, deputy head of school, said: "This is about celebrating the fantastic year we have had and the progress that has been made.

"A lot of our children would not have been able to tolerate an event like this at the start of the year.

"But, bringing everyone together at the same time, enjoying the same thing, is a great morale boost.

"We hope this will encourage our families to consider going to family events like this in the future,



Pupils and staff at Chatten Free School enjoyed an end-of-year festival called Chattenbury

knowing their child could tolerate it.

"A lot of our children do not go out other than to come to school; that is their reality. They have the right to go out with their families, and this helps to desensitise them.

It is showing them what life looks like outside of these walls and preparing them for life beyond us.

"We are showing that with patience, flexibility and support, these things are not off the table.

"We want our children to live a purposeful life without us. It's a celebration with our children, whom we adore.

"It's ensuring everyone is leaving us for the summer on a high."