

# Special school in Witham expanding its extra-curricular programme for pupils

Sessions in music, art, dance and more helping youngsters develop social skills and interact



**ART THERAPY** - Daisy enjoying her weekly sessions at Chatten Free School

Image: Chatten Free School

A SPECIAL school in Witham is expanding its extra-curricular programme with sessions in music, art, dance and more.

Chatten Free School is a specialist day school for children diagnosed with autism who cannot access other SEND settings.

Many of its pupils were previously out of education or facing placement in care.

The school opened in 2021 and aims to provide as many experiences as possible to help its students prepare for adulthood.

Bobby Roache, assistant headteacher, said: "Our extra-curricular calendar has grown over time.

"When we think back to our first year, it would have been really hard for our children to access extra-curricular activities.

By ANNE SUSLAK

anne.suslak@newsquest.co.uk

It would not have happened.

"But, now, some of that same cohort of children are accessing these activities.

"We are even more open-minded now about what our children can do."

Each year, students have the chance to go on a residential trip, attend their own music festival, complete work experience and celebrate with a leavers' day in the summer.

Now the Royal Academy of Dance delivers its Step into Dance programme at the school for secondary-aged pupils, using sensory-based and group activities.

Millie Backhouse, assistant headteacher, said: "For some of our children, being able to tolerate someone new in the room with them is a challenge, and so to see them taking part and enjoying dance is wonderful.

"They may start with one-to-one sessions, but gradually they build up to work with two or three others and then take part as a group.

"It has become a real passion for some of our children."

The dance sessions are helping children develop social skills, follow instructions, and interact with others - abilities which could support them in youth clubs or adult social care in the future.

Suffolk Music Therapy Service also visits the school weekly.

Vic Beattie, assistant headteacher, said: "Some of our children are extremely sensory-based and need the input music therapy offers them.

"It works really well in getting those children to tune in and gets their attention.

"One of our children has discovered he loves music and singing so much that his parents have bought him musical instruments to widen his interests at home.

"It is giving them something to be passionate about."

Weekly art therapy sessions are also proving valuable.

Deputy head of school Ashleigh Cambridge said: "These are all new experiences for our children that they might not have had the opportunity to try before.

"While these are extra-curricular activities, when we find a child has a particular passion, we can use that to link back to the curriculum."

For nine-year-old Daisy from Chelmsford, art has become an emotional outlet.

Her mother, Erin Purnell, said: "Daisy has always loved art and gets a lot of joy from creating pieces of work.

"It regulates Daisy and keeps her happy."

Daisy joined Chatten Free School in 2023 after mainstream education was unable to meet her needs.

Erin said: "Daisy does art every day at home, so I'm very grateful that she's had the opportunity to have a professional art therapist work with her at school."

## MP visits school for funding talks

WITHAM MP Priti Patel visited a school to see first-hand the work being done to support pupils' learning and development.

Ms Patel met Honywood School headteacher Mr Saunders and learnt about the school's recent successes.

During the visit, they discussed educational standards and preparations for GCSE exams.

They also discussed funding challenges, the school rebuilding programme, and remedial works carried out in 2023 due to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete

(RAAC).

Ms Patel said: "Schools across the Witham constituency are working hard to support pupils, which is why I was pleased to visit Honywood School and meet again with their fantastic headteacher Mr Saunders to see this work in action.

"I always welcome the proactive measures taken at Honywood School and Mr Saunders to support students, building their confidence alongside a strong focus on academic achievement and personal development."



**VISIT** - MP Priti Patel with headteacher Mr Saunders at Honywood School