Essex County Council
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

How to apply for college:

Information for families and young people with SEND



After Year 11, many young people choose to continue their education at college. Applying for college can feel like a big step, but planning early can help young people and families make informed choices about the future.

Preparing for Adulthood: SEND Careers Advice Service
SEND Strategy and Innovation

Version 1 - September 2026



Step 1: Explore different colleges

Every college is different. Visit websites, attend open events and find out about:

- courses and qualifications available
- support for young people with SEND
- travel arrangements
- opportunities for employment and independence
- facilities, resources and student wellbeing support

Information on Essex colleges can be found in Section 3 of the Parents and Carers guide to post-16 opportunities.

Many colleges start advertising open days and information events from June or July, with most events taking place from September onwards. Families are encouraged to look out for events before the start of Year 11 and book places early where required.

Some colleges operate across more than one campus or site, with different courses, facilities and support arrangements available at each location so check which campus offers the course that interests your young person.

Families can find details of upcoming open events on the Preparing for Adulthood Events Calendar:

https://essexcc.pagetiger.com/calendar2526/1

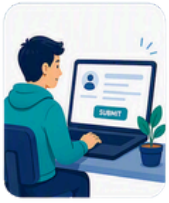


Step 2: Think about the right course

When choosing a course, consider your young person's:

- strengths and interests
- future goals
- support needs
- learning style

The right course for one young person may not be right for another. Some young people may be ready for a vocational or academic qualification, while others may benefit from programmes that help develop independence, confidence, employability or life skills. Some colleges also offer supported internships for young people with an EHCP who want to develop their skills in a real workplace with additional support.



Step 3: Apply to college

1) Apply as early as possible

Most colleges have an online application process and many open applications during the Autumn Term of Year 11, although dates vary between providers.

It is strongly recommended that young people apply during the Autumn Term of Year 11 wherever possible. Applying early gives young people more choice and more time to plan for the move to college. Colleges have legal duties to identify and support students with SEND and to make reasonable adjustments where required, so this also gives colleges more time to understand support needs, plan appropriate support and reasonable adjustments, and arrange a smooth transition.

2) Understand application deadlines

Some colleges have application deadlines. For example, Colchester Institute has an initial application deadline of 31 January.

Applications can often still be made after a deadline, but late applications may not be prioritised. Some courses fill quickly and applications may close once all places have been allocated. Families should check application deadlines directly with each college.

3) If a young person has an EHCP

If a young person has an EHCP and would like to attend a college or training provider, **families should tell their SEND Operations Team about their preferred option(s).** This allows consultations to be sent and helps determine whether the provider can meet the young person's needs.

Be sure to tell the college about any SEND support your young person receives and whether they have an EHCP. You may need:

- personal details
- school information
- details of an EHCP (if applicable)
- information about support needs

4) Applying to more than one college

If your young person is undecided or would like to keep their options open, **they can apply to more than one college or provider.**

Colleges expect young people to make multiple applications while they decide which option is right for them. If your young person later decides not to take up a place, they can withdraw their application. This will not affect future applications.



Step 4: Attend an interview or assessment

Many colleges invite applicants to attend an interview, assessment or informal meeting after they have applied. This is not something to worry about. It allows the college to:

- discuss the young persons course choice
- talk about support needs
- review any EHCP information (if applicable)
- assess maths and English skills
- explain about college life
- answer any questions the young person or family may have.

This is also a good opportunity for families to share information about what helps their young person learn best, and any concerns they may have to make a successful transition to college.

Attending any interview, assessment or introductory meeting offered by a college is an important step in securing a place. **If a young person does not attend, the college may be unable to complete the admissions process or update their application status on the college system**.

As colleges typically communicate directly with applicants by email, **encourage your young person to check their email account regularly and take action on any requests or deadlines they receive.**



Step 5: Receive an offer

After your young person's interview or assessment, the college will contact them with the outcome of their application. This is usually called an **offer.**

They may receive:

- an **unconditional offer** - the college is offering a place on the course and there are no further requirements that need to be met before starting
- a **conditional offer** - the place is offered subject to certain conditions being met, e.g., achieving certain GCSE grades or successfully completing their current course
- an **offer subject to further discussion or assessment** - sometimes a college may need more information about support needs or suitability of the course before confirming a place

If you are unsure about any part of the offer, contact the college and ask them to explain what it means and whether there is anything you need to do next.

Once an offer is received, it is important to respond to any requests from the college by the deadlines given. This will help ensure the young person's place and support arrangements can be confirmed in time for the start of term.



Step 6: Attend transition visits and activities

Many colleges offer transition visits or taster sessions for students with SEND before they start their course. These can help them become familiar with the college environment, meet staff and begin to build confidence about the move from school.

Young people may:

- visit the campus and key facilities
- meet tutors and support staff
- discuss support arrangements and reasonable adjustments
- practise travelling to and from college
- become familiar with routines, timetables and expectations
- meet other students who will be attending their course

Taking part in transition activities can help reduce anxiety, answer questions and ensure that support is in place before the start of term.

Some young people may benefit from additional visits before starting college. Families can contact the college Learning Support Team to discuss support needs, reasonable adjustments and any additional transition arrangements. Support arrangements can continue to be reviewed after a young person starts college if needs change. Young people and families should speak to college staff if additional support or adjustments may be helpful.

If your young person is planning to travel independently, this is also a good time to explore Travel Training. Travel Training can help develop the skills and confidence needed to travel safely and independently to and from college.

If your young person has not yet secured a place at college, it is important to remember that **opportunities may still be available throughout the summer**. Many colleges hold Open Events where young people can learn about alternative courses and apply for places that have become available. College staff can provide guidance on suitable options and support young people to find a course that meets their needs and aspirations.

Information on Travel Training can be found in Section 2 of the Parents and Carers guide to post-16 opportunities.



Step 7: Enrol

Enrolment usually takes place after GCSE results are released in August and is the final step before starting college.

Many colleges will give your young person a specific time and date to enrol. This may be via letter, email or text message. **It is important to keep this date free and avoid booking holidays or other commitments that may prevent them from attending.**

Enrolment is when students:

- formally confirm their place on a course
- provide any evidence of qualifications or GCSE results (if applicable)
- complete consent forms
- receive information on induction activities, timetabling and start date
- complete any remaining paperwork required by the college

To help secure their place at college, young people should collect their GCSE results promptly and follow any instructions provided by the college for submitting their results.



Step 8: Attend induction

Most colleges hold an induction programme before or at the start of term. This may take place over one or more days and helps young people settle into college life, meet other students, and understand what to expect from their course. It is important to be aware that **induction may take place before the official start of term, so avoid arranging holidays during this time where possible** to ensure your young person can fully participate.

During induction, young people may:

- receive their timetable and course information (if not provided at enrolment)
- meet tutors and support staff
- learn about college facilities and support services
- set up college accounts and access online systems
- find out about clubs, activities and opportunities available

For young people with SEND, this is also a good opportunity to check that support arrangements are in place and to discuss any questions or concerns before lessons begin.



Key questions to ask colleges

Course

- Does this course match my young person's interests and goals?
- What qualifications will they gain?
- What happens after the course?

SEND Support

- How do you support learners with SEND?
- What support is available in lessons?
- How do you support students with an EHCP?

Independence

- How do you help students develop independence?
- Are there opportunities to learn life skills?
- How do you prepare young people for adult life?

Employment

- Are there work experience opportunities?
- Do you have links with employers?
- How do you support young people into employment?

Wellbeing

- What pastoral support is available?
- How do students access wellbeing support?
- How do you help students settle into college?

Travel

- How will my young person get to college?
- Is travel training available?
- What support is available for students who find travelling difficult?

College application checklist

Before applying

□ Researched different colleges
□ Attended an open event
□ Considered which site/campus is most suitable
□ Looked at course information
□ Considered support needs
□ Discussed options with school
□ Reviewed EHCP outcomes and aspirations

During the application process

□ Submitted application(s)
□ Shared information about SEND support needs (if applicable)
□ Advised SEND Operations of preferred college options (if young person has an EHCP)
□ Attended interview or assessment (if required)
□ Prepared questions for the college

Travel and transition

□ Attended transition visits or taster sessions
□ Met Learning Support staff
□ Discussed support arrangements and reasonable adjustments
□ Planned travel to and from college
□ Explored Travel Training (if appropriate)
□ Practised travelling to and from college

Before starting college

□ Responded to offer
□ Arranged travel
□ Attended transition events
□ Completed enrolment
□ Confirmed start date
□ Received timetable and induction information
□ Know who to contact for support

Key messages

Apply early. Most colleges open applications during the Autumn Term of Year 11.

Young people can apply to more than one college. Applying early, attending open events and exploring different options can help ensure they have the widest range of opportunities available.

Keep checking emails and messages. Colleges often communicate directly with young people about interviews, offers, enrolment and next steps. Missing an email could mean missing an important deadline.

Attend all interviews, assessments and introductory meetings. These are often an important part of securing a place and discussing support requirements.

Collect GCSE results promptly. Many colleges require evidence of qualifications during enrolment and may ask for results to be uploaded or presented.

Avoid booking holidays during August and early September where possible. Enrolment appointments, transition activities and induction programmes often take place before the official start of term and are important for a successful start at college.

Don't panic if your young person doesn't yet have a place. Alternative courses may become available throughout the summer, and colleges often hold open events, enrolment sessions or advice appointments to help young people find suitable options.

Tell the college about any support needs early. Sharing information about SEND needs helps colleges plan reasonable adjustments and support arrangements.

Start planning travel early. Practising routes and exploring Travel Training before term starts can help build confidence and independence.

Remember - there is no single right pathway. The best choice is the one that helps your young person achieve their goals, build confidence and prepare for adult life.

This document has been produced by the ECC Preparing for Adulthood: SEND Careers Service.



sendcareers@essex.gov.uk