Essex County Council
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

How to apply for Sixth Form:

Information for families and young people with SEND



This guide explains the typical sixth form application process and highlights key information for young people with SEND and their families as they prepare for life beyond Year 11.

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

Version 1 - September 2026



Step 1: Explore different sixth forms

Applying to sixth form can feel like a significant step, but planning early helps young people and families make informed decisions, explore a range of options and identify the pathway that best supports their aspirations and Preparing for Adulthood outcomes.

Choosing a sixth form can be an excellent route towards university, higher apprenticeships, skilled employment and adulthood but the decision-making process, entry requirements and student experience can be quite different from college.

Sixth forms are often based within schools and typically focus on A Levels, T Levels and Level 3 qualifications and entry is usually based on GCSE grades, with specific subject requirements for many courses.

Choosing a sixth form is about more than finding somewhere that offers the right subjects. It is an opportunity to explore environments, teaching styles, support arrangements and progression routes to ensure the setting is the right fit for your young person.

Starting research early, ideally during Year 10 or at the beginning of Year 11, gives families time to compare different options and make informed decisions.

Attend Open Events
Most sixth forms hold open events, taster days, subject information sessions and information evenings to meet teachers and support staff, learn about subjects, explore facilities and get a feel for the culture and environment. This also offers an opportunity to ask questions about SEND support. **Many sixth forms require booking in advance to attend open events.**

Families can find details of upcoming open events on the Preparing for Adulthood Events Calendar or on individual sixth forms websites:

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

Developing travel independence
Travelling independently can be an important part of preparing for adulthood. Consider what support your young person may need to travel safely and confidently and that they can realistically manage the journey to sixth form each day.

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



Step 1: Explore different sixth forms (cont.)

Consider the Learning Environment
Many sixth forms are based within a secondary school environment, have smaller class sizes and place a strong emphasis on academic study whilst expecting students to complete substantial independent study. Families should consider whether the environment will help their young person develop confidence, independence and success.

Information on the difference between sixth form and college can be found in Section 3 of the Parents and Carers guide to post-16 opportunities.

Find out about SEND Support
Sixth forms have legal duties to identify and support young people with SEND, although the type and level of support available will vary between providers. Useful questions for families to ask may include:

- How is SEND support organised?
- Who is the SENCO or Learning Support Lead?
- What support is available in lessons?
- How are reasonable adjustments managed?
- What support is available during exams?
- How are EHCP outcomes supported?
- How are transition arrangements managed and what support is available before they start?
- What happens if additional support is needed during the year?

Families should feel confident discussing support needs openly at an early stage.

Things to discuss:

- Does the sixth form accept external applicants?
- What qualifications are available?
- What class sizes are typical?
- How much independent study is expected outside of the classroom?
- How do you help students develop independent learning skills?
- How do you support students with SEND (with or without an EHCP)?
- How do you share information with the current school?
- How are students supported during the first few weeks of term?
- How do young people access wellbeing and pastoral care?
- How will this sixth form help my young person achieve their future goals?



Step 2: Choose the right subjects

Explore subjects carefully
Different sixth forms may offer different combinations of qualifications including:

- A Levels
- T Levels
- Vocational qualifications

T Levels combine classroom learning with a substantial industry placement but may not be offered by all sixth forms.

When looking at subjects, consider the young person's strengths and interests, future career plans, whether a subject is essential for a future career as well as potential university or apprenticeship entry requirements.

Some career pathways require specific A Level subjects, so it is important to research future options before making subject choices. For example:

- Medicine typically requires Biology and Chemistry, alongside a third subject such as Mathematics or Psychology.
- Engineering courses often require Mathematics and Physics, with a third subject such as Computer Science, Further Mathematics, Chemistry or Design Technology helping to strengthen an application.

Understand the entry requirements
Sixth forms often have specific academic entry requirements. This may include:

- a minimum number of GCSE passes
- required grades in English and Mathematics
- higher grades in subjects students wish to continue studying
- additional subject-specific entry criteria

Understanding these requirements early can help young people plan their GCSE studies and identify suitable alternatives if needed.



Things to discuss:

- Which subjects keep future options open?
- Are there subject combinations recommended for future careers?
- Does the young person need three or four subjects?
- Are there vocational alternatives?



Step 3: Apply Early

Many sixth forms begin accepting applications during the Autumn Term of Year 11 for the following year, and **many open shortly after their open event has taken place.**

Applying early allows:

- More opportunity to discuss support needs
- Time to consider different options
- Better transition planning
- More informed decision-making

Many sixth forms now use online application systems, allowing young people to apply, select subjects and track the progress of their application electronically. It is therefore important to complete this carefully and as early as possible.

When applying, young people may be asked to provide:

- personal and contact details
- current school information
- predicted GCSE grades
- subject choices
- information about future aspirations, e.g., university, apprenticeships or careers
- details of any SEND support they currently receive
- information about an EHCP (where applicable)

Online systems may also allow applicants to:

- upload supporting information or documents
- receive updates about their application
- book interviews or information meetings
- accept or decline offers
- complete enrolment forms at a later stage



Families and young people should therefore keep a record of:

- application usernames and passwords
- confirmation emails
- application reference numbers
- key deadlines and dates



Step 3: Apply Early (cont.)

Applying to more than one sixth form
Young people do not need to choose just one option straight away.

Applying to more than one sixth form can:

- keep options open
- provide more opportunities to compare courses and support available
- reduce anxiety if plans change
- allow time to consider offers before making a final decision

Making multiple applications is normal and expected. If a young person later decides not to take up a place, they can simply decline or withdraw their application.

If a young person has SEND or an EHCP
It is important to tell the sixth form about any support needs as part of the application process.

Providing information early helps the sixth form:

- understand the young person's strengths and needs
- plan appropriate support and reasonable adjustments
- arrange transition activities where needed
- ensure support is in place ready for September

Families should also ensure their SEND Operations Team is aware of any preferred sixth form options if the young person has an EHCP. For young people with an EHCP, the annual review process should normally consider post-16 aspirations and potential destinations from Year 9 onwards, with post-16 planning becoming increasingly important during Years 10 and 11.



Step 4: Attend an interview (or guidance meeting)

Most sixth forms invite young people to attend an informal interview, guidance meeting or discussion after they have submitted their application.

This is a normal part of the admissions process and provides an opportunity for the sixth form and the young person to explore whether the chosen subjects and pathway are the right fit. It also helps them to understand the young person's interests, aspirations and support needs, while giving students and families the chance to ask questions and learn more about life in the sixth form.

Where possible, families should encourage their young person to take an active role in the discussion as sixth form is often a step towards greater independence, and staff will want to hear directly from them about:

- what they enjoy
- what they are good at
- their future ambitions
- any worries or questions they may have

This is also an opportunity for families to discuss:

- any SEND support currently in place at the young person's current setting
- reasonable adjustments that help them learn effectively
- examination access arrangements, where relevant
- support required during transition into sixth form
- any concerns about independence, organisation, wellbeing or attendance
- outcomes and aspirations identified within an EHCP (if applicable)

Families are therefore encouraged to share information about what works well and any support that may help ensure a successful transition.

Top Tip:

Make a note of the answers you receive especially if your young person applies to more than one sixth form. Comparing responses can help you identify which environment, support arrangements and opportunities are likely to be the best fit for their needs and future aspirations.



Step 5: Receive an offer

Following the interview, guidance meeting or application review, the sixth form will contact your young person with the outcome of their application. This is usually referred to as an **offer**.

Conditional offer
Most sixth form offers are **conditional**, meaning a place is offered subject to the young person achieving the required GCSE results.

Conditions may include:

- achieving a minimum number of GCSE passes
- achieving specific grades in English and maths
- meeting the entry requirements for particular subjects
- meeting the overall sixth form entry criteria

Unconditional offer
An **unconditional offer** means that the place has been confirmed regardless of examination outcomes. **This is less common in school sixth forms** so families should carefully check what is required before assuming the place is guaranteed.

Checking the offer carefully
Once an offer has been received, families should take time to review:

- subject-specific entry requirements
- any conditions attached to the offer
- acceptance deadlines
- next steps in the admissions process
- information about transition events or induction activities

If anything is unclear, contact the sixth form and ask for clarification.

Applying to more than one sixth form
Many young people apply to multiple sixth forms and receive more than one offer. This can help keep options open while they decide which provider is the best fit and wait for GCSE results, so receiving an offer does not necessarily mean a final decision must be made immediately.

However, once GCSE results are known and a final decision has been made, young people will usually be expected to enrol at one provider and notify any other sixth forms that they no longer require their place.



Step 6: Transition and preparation

Once your young person has received an offer, it's time to start preparing for the move to sixth form.

Many sixth forms offer activities designed to help students feel confident and ready for September. These may include:

- transition events
- induction days
- subject taster sessions
- study skills workshops
- information evenings
- opportunities to meet tutors and current students

For young people with SEND
Some young people may benefit from additional preparation and support before starting sixth form. This may include:

- meetings with Learning Support staff
- additional visits to the sixth form
- transition planning meetings
- opportunities to explore key areas of the site
- discussions about reasonable adjustments
- travel planning and travel training
- reviewing support arrangements before the start of term

Families should discuss any concerns with the sixth form so that appropriate support can be considered in advance, and support can continue to be reviewed after your young person starts sixth form.



Questions to consider for a smooth transition:

- Does my young person know where key facilities are located?
- Will they know who to speak to if they need help?
- Have support arrangements been discussed?
- Have transport arrangements been planned?
- Will additional visits help build confidence before September?



Step 7: GCSE Results Day

Unlike other post-16 pathways where applications may be assessed more holistically, sixth form entry is often linked directly to GCSE outcomes and subject-specific entry requirements.

On Results Day, students should:

- collect and review their results carefully
- check whether they have met the conditions of any offers received
- contact the sixth form if they are unsure about next steps
- attend any results-day appointments or enrolment activities arranged by the provider

If results meet expectations
Young people will usually move forward with enrolment and confirmation of their chosen subjects.



Step 7a: What if my young person doesn't get the grades they need?

Not getting the grades needed for a sixth form course can feel disappointing, but it does not mean that opportunities are lost. There are often alternative pathways available, and many young people go on to achieve positive outcomes through a different route than originally planned.

The most important thing is not to panic. Schools, sixth forms, colleges and careers advisers can help young people explore the options available.

Speak to the sixth form
If your young person narrowly misses the entry requirements:

- contact the sixth form as soon as possible
- ask whether there is any flexibility in the entry criteria
- discuss alternative subject combinations
- explore whether another course or qualification may be suitable

If your young person narrowly misses the required grades, it is still worth speaking to the sixth form. Some providers may be able to offer a place or suggest an alternative course.



Step 7a: What if my young person doesn't get the grades they need (cont.)?

Consider alternative options
There are a range of post-16 pathways that may be appropriate, including:

- alternative sixth form courses
- vocational qualifications
- T Levels
- further education college courses
- apprenticeships

A different pathway can still lead to higher education, employment and independent adulthood.

If your young person has an EHCP
If GCSE results affect the planned post-16 destination:

- contact your SEND Operations Team as soon as possible
- discuss any changes to preferred providers
- explore alternative placements if required
- ensure any revised plans continue to support the outcomes identified within the EHCP

Questions to ask on results day:

- are there alternative courses available?
- can subject choices be adjusted?
- what other pathways are available?
- is additional guidance available?
- are places available at other providers?

Key message:

There is no single route to success. Many young people change direction following GCSE results and go on to achieve positive outcomes in education, employment and adult life. The right pathway is the one that matches their strengths, aspirations and support needs.



Step 8: Enrolment and induction

Enrolment is the final stage of the admissions process and confirms that a young person will be joining the sixth form.

This often takes place shortly after GCSE Results Day, although arrangements will vary between providers.

During enrolment, students will typically:

- confirm their place
- finalise subject choices
- provide GCSE results if needed
- complete any remaining forms
- receive important information about starting sixth form

Young people may also:

- receive their timetable
- obtain information about induction activities
- set up student accounts and online systems
- learn about attendance expectations
- receive information about support services
- meet key members of staff

Induction
The purpose of induction is to help young people:

- settle into the sixth form environment
- understand expectations
- meet tutors and other students
- become familiar with routines and systems
- access support if needed
- learn about enrichment activities, sports and clubs

Key message:

Enrolment and induction are more than administrative processes - they mark the beginning of a new stage of education, helping young people build independence, develop new skills and prepare for their future aspirations.



Key questions to ask sixth forms

Subjects

- What qualifications do you offer?
- What GCSE grades are needed?
- How flexible are subject combinations?

SEND Support

- What support is available in lessons?
- How are reasonable adjustments managed?
- How do you support students with EHCPs?

Independence

- How do students develop independent study skills?
- What support is available outside lessons?

University and careers

- What destinations do students progress to after sixth form?
- Do you support UCAS applications?
- What support is available for apprenticeships?

Wellbeing

- What pastoral support is available?
- How do students access wellbeing support?

Enrichment

- What clubs, volunteering and leadership opportunities are available?
- What work experience opportunities are offered?

Sixth form application checklist

Before applying
- ☐ Attended open evening
- ☐ Researched subjects
- ☐ Considered career goals
- ☐ Reviewed entry requirements
- ☐ Discussed options with school
- ☐ Reviewed EHCP outcomes and aspirations

During the application process
- ☐ Submitted application(s)
- ☐ Shared information about SEND support needs (if applicable)
- ☐ Attended interview or guidance meeting
- ☐ Asked questions about support

After receiving an offer
- ☐ Reviewed offer conditions
- ☐ Checked subject-specific entry requirements
- ☐ Accepted preferred offer
- ☐ Compared offers from different providers
- ☐ Discussed support arrangements and reasonable adjustments
- ☐ Planned next steps before GCSE Results Day

Before starting sixth form
- ☐ Confirmed subject choices
- ☐ Planned travel arrangements
- ☐ Attended transition activities
- ☐ Met support staff
- ☐ Completed enrolment
- ☐ Received timetable
- ☐ Know who to contact if support is needed

Key messages

Apply during the autumn term of Year 11 wherever possible.

Young people can apply to more than one sixth form. GCSE entry requirements vary between providers.

Choose subjects that support long-term goals and aspirations.

A Levels are not the only route. Many sixth forms also offer vocational qualifications and T Levels.

The best pathway is the one that helps the young person prepare successfully for adulthood.

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



sendcareers@essex.gov.uk