

A unique day school to engage young learners in a natural, outdoor setting.

Submitted by: The Willow School

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"I do not fear stormy seas, for I have learned to sail my boat."

Plans are underway for The Willow School (<https://www.willowsschool.co.uk/>) to open in Algakirk in the new year. The project is made possible by Darryll Loizou, owner of the site, who will partner with The Chelsea Group of Children, a renowned special needs primary school based in London. The Willow School will provide the local community with an educational setting that meets the special needs of children in the area. It aims to engage the students through outdoor learning experiences in a purpose-designated green space in the heart of the village.

Darryll's own experience of raising a child with autism has given her direct insight into the challenges faced by carers in a similar situation. After a long search for a suitable learning environment for her son Nicholas, she was introduced to a special school in London - The Chelsea Group of Children. She never looked back; finally, Nicholas was able to flourish in his own way.

At The Willow School, pupils can expect an engaging learning experience, rich in sensory input. The Willow School will foster a culture of curiosity and give children a strong foundation to build upon. They will be immersed in nature and all activities will be meaningfully structured around this. As well as making happy memories, each child will be building their life skills to equip them for the next phase of their journey. Typical activities will include growing, picking and preparing fruit and vegetables, camp cooking and den building. Children will also tend to the animals and have access to the therapeutic centre. All activities will be purposeful and designed to help children reach their own potential.

Lincolnshire has a high number of children with specific and complex learning needs. Unfortunately, families and carers may have to look outside the county to find schools which suit the individual needs of their loved ones, often travelling many miles every day. The Willow School aims to address this current lack of provision in the area. It will also relieve the pressure facing existing schools and the local authority. Yet this is not a problem confined to the Lincolnshire area. Company director Dan Griffiths, who lives in Kent, also struggled to find a suitable placement for his son. Thankfully, they found a setting like The Willow School, which Dan says has been "enormously helpful". "There simply aren't enough of these places available," he adds.

Local parents and estate agents, Claire and Hayden Fairweather also contacted Darryll to say how impressed they were with her vision for The Willow School. Claire says that on many occasions she has seen parents make the difficult decision to leave the area – as well as their valuable support network of friends and family – to find a suitable special needs school for their child. Hayden confirms they have experienced a growth in interest in special needs schools from potential buyers. He adds: "When people are registering for properties and enquiring about local amenities, one of the first questions I am often asked is whether there are good special needs schools available locally." Claire has "no doubt that there is a demand for a school as special as The Willow School" and believes it would be "a wonderful asset" to our community. "I only wish all children had the ability to learn in such a positively refreshing environment," she adds.

The Willow School hopes to form links with the local community and schools to promote integration. This will help prepare the children for participation in wider society and, where appropriate, mainstream education. Locally-recruited Lincolnshire staff will work alongside highly-qualified staff from London, who will train them in specialised skills they need to create a bespoke learning plan for each child. This will have a direct positive impact on local expertise and job opportunities.

The Willow School will remain small so that it can run in accordance with its ethos. Using the open land as a classroom will preserve its natural beauty and protect it from unsustainable development, making it a credit to the village and its surroundings. Simon Langley, local parent to two children with additional needs, wrote to Darryll to thank her for her vision and encourage her with the project: "Your school is just what is needed in the local area – and in any area."

Key facts:

- Local need: Lincolnshire has a large SEND population and a demand for extra provision
- Age of pupils: all children aged 4–11 years
- Maximum school capacity: 30 children
- Maximum class size: 5 pupils
- Opening times: school hours are between 9am and 3pm, Monday to Friday. Pupils may arrive early (8.35am) for therapeutic sessions before school starts.
- Site development: only existing buildings to be restored and adapted for school use
- Traffic: school drive (within grounds) to accommodate 3 minibuses and parking/ manoeuvring for all staff and pupils
- Fees: competitive and in accordance with existing local provision

An application for planning permission is currently being processed, and any further support for the school would be gratefully received in relation to this.

The Willow School website: <https://www.willowsschool.co.uk/>

For more information about The Chelsea Group of Children please see <http://www.chelseachildren.com/>

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