

Try a Train classes are back in time for World Autism Awareness Day

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Dunstable-based Central Bedfordshire College students with autism, learning disabilities or both are the first group in over two years to take part in Thameslink's 'Try a Train' events.

The events had to be suspended in 2020 because of COVID restrictions.

The aim of the classes is to give young people who find travel daunting the confidence and experience to use trains more independently. Participants visit a station, take a train ride and hear advice on how to travel safely.

The train company has resumed the highly valued trips in time to support this year's World Autism Awareness Day on 2 April.

The College's 16-to-20-year-olds were the guests of Luton Airport Parkway Station Manager Joe Healy. Joe showed them around the station and took them on a return trip to London St Pancras (just over half an hour each way), giving practical advice on how to plan a train journey, buy and use tickets, and travel with confidence and safety.

Before the pandemic, Joe was organising at least five Try a Train trips every year. He had hosted well over 100 students from Bedfordshire colleges, and other participants nominated by the Autism Bedfordshire charity.

Joe said: "It's so great to be back doing Try a Train events again. Most of the Dunstable students hadn't been on a train in over two years, or as far as London by any means, so there were some nerves, but a lot of excitement. And it's the first time since before the pandemic that I've taken a Try a Train group, so I was excited too.

"I can't tell you how proud I am to meet these young people and take part in these events with them. I was privileged I could take them out for the day and it's brilliant just to see the smiles on their faces. With the confidence they get in travelling independently by rail, they can enjoy more opportunities in their lives."

Claire Andrews, tutor at Central Bedfordshire College, said: "Over the past six years Joe Healey has been so supportive and accommodating to arrange several Try a Train events for Central Bedfordshire College Pathways students. The trips are so powerful as they give students an opportunity that some wouldn't usually get, especially when we have limited funds to go on lots of trips.

"It's such a relaxed and enjoyable day, not only fun but also educational as students are allowed to experience travelling on the train in a real-life situation where they learn so much. The students thoroughly enjoyed their recent visit - they'd spent weeks looking forward to it as it's always such a special event.

"I just want to thank the staff so much on behalf of myself and all of the students that have taken such benefit from Try a Train over the years."

Claire highlighted one student's experience in particular: "One of the students has a special interest in trains so this was even more exciting for him. One of his dreams and aspirations was to do a real-life train announcement at the station. Joe very kindly allowed him to do a few announcements, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He said that 'It was the best day ever'. We videoed this for him to watch afterwards and show his family who found it very emotional as it was such a proud moment for them all."

The autism charity Autism Bedfordshire has been an official station partner with Luton Airport Parkway since early 2020. The charity has a close relationship with Thameslink station managers Joe Healy and Bernie Lee, both looking forward to hosting more Try a Train trips now Covid restrictions have been lifted.

Thameslink trains continue to be treated frequently with a viricide that gives long-lasting protection against Covid.