Hello. My name is Sian and I am 21 years old. I’m adopted and suffer from early childhood trauma. I am studying for a degree in Illustration at university but the road to get here has been extremely tough and it continues to be. I am finding university very hard, almost as hard as I found secondary school.

But to start at the beginning, I managed to survive primary school, where I was bullied for being adopted and because I have a facial palsy and I wasn’t as socially able, so I didn’t enjoy it very much. I just tried to keep my head down and not be noticed but this affected my behaviour at home. I also had undiagnosed autism, and I struggled with sensory issues, so noise especially would upset me.

Secondary school was on a completely different level. The first year, year 7, was similar in a way to primary school but I also had lots of intervention from the SENCO – the special needs coordinator. I found the environment completely alien – the noise, the bustle, the bigger kids, having to move between rooms for every lesson and having to remember where to go next. Changing for PE was another battle, as I struggled with buttons and tying up laces.

In year 8 – aged 12 - everything started to fall apart as I was finding it increasingly difficult to cope. This was when my mental health started to get worse drastically and my behaviour at home went downhill. It got to the point where I started to refuse to go to school. I couldn’t face it. It was like hell to me. (***xxxxxx)***

The noise and busy-ness of it all was overwhelming and I couldn’t stand it. I tried a reduced timetable but that didn’t help and my refusals got worse and life at home was very difficult. Eventually my parents decided that I should stop going to school altogether, not just for ***my*** mental health but for theirs as well, and luckily the SENCO supported this decision as they realised that the school was unable to support my needs, but they did put some external lessons in place for me. It was decided that I should have an EHCP – an Education, Health & Care plan to support students with additional needs - which the school set in motion.

My parents knew about a school called Beech Lodge which was set up by an adoptive mother because her own son struggled so much at school and there wasn’t anywhere else for him to go. Although the local authority initially refused to fund it, eventually I was able to move to Beech Lodge in year 9.

I don’t think it’s overstating it to say that Beech Lodge was a life saver for me. When I first started there were only 8 in my class and only 2 classes. I felt the staff there understood what it was like for me and unlike mainstream school there was no pressure. I felt able to breathe and to be myself. The school was surrounded by woods and we regularly went out for walks and we could go and play outside in the small garden. It was much quieter and much less busy, and life at home calmed down as well.

I was there for 3 years before moving on to the local college where I started on an art course. Suddenly I was doing something I enjoyed and I was good at but I found the pressure at college very difficult, so although I loved my art I can’t say I enjoyed my time there. Some of the tutors were very tough and didn’t seem aware of the pressure they were putting us under or the effect it was having. There were times when I didn’t want to attend, but again, I managed to keep my head down and do what I had to do to get through it, with a lot of support from my parents.

My time at Beech Lodge was the happiest 3 years of my school life. I prefer to forget about the rest of it. As my mum says, school should not be a ‘one size fits all’ place. School was not a safe place for me and the fact that I was refusing to go was a big red flag for everyone. The cost on my mental health has been huge and the cost to my parents has been huge as well. If only there were more places like Beech Lodge, or greater awareness and understanding in mainstream school to help children who can’t cope, the easier and better school life would be and perhaps children wouldn’t need to absent themselves so much.