

MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Anna's full of praise for help Stepping Stones has given

"They reassured me. They just got it. We continued to go most weeks and I could see a vast improvement in Alfie's aggression and tolerance to other children."

"They also taught me strategies to handle him."

Staff also visited Anna at her home on the new Braiswick Park estate in Colchester to give her more advice and support.

She had already raised her concerns about Alfie with her GP and been referred to a paediatrician in November 2014.

A process of assessment started and Anna was diagnosed with autism last June.

For his mum it was a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, she knew it meant he would be able to get the services and support he needed.

On the other, however, it was the confirmation of her fears. She said: "Before the diagnosis, I was in denial."

"I hit the floor after getting the diagnosis, but Stepping Stones was there for me even though I couldn't face leav-

ing the house. I've never felt so overwhelmed.

"I didn't want it to be a label. I didn't want him to be defined by autism."

"I think the support I got was part of my acceptance of Alfie's autism."

Staff from Stepping Stones visited Anna's home and helped her in her lowest moments.

Alfie is now three and goes to Stepping Stones two days a week.

He has limited speech, but is learning Makaton, a form of sign language.

Communication is vital. At the moment, Alfie is still unable to tell his mum when he is thirsty, or hungry, or in pain.

With Makaton, he will start to communicate and some of his anxiety and aggression will subside.

Mrs Cunningham said: "He's learning to socialise and how to share, how to have relationships and that someone else can comfort him if I'm not there."

"He is learning he can cope without me."

"I was judged before when I went

He's learning to socialise, how to share, how to have relationships and that someone else can comfort him

BENEFICIARIES INCLUDE AN MS GROUP, HOSPITALS AND DISABILITY CHARITIES

THE Colchester Catalyst Charity has given out a total of nearly £75,000 in its latest round of grants, with Essex University, Mistley Kids' Club and the Colchester Prosthetic User Group among the recipients.

Its grant of £13,500 for the Stepping Stones play and learn group will help fund a new outreach project to support families with special needs children under the age of two. The charity also gave the group £13,500 last year.

Other groups supported by the latest round of grants include:

- MS-UK, which helps Multiple Sclerosis sufferers and has been given £12,284 to open for longer at weekends and in the evenings to provide more support for people with MS in north east Essex
- Disability4Sport, which got £2,175 to fund specialist equipment to help build the strength of people with disabilities so they can live more independent lives
- Beacon House, Colchester, which got £10,000 to improve IT systems to allow health professionals

to spend more time helping patients instead of doing admin

- Colchester Hospitals Charity, which received £6,100 to buy a My Life mobile distraction unit with software to help dementia patients.
- The Haven Project, in St Peter's Street, Colchester, which supports people with personality disorders. It has received £2,500 to soundproof a therapy room and help the group to double the number of counselling sessions it can offer.

anywhere with Alfie.

"Coming to Stepping Stones was the only place I could bring Alfie without being stressed."

"It has been fundamental to my happiness and Alfie's, too."

"The staff there are incredible. They focus on the positives, not the negatives."

"Their expertise and support are invaluable to families such as mine."

"Thanks to Stepping Stones, Alfie will be the best he can be."

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF 1990 OAKS SALE

THE Colchester Catalyst Charity was set up in 1990 using money which came from the sale of the former Oaks Hospital site, in Oaks Road, Colchester.

The money was invested and over the past 25 years, has yielded about £9million to be passed on groups and individuals to help relieve illness and suffering.

Last year, it gave out £375,394 to general applicants to support new health projects, people with

individual needs and those in need of respite care and counselling.

This year, it has £450,000 to spend and the charity is keen to hear from groups and individuals who might benefit.

Rodney Appleyard, its development officer, said it was now looking forward to expanding the ways it could help others – including by working more closely with the Big Lottery Fund, Colne Housing and the Fowler Smith and

Jones Charitable Trust. y doign so, it hopes to provide joint funding support for new projects.

Mr Appleyard added: "Through this strategy of combined working, it means projects have the opportunity to apply for capital funding and to cover running costs from multiple funders in a co-ordinated manner."

● To to apply for funding, call 01206 323420 for more information, email info@colchestercatalyst.co.uk



■ Making a difference – Alan Saddington is helped to regain his balance by physio Kimberley Rice, rehab assistant Emma Metcalf in the new gym room

Picture: STEVE ARGENT

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