

WE'LL BUILD A FIELD OF DREAMS

Charity plans centre to give support to the deafblind

FOR people who are deafblind the most simple tasks can be an unbreachable barrier.

Leaving home to go out to the shops might be an impossible task – never mind going somewhere to study or simply to socialise with friends.

For these reasons, charity Deafblind Scotland has created an ambitious challenge for itself.

It aims to build a £1.3million learning and development centre with the ability to alter lives.

Currently there is nowhere in Scotland designed specifically for the needs of people who are both deaf and blind.

So the charity wants to create a purpose-built centre, which will be fully accessible to people who have both sight and hearing loss.

It can also be used for people with a single sensory impairment but will particularly make communication easier for people with both disabilities.

Drena O'Malley is Deafblind Scotland's initiatives officer and is heading the charge to raise the cash needed to make the dream a reality.

Drena said: "This initiative has been in the pipeline for quite a long time.

"I joined Deafblind UK as a part-time liaison officer in 1989 when the UK-wide charity set up an office in Scotland and was there when the charity became Deafblind

Scotland in 2001, though we're still very friendly with Deafblind UK.

"I first understood there was a piece of land available in Lenzie in 2007 and I knew it would be perfect for our plans to create a purpose-built centre for deafblind people.

"We call it our Field of Dreams."

It took more than five years for the charity to raise the £200,000 needed to buy their Field of Dreams and for the purchase to go through.

Various members of the charity took part in the fundraising bid.

Chairman Bob Nolan, who is deafblind, and his wife Louise Nola, who is deaf, raised £34,000 by cycling from Land's End to John o'Groats.

Vice-chairman Michael Anderson, who is deafblind, rowed 30 miles along the Union Canal to raise £3,000 while Stephen Joyce, deafblind training officer, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, raising £12,000.

Another member, John Whitfield, deafblind project officer, walked the Great Wall of China, raising £9,000.

Once the land was purchased, £1.5million needed to be found to build the new centre.

A large chunk of the funding for the new project came from a benefactor called Gordon Neasham.

Mr Neasham had dropped in to visit the charity on afternoon in 2006, where he met Drena and her colleague Margaret Law.



Drena O'Malley, Initiatives officer, has been with Deafblind Scotland since it was formed in 2001. Picture: Stewart Attwood

train and had spotted Deafblind Scotland as he went through Lenzie railway station.

For three months, Mr Neasham would drop in for a scone and a chat with Drena. In 2013 he died, aged 77, and Deafblind Scotland discovered

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he had left the charity £599,000.

This, along with money raised from a variety of trusts, means Deafblind Scotland has around £215,000 still to raise.

To explain why the building is needed, Drena quotes a deafblind member, Louisa, who says: "I get exhausted trying to

nity centres, hotels, churches, colleges, leisure centres. Too much light or not enough, totally uncontrollable. Hard wooden surfaces and floors which are so noisy.

"Everything echoes and this really interferes with the little hearing I have. I know no peace in such buildings. It is easier to stay home where I can, to some extent, control my environment."

To ease communication issues the building will be as acoustically neutral as possible.

Drena, who is former chief executive of the charity, said: "Ironically, as buildings have become more accessible for people with disabilities, they have become less accessible for deafblind people.

"For example, you rarely find a modern building with carpets, which makes it much easier for people in a wheelchair to get

"But hard surfaces create an echo that makes it very difficult for people with hearing loss."

Lighting will be controlled in the building with no bright glare or any dark corners and colour will be used to highlight routes and provide information.

The centre will also include a gym, an arts facility; a multi-purpose room for large meetings or art and drama groups; and a study to produce audio recordings, braille and moon, which is similar to braille.

It will include a community cafe staffed by deafblind people and a high-tech IT suite.

Drena added: "The IT suite is really important. As IT has grown, deafblind people have become more and more isolated.

"Think how many times the BBC, say, will refer people to

look things up online. Deafblind people cannot access these things. They no longer check the weather forecast because it is all online. You have to book appointments online or shop online. It's cutting them out.

"Our IT suite will be second to none and ensure deafblind people are able to access e-mail and the internet.

"The centre that will be built on Field of Dreams is essential to make sure deafblind people are able to develop their skills, learn new communication methods and have a degree of independence. It will be a flagship centre that can show other local authorities, architects and builders how to make sure deafblind people can have full access to other buildings in the future."

TOMORROW: Meet inspirational sportsman James Levine, plus how you can help raise

'When chess club's not on, I cry at home'

PART of Deafblind Scotland's remit is to bring a little bit of normality back into the lives of those with sight and hearing loss.

One of the ways it does this is with the long-running chess club where members meet on Mondays to play chess on specially adapted boards.

Robert Dillon has been coming to Deafblind Scotland for more than 20 years to take part in the chess club.

Robert was born deaf but began to lose his sight at the age of 30. It slowly grew worse until he had to stop working when he was about 40 years old.

The 63-year-old was diagnosed with Usher syndrome and is now completely blind. "That's just the way I am. I am used to it now," he said. Robert goes to a deaf club on a Tuesday and a Saturday, which is where he first met guide/communicator Lorna Lockwood.

Although guides are assigned to different people, Lorna often works with Robert and the two have a great rapport. Lorna said: "I wanted to learn British Sign Language for myself. I met Robert at the deaf club and was frustrated that I couldn't talk to him so he gave me the number for Deafblind Scotland. Now, 14 years later, I'm still working as a guide communicator."

As Robert, who lives with his second wife, grew up using BSL as his first language, he signs to Lorna. She then will take his hands to sign back.

The chess boards have raised and lowered squares to denote which are black and which are white. White pieces have a raised bump on top to distinguish them from black and the board has holes the pieces fit into, like pegs.

Robert added: "Being part of the organisation has improved my life. It's good to be able to go out on my own. When chess club is cancelled I sit at home and cry. I love chess, I started playing it when I was 11. I could see then. It's different playing now."

Robert's chess club mate is John Dearie, who also comes along to the Monday morning class in Lenzie.

He too was born deaf and began to lose his sight in his early 30s before becoming completely blind in his 40s.

He now gets around with help from his guide dog Umber, who is five, and gains support from Deafblind Scotland and the guide/communicator service.

Colin Beveridge, the guide/communicator working with John, said: "I really like my job. Sometimes it's the simple jobs that are the best, for example, taking a guide dog for a walk.

"I describe what can be seen on the walk and, because we go the same route, local people who recognise us will stop and say hello.

"It's a really satisfying thing to do and I hope the members get as much out of it as we do."



Robert Dillon, left, and John Dearie play volunteer Mike Hooper (back to camera), helped by guide communicators Lorna Lockwood and Colin Beveridge. Picture: Martin Shields