

Centre for disabled makes sense

Sight and hearing loss charity Sense has been selected as the nominated charity for this year's Birmingham Post Business Awards. Here, chief executive Gillian Morbey looks at its work

SENSE is a national charity that supports children, adults and older people who have sight and hearing loss as well as those with additional support needs.

We offer personalised services, campaign for change, and have built a world-wide reputation for our pioneering work.

Sense has kept pace with the changing needs of the individuals and families that it supports so as to ensure it remains relevant to their lives.

We support people of all ages with a wide range of sight and hearing difficulties and associated communication needs or additional learning disabilities. There are over 250,000 children and adults across the UK who have both sight and hearing impairments, with that number set to increase significantly over the coming decades.

Sense was started by a group of families who had deafblind children after being seriously affected by rubella during pregnancy.

Today, a growing number of children are born prematurely with a range of



► An artist's impression of Sense's Touchbase centre in Selly Oak

to choose from a wide range of activities and programmes that can help them to develop their communication and living skills.

We also offer a range of supported accommodation services so that people can choose between housing options.

Most of our income is generated through providing commissioned services for local authorities and we also fund-raise for our charitable work such as campaigns, information and public awareness.

We believe that larger organisations such as Sense have a responsibility not only to contribute to these sectors but be part of the local communities they work in.

One of the biggest and most ambitious fundraising schemes we are developing at the moment is Touchbase Birmingham, which will be a new pioneering centre for disabled people and the wider community. It is based in Selly Oak but with a wider reach across Birmingham.

We come to this project from a position of strength. We have a long established base in Birmingham supporting both adults and children across the region.

We have a Birmingham office located in Selly Oak and strong relationships with Birmingham City Council and the University of Birmingham, where the School of Education runs specialist MSI courses.

Sense also has close links with Birmingham Children's Hospital.

Touchbase will include direct Sense service provision, day care services as well as, arts and well-being activities, a family and children's area, conference facilities and a public café.

These "social" businesses are designed to be used by all the community and we will invest all future profits back into the charity.

Through Touchbase, we will aim to harness community capacity and build resilience in the local community and voluntary sector – giving people a real stake and greater ownership.

It is our vision that people with disabilities engage and enjoy life with able bodied people and the communities in which they live in.

Construction of the building will commence in 2015, with the creation of up to 130 jobs, helping to support the regeneration of the local area. It will open in late 2016.

The total cost of the scheme will be around £14m with the money to come from a combination of Sense funds, social bonds, grant and fundraising. Already we have received £2.1m from the Government's Regional Growth Fund.

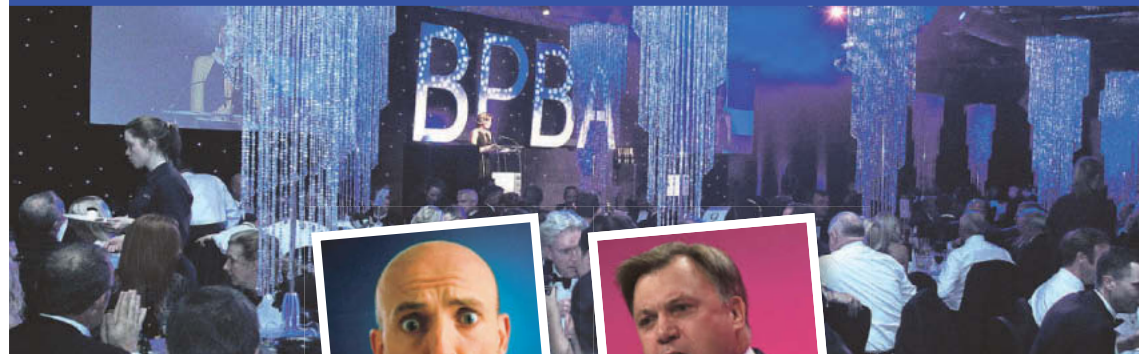
We were the first voluntary sector organisation to receive funding, in recognition that like private companies we are able to boost economic growth across the West Midlands throughout the country.

We are ready to invest in this project but can't do it all on our own. Support from business community in Birmingham would make the project a reality.

■ Anyone interested in finding out more about this ambitious project should visit our website at sense.org.uk or contact our Head of Capital Appeals Mankit Yau on Mankit.yau@sense.org.uk.

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medical conditions that often includes sight and hearing impairments.

There are also older people who develop sight and hearing loss at later life. We still have a live community of active families at the heart of Sense; that is a big part of who we are and what we do.

Having both sight and hearing impairments affects all aspects of a person's life – from their ability to communicate, to access information or to get around.

The sight and hearing loss impact on each other, multiplying the total effect.

A person with both sight and hearing impairments has described it as colour mixing... "If you think of deafness as yellow and blindness as blue, when you mix them both you don't get yellow-blue, but a completely different colour – green."

What is it like for a child growing up with both sight and hearing loss?

Making eye contact, watching expressions on the faces of others and listening to the voices are all important steps in early communication which we take for granted. But for the children we support, their attempts to communicate may not be recognised.

Imagine being unable to express when you are in pain, hungry, or to tell your family you love them. Sense helps children to make sense of the world around them.

Physical closeness and touch become increasingly important.

We are able to help as our staff are trained in the 'total communication' approach.

We take time to understand and respond to a person's ways of communicating, whether that is through speech, sign, symbols, objects of reference, gestures or body language.

We work closely in partnership with each person and their family, learning about the things that matter to them – particularly how they communicate their likes and dislikes.

At Sense we offer specialist advice, information and services across the UK, using skilled staff and a dedicated network of volunteers.

In our community resource and day centres around the UK, people are able