

Disability charity's £2m dream

by Pete Castle

THEY have for a long time been the hidden members of society.

Now people with serious multiple disabilities look set to get the facilities they deserve at a £2million purpose-built centre in Farnborough.

Parity for Disability already provides day and respite care for people in Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire from its two centres in Whetstone Road, Cove, and St Martin's Church in Hampshire Road, Camberley.

However, while the converted shop units, temporary buildings and church hall provide a vital service for severely disabled people and their families, with some travelling from miles away to use the facilities, they are a long way from ideal.

With that in mind, Parity is preparing to launch its Building Parity Appeal to create a new day care centre at Cherrywood Road in Farnborough.

The site, on the corner of the football ground of Farnborough FC, will provide space for a top-quality day care service to replace the charity's current diaspora of buildings and services.

The scheme is the culmination of ten years' work searching for a suitable location for a permanent home for the charity.

After disappointments in securing funding for buildings in Fleet and elsewhere, the charity's organisers are now confident they have the project that is right for their people.

Parity chairman Paul Roper said the new building would give a traditionally ignored group of people the facility they truly

deserved and provide a groundbreaking model for services for disabled people.

"There has always been a high demand for our services," he said. "Now we have a demand for a dedicated building where we can provide really high quality services for a group of children and young people who traditionally have been at the bottom of the pile."

Mr Roper said attitudes towards severely disabled people were still hampered by the days when they would be taken away from their families and virtually locked away in hospitals.

"This is a group of people that has been ignored by society because they have been almost invisible," he said. "It is quite shameful but it is a demonstration of how society treats people with profound levels of disability."

"An important part of what we do is to raise people's awareness of what goes on and change people's awareness of disability."

The new building is designed to have all the latest equipment and will have the space to house techniques designed to give people with serious disabilities a better quality of life.

Top of the agenda is a hydrotherapy pool, which is vital for physiotherapy work but very difficult to access elsewhere at hospitals or in private clinics.

It will have rooms designed for activities such as music and speech therapy, as well as a sensory room, library and private rooms for individual treatment. But Parity organisers hope the landmark building will act as a hub for families looking to find information on caring for relatives or accessing services.

Mr Roper's late son Mark, who



A computer-generated picture of the new day centre which Parity wants to build in Cherrywood Road, Farnborough.

had cerebral palsy, attended Parity's facilities as a teenager, and the experience is something he has not forgotten.

"Parents who have a child with a disability feel totally alone because they have no experience of that," Mr Roper said.

"They are just scrambling around in the dark. It is important that they can find someone to give them that guidance. It is a huge commitment to look after someone with a disability, which is hugely time consuming and very draining. The amount of respite people get is quite minimal."

Alison Cooper, Parity's execu-

utive director, agreed. "Parents with children who have disabilities often really need help just to point them in the right direction. They often don't know how to access the information they need."

"We listen to what people want and deliver that — we don't tell people what they need and that is what makes us different."

It is an attitude that has made the charity hugely popular with families from across Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire, with some coming from as far afield as Reading, Ascot, Sunbury and Bordon.

While the new Cherrywood Road centre will be a big improvement on current arrangements, the charity's leaders are keen to stress it is not a return to large, impersonal institutions.

The charity is keen to consider the options of opening up more small centres in the future.

"I hope this is a step change for us, but we can always do more," said Mr Roper.

"Within Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire there are some other centres we would like to establish, and with a change in people's perceptions of our

organisation we will be in a position to do that."

With planning permission already granted, the only hurdle remaining is to find the money, and Parity first needs to raise £6,000 sponsorship to make a promotional DVD to get its message out.

The short film will star Bernard Cribbins and be used as an educational tool as well as raising the profile of the charity in the run-up to its appeal launch in September.

For more details, or if you can help, call Helene Abbiss on 01252 375581.