

*It is widely recognised as the UK.'s leading centre for the teaching of deaf children. Mary Hare in Newbury. Like all schools, though, has had a difficult year. But despite the pandemic, it is also thriving as well as providing a full curriculum online during both lockdowns. The school's pretty much raised their three and a half million pounds it needs for a new primary school, with work set to start later this year.*

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*So let's find out how it has all been going from head teacher Peter Gale who joins us now. Good morning, Peter.*

Good morning.

*Lovely to have you on the show before we start talking about the challenges in the last twelve months and that the future for the school. Just remind us of how big the school, is and who you look after there.*

Sure. So, we're a national school for deaf children and we have around 230 children.

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We have a small primary currently at Greenham, but as you've said, we're very much hoping to be moving that onto our main campus which has around 210 senior School pupils in Year 7 to 13.

*Wow. OK, so that's a big age range that you're looking after and talk to me about the different levels of of hearing impairment. You cater for what.*

So, we're set up for severely profoundly deaf children, but I have to say we've seen a growth in the number of children with moderate hearing loss, seeking us out.

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I think that mainstream schools are quite unforgiving environments for many deaf children just simply in terms of feeling different, not having friends like them and also just not being able to hear properly. So, I see a range of deaf children who see the benefits of wanting to come to a school like ours and learn with other children like them in a setting that's designed to meet their needs, I mean mainstream schools are noisy old places at the best of times and the idea of having a classroom full of 30 screaming children.

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if you struggle to hear. That's a real problem, isn't it. You can see why that would hold you back. I mean, I think we'll look back on this year and say we didn't listen to the children. The children know what they need. And if they come to a residential school quite a long way from their home and say this is what I need to learn. I think their voice should prevail. We've had well meaning adults telling them.

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What is good for them and for too long,

*So. So talk to me about how you have been impacted over the last twelve months. So if you offer a residential facility, How was that impacted on. What did you have to do.*

Well, I mean, you cannot imagine that. That gave us loads of challenges, which wasn't really readily addressed in lots of the guidance because it's such an unusual set of circumstances.

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So we had to follow both of the main lock downs. We didn't see a way that you could keep children living so closely together and sharing facilities, safely when the pandemic numbers were at their worst. So we had to set up online learning and we did it virtually overnight and we decided there would be no compromise. We'd be running a full day from nine till four so the lessons timetabled would happen in real time.

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In fact, we had to actually to change the offer to our younger pupils in years 7, 8 and 9 whose parents said seriously. They're just exhausted. So ,we did that and went down to just mornings only with some enrichment activities in the afternoon. So we all had to get to grips with online learning pretty much overnight.

*I'm really interested to know how that differed for you because trying to do online learning, trying to do.*

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*Zoom lessons with children who struggle to hear or who can't hear is a very different ball game. So how would you address that.*

Sure. And I think one thing it did was give us a nudge to make the most of all the technology that was already out there for example, libraries, doing an assembly every week to try and keep the children feeling connected with the school and I was using a product, whereby I would upload the video and thirty minutes later, the subtitles were there.

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I could just publish it after tidying up one or two mistakes. It always struggles with Mary Hare gets that a bit wrong. So, it was a mixture, really, of using loads of visual stuff, which we do all the time. Lots of visual backup live subtitling and the children are also phenomenal listeners. I think it's important that people understand that the majority of deaf children these days have a use for exposure to sound.

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If they are aided either conventionally or by cochlear implant. So it was a whole range of things. The usual mixture. I don't know, but I get the impression that we did a lot. And that I think it worked pretty well compared with what I've heard from other colleagues. You know, those teaching hearing children. We were able to connect. With having a small number, obviously helped, and set us apart.

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*What does sign language, have to play in all of this.*

So Mary Hare doesn't use sign language in teaching and learning and unfortunately there's a real prevailing debate around the best way to educate Deaf children and it's a shame because the numbers are very small and then to divide that number into different methodologies I think is problematic, but we believe most deaf children are born to hearing families and we believe in just basically immersing them in English.

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The language of the curriculum. The language of the high street and so we just focus on technology, residual hearing, lip reading and speech and language therapy and so on. Children sign in their free time. Those who do know sign Language will always enjoy it socially, but the children here want access to the curriculum through the language of the curriculum now.

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We have talked a lot in the last few months about the impact of the last year on children and their mental health and I'm talking about children in mainstream schools at the moment, who, regardless of age have really struggled. Being apart from their friends. They have struggled without that routine and I think we're now beginning to see the effects of that with some children, struggling to reintegrate back into it into the education system.

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*I guess what's your experience of that been with the youngsters that you're looking after.*

Well, I think I think that helped us. We were one of the first schools to have a full time Mental Health and Wellbeing Coordinator. We introduced in 2014 and so she kept in touch with the vulnerable pupils as did a safeguarding team throughout the lock downs, our care staff and residential care staff went online playing games with them and doing activities.

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So we tried our very best to make sure that they still felt that Mary Hare was their home. Even though they weren't here. So, for example, when it snowed I went round the campus took loads of photos and uploaded them so the children could enjoy at home, because normally they'd have been out here playing in the snow, but I would say without belittling them that they're definitely young people as you describe who, are struggling to reintegrate.

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to spend so much time now in a relatively crowded and noisy environment, compared with being home, but I would say we've got something really beautiful and positive out of this as well, which was the children realised just how much this school means to them and they came back with the smiles. Their smiles and the pleasure of being back was just so amazing that all the staff really fed off that and enjoyed it.

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So I would say, overall, we're in a pretty good place.

*Oozing positivity which is lovely to hear and that is further compounded by the fact that despite all of the challenges of the last year. You've managed to raise the three and a half million pounds needed for a new primary school.*

Oh, absolutely. I mean, many of my predecessors made sure this school, never stood still and the next phase is

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we have a small primary at the other side of town. We see massive advantages to having everything on one campus. So, let's say a science teacher could go over to the primary school, a primary school teacher can liaise with the children when transferring to the

secondary phase. We have this concept 'together yet apart'. We don't want the young people to be overwhelmed by the older students. So it's up on a hill on the same campus and we are very much hoping to get a spade in the ground in May.

Brilliant stuff.

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Well, look. Thank you for coming on and talking to us about it this morning. Enjoy your Easter break when it eventually rolls around as well because it's been a pretty stressful year, but it sounds as though you're going great guns. Thank you for coming on. That's a teacher of Mary Hare School in Newbury. Peter Gale on BBC Radio Berkshire.