

# PLAN B

Getting planning permission for a drugs project is no easy task. **Chloe Stohart** visits south London to see how some bite the dust while others get from drawing board to reality.

Like many inner city areas, Peckham in south London has its problem with drugs. So when a national drug treatment provider, CRI, and the local primary care trust got together to try and set up a drop-in project for drug users, it seemed a logical way to tackle the problem.

The centre, to be situated above a branch of McDonalds in the town centre, was to have a separate entrance to the restaurant. Service users would have been highly supervised – many would have been there as part of their probation conditions set by the courts.

The primary care trust, Southwark Heath and Social Care, began by getting in touch with local residents asking for their views before putting in the planning application.

Eileen Conn, coordinator of Bellenden Residents Group, which covers Peckham town centre, says most respondents to the application approved of the principle of drug projects, but were unsure about the location. They argued it bordered the town centre and a residential area and feared it might exacerbate crime in a problem area. Conn says she would have liked residents to have had six months to see other similar schemes in action and gather information before the application went in.

"The problem with the planning application system is people are asked for their comments but they need more information and the opportunity to talk

to other people and there's no time for that," says Conn, who adds that some objectors might have backed it had they had more time to think. "We only had three weeks to form a view and because there was no time to find out about it we had to say no," she explains.

Rod Craig, director of client group commissioning at Southwark Heath and Social Care, agrees that a longer time for residents to consider the plans would be good, although he adds that there is a long consultation period built into the planning process after the application goes in. He also points out that there is a danger that landlords might not be willing to wait so long for the organisation to apply for planning and would give the premises to someone else who could move more quickly.

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In the end, the council never had to make a planning decision on the McDonalds' site – as the fast food chain withdrew its permission for the project

to use the space because it claimed it put customers off. A manager at the Peckham town centre branch told *Druglink* that customers opposed the plans after seeing them outlined in the local paper. "It was such a backlash it had to colour our decision not to allow it to go ahead," she says. "There was a very clear mindset amongst a significant number of our customers. It's a family environment and people did not feel the centre would be in a suitable location."

The story of local people opposing the location of a drugs clinic is not especially unusual – Craig and his colleagues in other PCTs have other examples. But there are plenty of projects which succeed, either after overcoming opposition or never having faced much to start with.

Beverley Priest, communications director at Turning Point, says the majority of its schemes go unopposed. "If you get your communication right then a good, well run, safe project can be set up pretty much anywhere."

One centre that overcame opposition and opened is Lorraine Hewitt House in Brixton, south London. The clinic, run by South Lambeth and Maudesley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM), is a central base for drug workers to visit other services in the borough as well as providing support for over 500 people with drug and alcohol problems including keyworking, clinics, a crèche,







**Petition power:**  
Lorraine Hewitt  
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## BEVERLEY PRIEST'S TIPS FOR PLANNING SUCCESS

Make sure you stick to the letter of planning law.

Be responsive to concerned locals: have a named person with a phone number they can contact.

Be clear why you are setting up the project, what local needs it is addressing and which organisations are involved.

Make sure the scheme has the support of the council, including the relevant cabinet member, the DAT and any other authority figures.

Be clear about why the location is right and why the scheme won't have an impact on local residents.

When choosing a location don't tuck the scheme away; that suggests there is something to hide and makes it difficult for services users to reach the facility.

Think about ways to minimise disturbance to neighbours – separate entrances and discouraging people from smoking outside the building can help.

Give examples of successful schemes. You could offer to take residents to visit one but you would need to protect the confidentiality of services users.

dental clinic, prescribing and psychiatric services.

The building is in an area where there are good transport links to the rest of the borough, which is useful for workers going out to visit people and for service users trying to get to the facility. The site fits in with Lambeth council's unitary development plan (UDP), which outlines what can and cannot be built in particular areas of the borough. Planning officers refer to the UDP when recommending whether councillors on the planning committee should back or reject a planning application.

Mike Kelleher, consultant psychiatrist and clinical lead for Lambeth Addictions at SLaM, says it was important to be able to show the committee that the location fitted in with the council's plans, that there was a need for it and that the council's officers recommended it.

SLaM and the local drug action team then held consultation events with local residents and some opposition arose. "It is important to understand where the local groups are coming from," he says. "They are not prejudiced people, they are just worried. There was very little disagreement with the idea a clinic was needed."

SLaM worked with the local drug action team and the police to get improvements to street lighting, repairs to CCTV and an extra named police community support officer to patrol the

area and work with the centre, and better gating for nearby blocks of flats. The team also decided not to dispense prescriptions from the centre but instead leave that to pharmacies. This helped to reduce the likelihood of service users congregating around the doors to the centre as well as enabling them to pick up their medications at a pharmacy closer to their home.

The scheme was examined at a hearing of the council's health scrutiny committee, where people opposed to the project put their case and the team behind the scheme set out their plans. It eventually went before the council's planning committee, which had the power to accept or reject the application for planning permission. Some local councillors, including some on the planning committee, were opposed to the scheme. SLaM quoted a case study, provided by the NTA, of a similar centre in Manchester which had operated without problems. "It helps to be able to quote these facts to people," says Kelleher.

Since opening in February 2008, the clinic has worked hard to build a good relationship with local residents, says Kelleher. A worker checks outside for discarded needles every morning, clients know not to hang around outside to avoid antagonising the neighbours, SLaM's borough manager meets regularly with the DAT and police, residents and locals can call or drop in

any time to talk. "We haven't had any real problems and I think local residents are quite happy," he adds.

Although there was opposition, the centre was also in the unusual position of being the subject of a petition by people, including some local residents, who wanted it to open. The petition was set up and discussed at length on Brixton-based website Urban75, which has an active drugs forum. "I think it definitely helped to get it through [the planning committee] because some people would like to say the whole community is against it – and the petition showed it was more mixed than that," says Kelleher.

His tip for others hoping to follow in SLaM's footsteps is to be open and work with as many local groups as possible – and don't try to sneak any plans through hoping people won't notice. "It is not an easy process but the end product has been very good I think," he says.

■ **Chloe Stothart** is a journalist specialising in housing issues