

Agenda Item A5	Committee Date 28 September 2009	Application Number 09/00789/CU
Application Site Former Conservative Club, 173 Euston Road, Morecambe		Proposal Change of use from business use (Class B1) to medical centre providing specialist services for drug dependents, including needle exchange
Name of Applicant DISC Ltd		Name of Agent Fisher Wrathall, The Old Warehouse, Castle Hill, Lancaster LA1 1YP
Decision Target Date 30 September 2009		Reason For Delay Not applicable
Case Officer		Peter Rivet
Departure		No
Summary of Recommendation		Approval

1.0 The Site and its Surroundings

- 1.1 This application was originally identified as one which could be dealt with by the Head of Planning Services under delegated powers. It has been referred to Committee because of the issues involved.
- 1.2 The former Conservative Club, now known as Bellfield House, occupies a site immediately to the west of York Bridge, on the south side of the Euston Road/Thornton Road/Lancaster Road junction. It ceased to be used as such around eight years ago and in recent years has been occupied as offices by a firm supplying CCTV equipment. It is currently vacant.
- 1.3 The proposal as submitted is for the change of use of the ground floor of the building. There is a flat on the first floor, which would continue in residential use. The building is served by a substantial car park at the rear.
- 1.4 The immediate area is prominently residential, but it is on the fringe of Morecambe town centre. The site is readily accessible from a large part of the district, as it is on a bus route with a frequent service. It is also within credible walking distance of other bus routes along Morecambe Promenade, and of Morecambe railway station.

2.0 The Proposal

- 2.1 The applicants are based in Spennymoor, Co. Durham. DISC stands for "Developing Initiatives Supporting Communities". It is organised as both a charity and a company, and its purpose is to address problems associated with unemployment, housing and children and families as well as those associated with drug and alcohol abuse. According to its web site it employs over 300 staff. Most of its work is undertaken in partnership with other agencies. At present it plays a major role in addressing drug and alcohol related issues in North East England and Yorkshire.
- 2.2 Following a tendering process, DISC has been engaged to provide a similar range of services in North Lancashire, replacing the existing provision in the area. This means, among other things, that the existing needle exchange facility at Deansgate in Morecambe would close.

2.3 In pre-application correspondence DISC's representatives indicated that the bulk of the accommodation would be used as offices where the Morecambe and Lancaster outreach workers would be based. The centre would employ 12-15 staff. It would also provide a drop-in facility where the service users would receive one-to-one consultation, with a doctor if required. The doctors would provide a prescribing service. No drugs would be issued from the site, but a needle exchange facility would be provided. The services offered would normally operate from 8:30am to 5:30pm but they might wish to offer occasional evening sessions for those who could not attend during normal office hours, for example because of work commitments.

2.4 A further letter from them confirms that DISC is replacing Lancaster Care Foundation Trust as the provider of drug treatment services in the area, and that the size of the building should not be taken as meaning that they intend to work there with large numbers of people. The intention is primarily that this building should be an office base for their staff.

3.0 Site History

Recent planning applications involving this site are as follows:

Application Number	Proposal	Decision
03/01242/CU	Change of use of ground floor to offices with additional store/display/demonstration area	Approval
05/01509/CPA	Change of use from an office and first floor residential flat to a short-stay school including the recreation of a new window opening	Withdrawn
07/01255/FUL	Erection of rear first floor extension to the existing ground floor office accommodation	Approval

4.0 Consultation Responses

4.1 The following responses have been received from consultees:

Consultees	Response
Morecambe Town Council	Object strongly to the application. The proposal is to provide a service for which there is already an oversupply in the area.
County Council Highways	No highway objections to this proposal.
Police	Although they have reservations about this application the Police do not wish to object to it. The site is close to Morecambe Town Centre on a main access route into the town and is self-contained, with a private car park and surrounded by a wall and fence. The provision of this type of service, dealing with people who have drug and alcohol dependency problems, is controversial but a review of crime and incidents at existing drug treatment centres in Morecambe has shown no specific crime or anti-social behaviour problems relating to their current use as a needle exchange. There are therefore no grounds to support a Police objection.
Morecambe Bay NHS Trust	No response received during statutory timescale.

5.0 Neighbour Representations

5.1 In total 54 individual letters and emails had been received at the time of compiling this report, objecting to the proposal on the following grounds:

- The area is a residential one and is inappropriate for a centre of this kind;
- The route past the site is used by many children on their way to and from Lancaster Road, Morecambe Bay and Poulton Primary Schools, and Morecambe High School;
- A lot of effort has been put into regenerating the area and the proposed use will prejudice this;

- Facilities of this kind should be sited within hospitals or in non-residential areas;
- The site is at the main entrance to the centre of Morecambe and is not an appropriate “greeting” for visitors to the town;
- Needles may be left on the site when the premises are closed, with potentially dangerous consequences;
- Fear of anti-social behaviour and crime;
- Possible traffic hazard;
- There is no need for this facility in Morecambe;
- The site is opposite an off licence which offers temptations to people with alcohol abuse problems;
- Loss of property value (not a planning consideration).

5.2 A further letter comes from a local resident with professional experience of public health issues. He raises not only the conflict between this provision and the City Council’s commitment to the regeneration of Poulton, but also concern that DISC has been “parachuted into the area”, with very little public consultation, to take over drug and alcohol related problems from the organisations already involved in addressing these issues in Lancaster and Morecambe. He is very critical of the lack of information supplied by the applicants in support of their proposal.

5.3 The Primrose Court Residents’ Association, representing a group of residents immediately adjoining the site, has submitted a petition with 26 signatures objecting to the proposal for similar reasons, emphasising the work which has gone into improving the area.

5.4 A second petition with 105 signatures from a wider area, including Bare and the Barton Park Homes site on Westgate, opposes the application on the basis that the site is inappropriate for such a facility.

5.5 Councillors Archer, Gerrard and Taylor have indicated their concern about the possible impact of the proposed use on neighbours and the local community.

5.6 Any further representations received will be reported orally at Committee.

6.0 Principal Development Plan Policies

6.1 Policy **SC2** of the Core Strategy emphasises the need to build healthy sustainable communities by focussing development where it will support the vitality of existing settlements, regenerate areas of need and minimise the need to travel.

6.2 Of the policies in the Lancaster District Plan, **T9** is relevant as it requires development which may increase the need to travel to be located so as to maximise opportunities for using public transport, and therefore close to bus routes.

6.3 Policy **R21** requires that where appropriate, access provision should be made for people with disabilities.

7.0 Comment and Analysis

7.1 Current provision for people with drug and alcohol abuse problems in the area is provided through a complex network of agencies. These are not provided directly through the National Health Service, but via the Lancashire Drug and Alcohol Team on which interested organisations, including the NHS, the Police, and the Probation Service are represented. Some of the provision is through dedicated premises like the present one at Deansgate, but it also involves the use of private sector agencies such as pharmacies, including one in Kensington Road which is not far from the application site. Pharmacy provision would not be affected by the current proposal.

7.2 In pre-application discussions the applicants suggested some other sites which they thought might be suitable for their purposes. Two were vacant shops in Victoria Street; the other was another vacant shop, in Euston Road. In terms of their impact on residential neighbours, all three were open to much stronger objection than the present site but this does not of itself provide a reason for endorsing the use of Bellfield House.

- 7.3 The provision of services for people with drug and alcohol dependency issues is always controversial. At the same time a centre of this kind is essential to tackle the underlying problems. There is a strong argument in favour of locating facilities of this kind within hospitals. It gives them relative anonymity and avoids the problem of the surrounding area being perceived as being full of drug users. From the point of view of the drug users it avoids stigmatising them too, on the basis that everyone needs to visit hospitals occasionally.
- 7.4 A difficulty in Morecambe is that the town no longer has a hospital offering a full range of services. The nearest equivalent is the outpatient centre on the site of the former Queen Victoria Hospital, a short distance to the north of the application site; there is little space available within its grounds for a facility of this kind. This property is probably as close to the Queen Victoria Centre as is likely to be available.
- 7.5 The applicants say that the centre is intended to serve both Lancaster and Morecambe (though DISC intends to provide an outstation serving Lancaster). It would normally be open on weekdays between 9:00am and 5:00pm, but the applicants wish to leave open the possibility of opening at other times to meet the needs of clients who are unable to attend during these hours. In discussions with officers of the Council they pointed out that by no means all people with drug and alcohol related problems are unemployed; some can only attend outside normal working hours. They stress that what they provide is a "harm minimisation service" and that without a centre of this kind the impact of drug abuse on the community would be significantly worse.
- 7.6 It is open to question whether a facility of this kind needs to be in Morecambe at all, since Lancaster has better public transport links to the district as a whole. The Poulton and West End areas are the City Council's major priorities for regeneration. Siting a centre for drug users in either area is open to criticism in that it will reinforce negative perceptions of them. However it appears from the available information that at present there are significantly more people with drug dependency problems in Morecambe than in Lancaster, and it is logical to site the centre where it is most accessible to them. From this point of view, Poulton is easier to reach by bus and train and is preferable to the West End, where it would not be possible to relate it to existing health provision.
- 7.7 It should be said that there is no reason to believe that people with drug and alcohol abuse problems will choose deliberately to live near centres intended to address their needs. However many of them are poor, often as a consequence of their addiction; and consequently they will gravitate towards areas of cheap housing.
- 7.8 In favour of the current proposal, it should also be said that the site is unusually self contained, with a wall and fence around the car park. There is only one entrance to it. The location is easily accessible by public transport. The building has already been adapted to make it convenient for people with mobility problems.

8.0 Conclusions

- 8.1 The Planning Service fully understands local residents' concerns regarding the change of use application. Many people would not choose to reside close to such a facility. At the same time it should be recognised that while there is a serious problem with drug related crime, it does not normally involve crime and disorder outside drug treatment centres. It usually involves thefts by people in need of money to fund their addiction.
- 8.2 However the use of alternative sites outside hospitals for the provision of services such as these is now commonplace. In considering the application, the proposal must be determined in accordance with material planning considerations.
- 8.3 The presence of centres for people with addiction problems is not normally apparent to people who do not know what they are. Needle exchanges, in particular, do not advertise themselves on large signs; they try to remain anonymous. The site in question is readily accessible to the project's client group, and an existing office dealing with drug addiction in a much more sensitive location would be closed as a result of this change of use.
- 8.4 Taking all these factors into account, it is recommended that permission should be granted.

Recommendation

That Planning Permission **BE GRANTED** subject to the following conditions:

- 1 Standard three year condition.
- 2 Centre to be open to the public only between 9:00am and 8:00pm Mondays to Saturdays
3. Existing drug treatment centre at Deansgate to close within one week of Bellfield House opening.

Human Rights Act

This recommendation has been reached after consideration of the provisions of The Human Rights Act. Unless otherwise stated in this report, the issues arising do not appear to be of such magnitude to override the responsibility of the City Council to regulate land use for the benefit of the community as a whole, in accordance with national law.

Background Papers

1. Letter from DISC dated 28 August 2009 setting out the way in which they intend to operate,