

We must all share burden of crime



The alcolm chards column

Everybody wants law and order - but nobody wants a prison at the bottom of their garden, we have been starkly reminded by the vociferous reaction to the Teddington cells proposal.

A similar heated row erupted in 1979 when the bail hostel - now in situ a few yards from Kew Gardens station was first proposed in the shell of the old Kew Police Station. And all hell was let loose, with public meetings, petitions and letters to the editor by the sackful.

Residents feared the value of their homes would plummet, burglaries and muggings would soar and there would be blood on the streets. I was fairly new to the editorial chair and bursting with compassionate liberal ideals - and in my editorial comments reminded the well heeled who populated Richmond's leafy streets that when the bell tolled no community was an island.

Or more specifically, that no London area, however affluent and desirable, could refuse to share the burden of helping to combat the capital's crime.

And when criminals needed to be detained then Kew must play its part.

Eventually the hostel opened in 1982 and there were no major incidents of the kind that residents feared and prophesied. And although suspicions still lurk today in the minds of some bigots that the hostel could be a centre of trouble, it is obvious you are more protected from lawbreakers if you live near an intensively policed detention centre than on a gated estate.

It is not surprising that the extension proposed for Teddington's police station has caused a similar outcry. With the present Labour government trying to demonstrate that it is even tougher on crime than the Tories, things are far worse than they were 30 years ago.

Prisons were overcrowded in the seventies and eighties too - but nothing like the scale at present being experienced. The crisis has forced the present grizzly Home Secretary John Reid to tell judges and magistrates to think twice before imposing custodial sentences on non violent offenders.

You do not create a safe, just society by tossing law breakers willy nilly into jail. Prison must be the very last resort - and for the dangerous and the violent. There are far more effective ways of dealing with the petty criminals - although locking them up short term while their misdemeanors are assessed is obviously necessary.

And this is where police cells are essential and remain essential. The drunk, the burglar, the minor drug dealer, the fraudster may need to be detained until the professionals can work out the best punishment and the best ways to prevent reoffending.

The kind of people likely to be held in a Teddington cell would not be the ruthless rapist, armed robber or murderer, who would need to be put into high security centres and kept there until it can be demonstrated that they will not behave

violently again.

Those of us who live in this borough are highly privileged and we need to be constantly reminded of this. We live in one of the most sought after areas of London and enjoy benefits denied to 90 per cent of the world.

Nonetheless, it is good news that a proper public consultation exercise is to be embarked upon before any final decision is made on whether Teddington is the right site for this project or if somewhere like Twickenham sorting office is more suited.

MP Vincent Cable in his cautious response to residents' concerns has acknowledged the need for the facilities but wants full public consultation about the location and security.

MPs and councillors have a duty to remind people that if the police are to do their job effectively and the crime rates are to be cut, civilised holding areas have to be provided and in the places they are most needed.

What is important is that they are well run, effectively supervised and that every effort is made to try and ensure that once taken into custody, offenders are given the right incentives to live within the eyes of the law.

This is not an easy message to get across and is unlikely to win any votes - but it is at times like this our leaders need to prove they are statesman and not grubby self seeking politicians desperately trying to hang onto office.