

Neglected buildings could be the answer to public loo blues

Toilets have rarely been out of the news in the last two decades. Ever since it became nationwide policy to phase out most of the public conveniences provided by local authorities, London Transport and British Rail, they have been subject of public concern widely aired in this newspaper.

A lively debate popped up on the letters pages after I raised the issue in this column earlier this year of how and where to provide alternative facilities in Hounslow and Richmond upon Thames. There is clearly a long way to go before the borough is adequately served again.

The matter of how redundant buildings of all kinds should be used in the 21st century is a recurring challenge for amenity groups, residents' associations, councillors and planners. In this case, though, the purpose they served is far from outdated and it is only the question of how and by whom they are provided that is debatable.

In the past the old loos have been converted for diverse uses like small shops, restaurants, coffee bars and even snooker halls - and there have been no replacements.

Now a proposal has been put forward for converting one in Clevedon Road, Twickenham into a café which actually incorporates a toilet for the disabled. An advance indeed.

But there are still some that have remained desolate for decades, including a spacious single storey block



The Malcolm Richards Column

in Old Deer Park, Richmond, which has been boarded up since the 90s, apparently forgotten.

Yet here is a case where somewhere to relieve bladder and bowels is still very much needed, as hundreds of motorists use the extensive car parking

facilities and there is nowhere in the immediate vicinity.

It would seem sensible that when a new use is eventually found - and the council should be actively seeking one - some basic unisex provision needs to be incorporated.

It could be that some completely original purpose could be found for this valuable location, including a miniature gymnasium, tiny youth club or even sales kiosk.

There is currently nowhere you can buy a newspaper now until you get to Richmond station or the Kew Road, both a brisk walk away.

A tiny shop here alongside a unisex toilet might provide the answer because if open until early evening misuse and vandalism would be kept to a minimum and the fact that there is someone on duty would help make the whole area safer and pleasanter.

The Old Deer Park car park, in its beautiful rural setting, is extensively used by motorists coming to Richmond to work and shop.

At present it is totally isolated and, when the Richmond Adult College is closed, is remote from any business activity.

It should not be beyond the wit of Richmond upon Thames Council to find an entrepreneur with the imagination to breathe new life into neglected structures and to enhance the area, in keeping with the town's character and needs - while incorporating a basic closet for those caught short.