

Many people working in planning are probably only too well aware of the negative imagery surrounding planning and planners in the media. We might laugh it all off as a bit of joke, but there are real problems caused by the profession's poor image. In 2001 a Local Government Association survey found that 87% of English local authorities had experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining planning staff, and there have been suggestions that the profession's poor image is at least part of the problem. I would go further and suggest that the image of planning and planners can also have impacts on the policy process and on public confidence in the system.

Central government increasingly sees planning as a vehicle for 'delivery' across a wide range of policy fronts, from sustainable communities to climate change. Consequently, the operation of the planning system has become a matter of interest for a wider range of interest groups and government ministries than ever before (especially HM Treasury), all anxious to streamline, strengthen, modernise or otherwise reform it in various ways.

Against this background of intense political debate, there is also a long-term decline in public trust in professionals, including planners. The planning profession came into its own at the height of post-war boom. As confidence in professional expertise and what Harold Wilson called the 'white heat of technology' has waned, planners now face ever-increasing demands for public participation and accountability, through government monitoring, audit and targets.

Taken together, the wide-ranging impact of planning, combined with ongoing reforms and the crisis in recruitment and retention, means that the public image of the profession and public understanding of what planning is and what planners do are now more important than ever

before. Despite the importance of the media in shaping the public image of planning, there have been few studies systematically and empirically addressing the issue.

It was with this in mind that I undertook just such a study, the results of which have recently been published in the journal *Town Planning Review*.<sup>1</sup> My research involved a survey of articles relating to planning and planners in British local, regional and national newspapers covering a one-year period from October 2003 to October 2004. The aim of the research was to explore how planning and planners were represented in the British 'public' press during a period of reform and change in planning. An identical survey of articles in the Haymarket/RTPI journal *Planning* was also conducted over the same period to explore differences between 'professional' and 'public' coverage and representation. Articles were reviewed to see both what topics were covered and how they were covered.

The overriding impression gained from this review of planning coverage in the British press was one of antipathy, even hostility. In the national press, planning was typically framed as being too slow and frequently too complex. Common phrases here predictably included 'bureaucratic' and 'red tape'. The criticism most often centred on the speed of the system, but also often involved 'exposés' on house prices.

The negative stereotype of 'town planning' also applied to 'town planners'. Overall, the image of planners in the national press was quite negative, where it is present at all. Thus the planner is often seen as a 'humble bureaucrat' or even 'narrow-minded pen-pushers' (in the *Daily Telegraph*). The main exception to such largely critical commentary was in articles about particular planners. However, these were usually articles about planners in the past, for example obituaries such as that of Sylvia Law,

# a cause for concern

**Planning's negative media image may be taken for granted, not least among the profession itself, but the poor image of planning and planners undermines the policy process and public confidence in the system, and so needs to be tackled, says Ben Clifford**

first female president of the RTPI (in *The Times*). We thus have a situation where the impression left is one in which the only good town planner is a dead one.

Although criticism was the main topic in national papers overall, it should not be surprising, given the strong political persuasions of the British national press, to learn that the tone differed markedly between papers. Thus the rhetoric of the right-wing press was particularly critical of planning. Journalists in *The Times*, for instance, bemoaned 'the state bureaucracy of the planning system'. By contrast, the left-leaning press seemed comparatively sympathetic to planning, if by nothing more than the fact that it never referred to the planning system as 'Stalinist' (as several writers in the *Daily Telegraph* did).

That said, the left-leaning press was hardly full of praise for planning, and with respect to public participation one journalist in *The Guardian* reported a grandmother as saying: 'The local community has no say in anything that happens and, as a result, trusts nobody. They've lost all faith in the planning system.'

Criticism of the planning system as a whole was much less prominent in the local press. In general, local papers were more interested in the issue of community consultation and participation in the planning system, and on specific plans for urban regeneration and traffic management – planning in action. Yet these stories about particular developments frequently contained no comment from or about local planners. When there was comment about a particular development, it was much more likely to be from a local councillor than a planner. This, arguably, feeds into an image of planners as 'faceless bureaucrats'.

The presentation of planning and planners in *Planning* was strikingly different. Compared with the broadsheets, there was less critical comment about the system and fewer articles about housing. Instead, a wide range of topics, mostly about planning in action, presented an image of planning as important, relevant and highly topical. This image serves to highlight just how out-dated, stereotypical and generally negative the public press can be in its image of planners and planning. Given the effects those negative stereotypes can have, there is a pressing need for the planning profession to 'face-up' to this negative imagery.

An interesting parallel can be drawn with architecture. The reputation of that profession also suffered from its association with the brutalist developments of the 1960s and from searing public attacks, including those from the Prince of Wales in the 1980s. Yet things have moved on since then. A number of British national newspapers now have dedicated architecture correspondents, and architects are frequently seen on television. The

leadership of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) seems to have played a key role. RIBA has appeared keen to confront critics and engage with the media. A simple glance at its website illustrates this commitment: there is even a special 'Media Matters' kit downloadable to help architects in their dealings with the media.

## **'There is a need to stand up for planning when faced with negative comments about planners from architects, politicians and developers, among others, particularly when these are laced with half-truths'**

This kit advises that local media are much more likely to tell good news stories than the national press. Similarly, there is clearly room for good coverage of planning and planners at the grass-roots. For local authority planners, there may be constraints owing to authority rules about relations with the media, but some more proactive action would surely help. The national media may be trickier to deal with, given their predisposition towards negativity, but such is their importance in agenda-setting and the political process, they cannot be ignored. Greater leadership by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) would seem to be necessary here.

The hard work already done by RTPI staff notwithstanding, there is a need to further promote planning in an exciting and relevant way, linking the activity and profession to 'sexy' topics such as environmentalism, sustainability and urban design. There is also a need to be prepared to stand up for planning when faced with the all-too-frequent negative comments about planners from architects, politicians and developers, among others, particularly when these are often laced with half-truths.

There are probably no easy solutions to the long-standing negative imagery of planning and planners in the British press. But that is not an excuse for inaction. Engaging with the public press must be a vital concern for all those involved with and interested in planning.

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### Note

- 1 B.P. Clifford: 'Only a town planner would run a toxic waste pipeline through a recreational area': *Planning and planners in the British press*. *Town Planning Review*, 2006, Vol. 77 (4), 423-55