

writeback

Readers' letters are always welcome. They should be addressed to: Editor, Town & Country Planning, TCPA, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AS. Or sent by email to Nick.Matthews@tcpa.org.uk

What a difference three years makes

Planning has often had a difficult relationship with the media, as pointed out by Ben Clifford ('A cause for concern', *Town & Country Planning*, June/July 2007). However his research is at least three years out of date.

I started work as a press officer for the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) three years ago, and I do recognise much of the 'negative imagery' Ben talks about in his article. However July's round-up of RTPI press activity tells a different story. The RTPI took part in six television and radio interviews and featured in 15 articles in the national press. June's round-up included seven interviews on television and radio and 20 articles in the national press. RTPI appearances have included *Newsnight*, the *World Service*, *Radio 4's Today*, *PM* and *World at One* programmes, and *Channel 4's Dispatches*.

Ben suggests the RTPI should take more of a leadership role, but on this evidence it is clear we already have. For example the RTPI's most recent report, *Opening up the Debate: Exploring Housing Land Supply Myths*, has changed the way the national media view planning in relation to housing. The housebuilding industry, time after time, pointed solely to the planning system as the one major block on housing delivery. Our report and subsequent media presence shattered this myth and presented planning in a positive light.

We are proud to say we have fundamentally changed the paradigm of this debate. The RTPI has also been in close contact with the Callcutt Review of Housing Delivery who welcomed the report. Best of all, the Housing Green Paper contains two recommendations directly taken from our report – that land holdings be clearly declared, and that housebuilders who have land with planning permission use it or lose it. Ben is right to point to the impact of the media on policy-makers, but wrong to suggest the RTPI is not playing the game.

During my tenure with the RTPI I have noticed that planners find it difficult to shout about all the great things they are doing. I am slowly introducing a 'planners promoting planning' programme, to help raise confidence and skills in dealing with the media. The RTPI's online learning resource PlanningMatters.co.uk now has four modules on PR and dealing with the media (and RTPI monthly press updates are available at www.rtpi.org.uk). The

number of student planners is higher than ever. I'm not saying the future is sorted, but it is a lot rosier than three years ago.

Andrew Kliman

RTPI Communications Manager

Ben Clifford replies: I am very grateful to Andy Kliman for his interesting response to my piece. My research did indeed draw on a sample of coverage from 2004. I drew on that when commenting partly as there is very little systematic research to go on at all, and partly as the slow nature of academic publishing meant that research had only just gone into print. It is obvious that since that time there have been some very productive steps taken to try to improve the image of planning, yet to call the research 'at least three years out of date' is a little too simplistic.

While time factors prevent a second full survey just now, a quick glance at recent coverage in the UK papers shows much less venom than there has been in the past and clear evidence of the RTPI being more proactive. But there are still examples of negative coverage, particularly in the property sections of certain national newspapers and the editorial pages of local newspapers: 'The Planner's haven't got a clue' remains all too frequent. There is also a bigger problem of planning and planners simply still not being mentioned at all in articles on topics which are closely linked to planning. A clear example is seen in the column-inches on whether building on the floodplains should be curtailed in the light of recent events in England, very few of which contained any comment from planners. Planners across the country also continue to raise the issue of a poor image of the profession with me when I meet them in the course of my research.

That said, clearly efforts are being made by the RTPI which can only be applauded. Thus my overall assessment remains that there is 'cause for concern', although I am cautiously optimistic for the future.