bell cornwell
Town and Country Planning Consultants

CASE STUDY

The Value of Working with a Planning Consultant:

Lessons from a Long-Term Collaboration

Leigh Rix founded his consultancy business offering estates board level support after a career spanning 40 years in land and property. During this time, he directed a 43,000 acre portfolio on behalf of the National Trust and was Head of Property and Land at Clinton Devon Estate, a 25,000 acre estate stretching across North and East Devon.

When it comes to navigating the challenges of the planning system, the role of a planning consultant can go far beyond simply securing permissions. As such, Leigh started working with the team at Bell Cornwell in 2010 following a move to Devon. He has worked particularly closely with partner, Iestyn John, since 2012. As Leigh reflects in conversation with Iestyn recently, the real value of working with a planning consultant lies in the breadth of insight, continuity, and collaboration that such a relationship brings.

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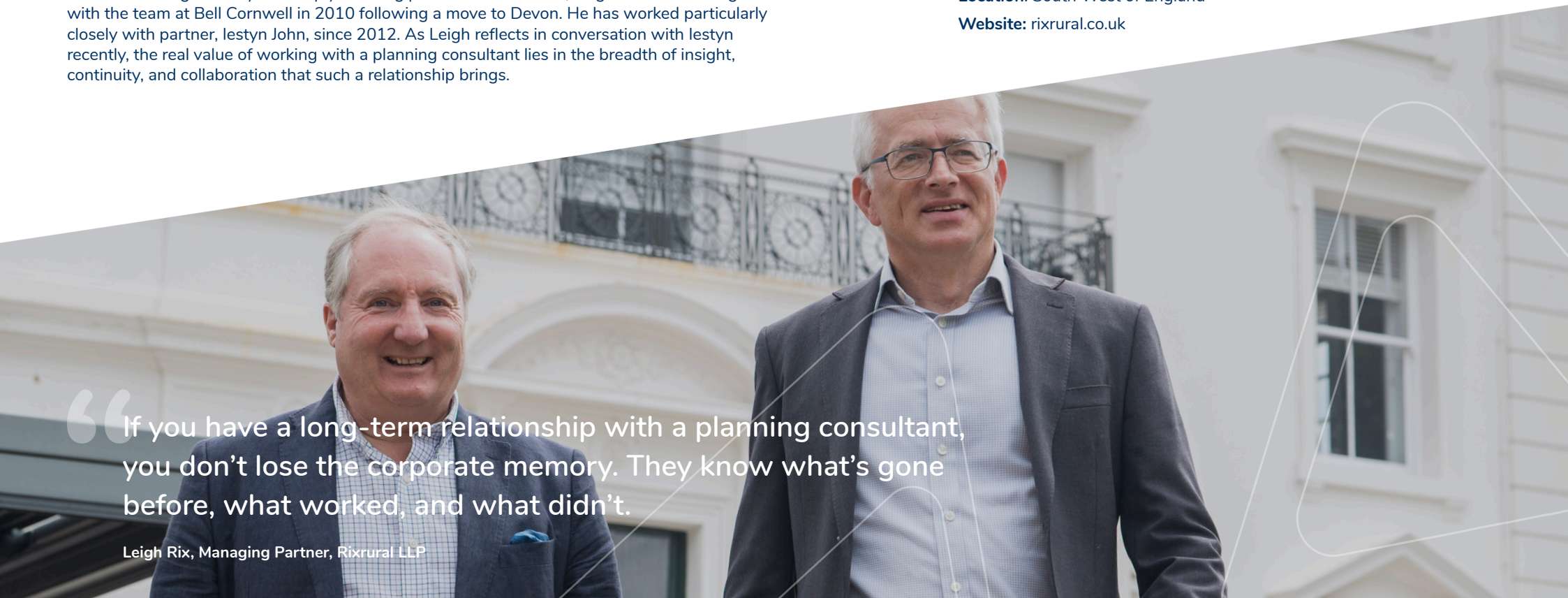

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Leigh Rix, Managing Partner, Rixrural LLP

Education and Ongoing Learning

For Leigh, one of the most important aspects of working with Bell Cornwell over the years has been the continuous flow of knowledge and industry updates.

He explains how, during his time at Clinton Devon Estates, Iestyn regularly worked from the estate office. He says, “By being in the office on a Friday, whether it was forestry, conservation, building maintenance or planning strategy, Iestyn picked up what was going on across the estate.” That proved to be an education not just for Leigh, but for the entire team.

Iestyn adds that this arrangement helped him understand the estate’s objectives more deeply and, in turn, tailor his advice. Ultimately, this day-to-day presence became a form of ‘horizon scanning’, keeping the estate alert to future policy shifts and local plan opportunities.

Building Relationships Over Time

The success of key projects that Leigh has worked on with Bell Cornwell, which have included a business park and numerous housing schemes, stemmed from the continuity of the client–consultant relationship. Leigh observes, “If you have a long-term relationship with a planning consultant, you don’t lose the corporate memory. They know what’s gone before, what worked, and what didn’t.”

For Iestyn, the trust built up over many years allowed both sides to approach projects in a pragmatic and creative way, confident that they shared the same long-term vision. To this end, they set up specialist project groups together which involved all the key members such as a builder, an architect and a communications consultant etc. This facilitated the process on numerous different levels, enabling the team to identify and address political and community concerns and using local knowledge to overcome technical issues.

“It’s not just about knowing the policies, but also the planning officers’ personalities and their attitudes to particular types of development because this helps shape the strategy for each project.”

Iestyn John, Partner, Bell Cornwell LLP

Personal Service in Practice

A recurring theme is the importance of a personal and accessible service. Leigh notes how valuable it is to have one main point of contact at Bell Cornwell. He explains he’s confident when he rings Iestyn that he’ll know what’s happening on his projects and is liaising with his colleagues behind the scenes. For Leigh that consistency is “hugely important especially when you’re also dealing with other external advisers such as accountants, and solicitors etc.”

This ‘surgery-style’ approach also means quick answers to smaller queries and informed discussions on strategic decisions. Close-knit teams at Bell Cornwell ensure that nothing is lost in handover.

Local Insight and Influence

Both Leigh and Iestyn emphasise the benefit of local insight. As Leigh puts it, “In a planning consultancy like Bell Cornwell, they know the planning officers in the districts - who to pick up the phone to, and how to play it. With planning officers increasingly hard to reach, that’s invaluable.”

Iestyn adds, “It’s not just about knowing the policies, but also the planning officers’ personalities and their attitudes to particular types of development because this helps shape the strategy for each project.” This insight has proved crucial in places like Budleigh Salterton and Exmouth, where sensitive negotiations around housing, allotments, and community facilities could easily have been derailed without the right approach.

A Holistic and Focused Approach

It’s clear how the strong consultant–client relationship has enabled more than just permissions for the projects that Leigh has worked on. It’s a strong partnership which encourages and promotes projects that balance commercial, community, and environmental interests.

Iestyn explains that by working together, the project team can identify common themes and nuances enabling them to put together an effective strategy to get the best possible results and outcome. It could be a biodiversity or social issue and addressing it early and taking a different approach than the standard developer, can help overcome objections. This also reflects Leigh’s objectives as the team is able to adopt a progressive stance in a way that many developers simply wouldn’t do.

Looking To The Future

Leigh and Iestyn continue to work closely together. This professional relationship, which has developed over the years, enables Iestyn to deliver better value as he has a deep understanding of what’s important to Leigh.

Leigh concludes that if he were advising another estate, his recommendation would be clear: build up a relationship with a planning consultant who can keep an eye on the market and the local plan, see what’s coming over the horizon, and help you respond strategically. That’s the added value.

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Leigh Rix, Managing Partner, Rixrural LLP

Let’s talk!

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