

EXPERT OPINION: DR DAVID BRAKE



DR DAVID BRAKE is a researcher, educator and journalist specialising in transport, urban policy, and public systems. He holds a PhD in Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and has written extensively on public transport, active travel, electric vehicles, and social policy in the UK and Canada.

David has worked across academia, journalism and policy advocacy, including senior roles in transit and environmental organisations in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, and has been recently based in Brighton. His work combines qualitative research, policy analysis and public communication, with a particular focus on how transport systems shape access, opportunity and everyday life.

He would love to collaborate with other people and groups in Sussex with an interest in transportation policy - contact him at davidbrake@gmail.com

SUSSEX TRANSPORT, DEVOLUTION AND THE DANGER OF DOING THE OBVIOUS THING

I should probably start with a confession.

I'm not from Sussex. Not originally. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise. I've lived in London. I've lived in Toronto. I've also lived somewhere where, frankly, if you don't have a car, you're stuck. Completely. So I come to Sussex with curiosity rather than certainty, which I actually think is quite a useful position to be in when you're trying to understand how a transport system really works.

Because the first thing you notice is this: Brighton works. Not perfectly, and certainly not without frustrations, but in a way that is immediately noticeable if you've lived elsewhere. Buses are frequent enough that you don't plan your life around them. Walking and cycling feel like realistic options rather than acts of bravery. You can, quite often, choose not to drive.

And then you start taking buses in the rest of Sussex.

And suddenly the system changes. Sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. Buses become infrequent. Gaps in the day appear. It can be difficult to figure out what you will pay to travel - especially if you cross county boundaries.

You get the sense that transport here has grown by accident rather than by design, shaped by historical boundaries and funding arrangements rather than by how people actually live and move. Which, to be fair, is largely what has happened.

This is why devolution matters. Not because it automatically delivers better transport, but because it makes joined-up thinking possible in a way that currently feels out of reach. Responsibility at the moment is fragmented in ways that are genuinely difficult even for professionals to navigate.

Bus companies operate across council boundaries. Councils subsidise services they don't fully control. Funding comes from multiple places, with multiple conditions attached. If you try to work out who is actually accountable for improving a particular journey, you can disappear down a rabbit hole remarkably quickly.

A mayor changes that dynamic. Not magically, but materially. Suddenly there is one person who can be asked, repeatedly, why things work the way they do, and who cannot quite so easily point elsewhere. That shift alone has value, provided it is used well.

The obvious temptation, of course, is to use that power to announce big, visible schemes. Roads loom particularly large here, and the A27 has become almost symbolic of Sussex's transport frustrations. It's understandable. Roads are tangible. They look like progress. Politically, they're neat. You can point at them.

But roads are seductive in exactly the wrong way. They promise certainty and deliver congestion. You build them, traffic fills them, and you are back where you started, only with less money and more arguments. Sussex, constrained by coastlines, national parks and historic settlements, cannot build its way out of transport problems. Even if it could, I'm not convinced that's the county people actually want to live in.

What strikes me far more forcefully is how badly Sussex suffers from east-west disconnection. This isn't an abstract policy concern; it's something you feel very quickly. My own first attempt to travel across the region by train took four hours. Four. That is not a minor inconvenience. It shapes where people work, where they study, who they can realistically see, and which opportunities feel available to them at all.

This is where devolution could be genuinely transformative, if it is approached with some discipline

Central government tends to think north-south. That's understandable, and it won't change overnight. Sussex doesn't have to follow that logic. A mayor with a strong mandate could say, quite reasonably: fine, you focus there — we're focusing here. East-west connectivity becomes the strategic priority rather than an afterthought.

Crucially, that doesn't require gold-plated rail projects that take decades to deliver. There are cheaper, faster options that would still be meaningful. Transport for the South East and Brighton & Hove Council are exploring a bus rapid transit system from Worthing to Eastbourne, with priority lanes to ensure reliable journey times and integration with rail. It might not be asProjects like these could make a big difference faster and for less money than a new rail line or highway.

SIX THINGS A NEW MAYOR CAN DO FIRST

1

Take control of standards, not just structures

Before reorganising ownership or launching complex reforms, a mayor could set clear, Sussex-wide expectations around fares, information, reliability and accessibility. Consistency alone would make everyday travel easier, even without new infrastructure.

2

Make east-west travel the immediate test case

Rather than trying to fix everything at once, a mayor could pick a single corridor – coastal or cross-county – and treat it as the proof point for what devolution is meant to achieve. If people can feel the difference there, confidence in the wider programme follows much more quickly.

3

Act early on youth travel affordability

Free or heavily discounted travel for under-22s, even if initially limited in scope or time, would address one of the most common barriers to education, work and social participation, while shaping long-term travel habits in a more sustainable direction.

4

Invest in people and data before concrete and tarmac

Strengthening transport teams, filling vacancies and bringing existing data together would improve decision-making across the board. Without capacity, even well-funded schemes tend to underperform.

5

Use the mayoral platform to explain trade-offs, repeatedly

Devolution creates a single point of accountability, but also a public platform. Explaining why some things come first, why others wait, and what success actually looks like reduces backlash far more effectively than slogans.

6

Resist the urge to declare victory too early

Quick wins matter, but they should point somewhere. The real goal is not a list of projects, but a system that makes sense and continues to improve after the headlines move on.

All of this raises a practical question, though, about where a mayor actually starts. Devolution offers a long-term opportunity, but early decisions matter disproportionately, both because they shape delivery and because they signal intent.

Affordability more broadly is where transport policy refuses to stay neatly in its lane. When young people say that travel costs stop them getting to college or work, that is not a transport failure in isolation; it is a social mobility failure. Other places have recognised this and acted. Free or heavily subsidised youth travel is not radical internationally; it is normal. The fact that it still feels ambitious here tells you something about how constrained the conversation has been.

There are, of course, risks.

A powerful Sussex mayor could make coordination with neighbouring regions more difficult rather than less. Bodies like Transport for the South East exist precisely because even after counties are enlarged, they will need to collaborate to tackle issues that affect the whole region. Otherwise we risk a continuation of national government transport strategy that tends to focus on connecting us with London more than connecting us with each other. . Replacing many underpowered voices with a few strong ones could lead to competition rather than collaboration if it is not handled carefully.

Planning capacity itself is perhaps the quietest crisis of all. A recent National Audit Office report found 46% of local authorities rated their capacity to deliver local transport as very or fairly poor. This was particularly the case for county and unitary councils, which had typical transport team vacancy rates of around 20% to 25%. Devolution that rushes straight to announcements without first rebuilding analytical and delivery capacity will disappoint everyone involved, regardless of how good the intentions are.

The prize

The real prize here is not a single project or policy. It is a system that makes sense, where buses, trains, walking, cycling, cars, pricing and land use are treated as parts of the same problem rather than as competing priorities. Where you pay once and move easily. Where responsibility is clear.

Devolution gives Sussex a rare opportunity to move in that direction. Not to do everything at once, but to do fewer things properly, with a clear sense of where they are leading.

Come and join the conversation.

Podcasts | Insight | Resources | Events

sussexandthecity.info

