

EXPERT OPINION: DAN YATES



DAN YATES is Head of Physiotherapy at University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust, with a 35-year career spanning clinical leadership, planning and change and service improvement. He has also held senior political and governance roles at Brighton & Hove City Council, including Leader of the Council (2018-2019), Finance Lead (2019-2020) and Chair of Audit & Standards (2020-2023), alongside roles focused on health and wellbeing.

Dan was shortlisted as one of the final two nominees to be the Labour party candidate for Mayor of Sussex & Brighton.

START WITH HOMES, END WITH HOPE: WHAT A SUSSEX MAYOR IS FOR

Devolution only matters if it changes outcomes. I'm not interested in a new layer of governance as a hobby. I'm interested in whether decisions get taken closer to Sussex, whether we stop passing people from pillar to post, and whether the county starts moving in a single direction on the big issues we all recognise.

At the moment, too many decisions that shape Sussex are taken too far away, with too little ability to reflect what Sussex actually is. And Sussex isn't one neat, uniform place. It is coast and Downs, commuter corridors and rural villages, big-city pressures and small-town fragility.

If we get devolution right, it gives us the ability to design solutions that fit that mix, rather than trying to squeeze Sussex into a one-size-fits-all national approach.

But it's also a test. People are tired of politics that sounds busy and delivers slowly.

People are tired of politics that sounds busy and delivers slowly. The first mayor will have to hit the ground running, because patience is thin and expectations are high. A mayor who looks important but can't move anything forward will be a failure; and not just personally, a failure of devolution itself.

What's holding Sussex back

I don't think Sussex lacks ideas. I think Sussex struggles to turn ideas into delivery at the right scale, because the current system pulls us apart.

In two-tier areas, it can be confusing even for councillors where responsibility starts and ends. If it's confusing for people inside the system, it's guaranteed to be confusing for the public.

People think they've got "their council", so they go there, and they get told it's someone else's responsibility. That's not how you build trust, and it's not how you solve problems quickly.

And above all of that sits the biggest constraint on Sussex’s future: housing.

We’re not building enough homes for what we know we need. That drives unaffordability, pushes rents up, stops young people staying, and makes Sussex less attractive to businesses that might otherwise invest here. Housing isn’t just a social problem; it becomes an economic choke point.

If people can’t afford to live here, businesses have higher cost pressures, staff churn rises, and local spending power falls. It becomes a cycle.

If we want better jobs, better health outcomes, better skills and better public services, we have to deal with the thing that’s making Sussex increasingly unaffordable.

Sussex needs a mayor who listens to experts (and isn’t precious about it)

One of the mistakes politicians make is believing they’re the person with all the answers. A mayor needs to “borrow” the best ideas from people who work in these systems every day than pretend they can invent everything themselves.

That means creating the right forums: getting the experts, practitioners, employers, community leaders and residents into the same room; and not just the loudest voices. Sussex has a very networked economy and a strong civic life, but it’s often in pockets. The mayor’s job is to connect those pockets at county scale, and then turn what comes out into decisions that deliver.

And we have to be honest: there won’t always be a single Sussex answer. Sometimes countywide strategy is right. Sometimes a place-based approach will be right, because Portslade and Peasmarsh are not the same place and shouldn’t be treated as if they are.

The test is always: does it deliver, and does it feel fair?

5 THINGS A SUSSEX MAYOR CAN DO FIRST

1

Set out a “first year delivery plan” residents can actually follow

Put the priorities in plain English. What changes in housing, transport, skills and infrastructure will be started in year one? Who is responsible? What are the milestones? People don’t want another glossy strategy document; they want to know what’s going to move, by when.

2

Unlock housing sites by fixing the blockers (not starting a planning war)

Start quickly by focusing on what’s already on the books: existing local plans, sites and stalled developments. A mayor should convene councils, utilities, developers and public agencies to work through what’s preventing progress (water capacity, transport connections, school places, primary care space, road layouts) and then use mayoral leverage (and lobbying power with government) to shift the blockers.

3

Make better use of public land and assets

Local authorities hold significant assets. Reorganisation creates the opportunity to take a hard look at what’s surplus or underused, and what could be repurposed for homes in places with existing infrastructure (e.g. town centres and urban edges). The mayoral authority should be ready with a capital approach, not just “encouragement”, so viable sites don’t sit idle while the housing crisis gets worse.

4

Insist on the right mix of homes, including homes people can age well in

Housing can’t just mean one type of unit. Sussex needs homes for different stages of life: genuinely affordable options for younger residents, family homes and far more well-designed, accessible housing for older people who want to move but can’t find somewhere suitable. That isn’t a niche issue. Done right, it creates movement across the whole system and frees up homes for others.

5

Build consent, not just compliance: bring in expert voices and citizen voices early

Planning debates become confrontational partly because the process rewards opposition: people who don’t want change shout loudest. A mayor should broaden the conversation so people who need homes, renters, younger residents, key workers and employers are genuinely represented. Create structured forums where evidence is shared honestly and the public can see how decisions were reached, because trust is built through transparency, not messaging.

The prize is a county where people can build a life and feel hopeful again

The biggest change the people of Sussex need isn't a new logo or a new office. It's a shift in trajectory.

Right now, too many people feel that living standards are stuck or sliding, and that opportunities are narrower than they were. My generation may be the first to leave our children worse prospects than we had, and that should bother us.

A Sussex mayor has to be judged on whether life feels more possible here: whether people can afford to live here, whether businesses can grow here without pricing everyone out, whether transport and infrastructure match reality, and whether politics starts to feel like a serious, local tool for improving lives rather than a distant performance.

That's what devolution is for. And if we don't deliver that, we shouldn't be surprised when people stop believing any of it.

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