

EXPERT OPINION: JAMES LEIGH



JAMES LEIGH is a Sussex-based consultant, delivery leader and entrepreneur with experience spanning digital strategy, organisational consultancy, programme management and business growth.

He is Chief Executive Officer of Vanberra, co-founder of Aria and founder of James Leigh Consulting, alongside strategic and delivery roles with Gold Project Management and Kintara. Previously, he led consultancy and delivery teams at James Chase, Coherence Digital and Graphite Digital, building a career around helping organisations turn ambitious ideas into practical action.

**SUSSEX MIGHT
HAVE TALENT, BUT
WE NEED TO
FOCUS ON THE
MACHINERY**

Sussex has always been a gateway

Its coastline has brought people, goods, ideas and disruption into Britain for centuries. It has produced radicals, inventors, entrepreneurs and people with a persistent interest in doing things differently. Even the martlets on the Sussex flag have no feet because they never stop moving.

That sense of movement offers Sussex a shared story at the moment when devolution asks us to imagine the county as something more coherent than a collection of councils, parliamentary constituencies and competing local identities.

But we shouldn't romanticise it.

The pace of movement across Sussex is profoundly unequal. There are communities that have benefited from investment, innovation and economic change, and others that have watched those opportunities pass them by. Devolution could help close that gap; but handled badly, it could deepen it.

The first mistake would be to present the new Sussex as Brighton & Hove with some additional countryside attached.

Brighton is economically, politically and culturally important, but it is not the whole county. Sussex also includes manufacturers, farmers, financial advisers, health businesses, food producers, rural communities, coastal towns and thousands of small companies operating well beyond the familiar creative and digital bubble.

These differences are part of Sussex's strength.

There has been too much patronising language in both directions, with metropolitan Sussex dismissing rural communities as resistant to change, and rural Sussex regarding Brighton and Lewes as hopelessly detached from everyday life. Neither caricature is true or helpful (although both contain just enough truth to remain politically potent).

A successful mayor must build on what connects these places without pretending they are identical.

WHAT THE NEW SUSSEX MAYOR SHOULD DO FIRST

1

Map the real economy

Build a detailed, regularly updated picture of employment, investment, self-employment, supply chains and emerging sectors across the whole county

2

Create pathways for firms to scale

Focus support on helping freelancers and microbusinesses become sustainable employers, rather than endlessly celebrating start-ups

3

Keep more value in Sussex

Use procurement, investment funds, workspace, business networks and university partnerships to help locally generated ideas grow locally

4

Treat the county as a network of places

Build economic plans around several connected centres rather than allowing Brighton to become the default headquarters for everything

5

Create a Sussex test-and-learn fund

Back practical experiments in transport, health, skills, housing, farming, technology and public-service reform, with clear routes to scaling successful ideas.

6

Connect rural and urban innovation

Bring technology businesses together with farming, manufacturing, food production, tourism and land-based industries

7

Stop talking down to people

Explain devolution through the politics of everyday life: jobs, journeys, housing, skills, services and whether people can build a decent future where they live

An ambitious economy

Sussex has a large population of freelancers, founders, small businesses and highly skilled people. It is good at generating ideas, expertise, research, experimentation and specialist services.

The problem is that much of the resulting value is captured elsewhere.

People living in Sussex frequently work for businesses headquartered in London, Surrey, Manchester or overseas. Local consultants help national organisations grow. Sussex researchers and technologists contribute to products scaled in other regions. Businesses elsewhere benefit from talent developed here.

Sussex risks becoming a service economy rather than an enactment economy; a place that supplies the skills, thinking and early-stage ideas, but lacks the machinery to retain ownership, investment, jobs and growth.

That is a more useful economic challenge than simply declaring that Sussex is “good at tech” or “famous for wine”.

Those sectors are critical; but easy narratives can obscure where substantial growth is actually occurring. Health entrepreneurship, financial and professional services, advanced food production and technology-enabled agriculture may prove at least as important. The vast controlled growing operations around Chichester are less picturesque than a vineyard, but they might tell us more about the future economy.

The mayor’s job should not be to select fashionable sectors based on reputation. It should be to understand where Sussex genuinely has an advantage, where investment is already flowing and where public intervention could help local firms move from supplying growth to owning it.

Sussex as Britain’s laboratory

There is a bigger opportunity here.

Sussex could position itself as a laboratory for Britain: a place where new approaches to business, public services, democracy, technology and community development are tested in real conditions.

It would require institutions willing to experiment, share data, accept occasional failure and scale what works.

Sussex has historical form in this though, and the instinct still exists right across the county for restless, argumentative, entrepreneurial and politically plural innovation. The county is much less predictable than old clichés of 'Conservative countryside' and 'lefty Brighton' suggest.

Devolution offers the chance to turn that restless energy into practical economic and social value.

Sussex does not lack talent, ideas or ambition.

What it lacks is the shared machinery to turn them into lasting local benefit. Building that machinery should be the mayor’s first and most important task.

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