

SUSSEX NEEDS A BUSINESS STORY BOLD ENOUGH TO UNITE US

GAVIN MCWHIRTER is the Founder of **Digital Islands**, leading programmes of support for start-ups, entrepreneurs and small business owners across Sussex, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

With 25 years' experience in sales, marketing and strategy, Gavin specialises in helping SMEs grow by developing clear value propositions and practical growth plans. Through Digital Islands, he works with more than 30 trusted specialists, partnering with local authorities to deliver fully-funded support that strengthens local economies.

He is a passionate advocate for small business owners and for building vibrant communities that sustain growth and creativity.



DRIVING ACROSS BRITAIN RECENTLY, I WAS STRUCK BY HOW CLEARLY REGIONS TELL THEIR STORIES.

In the Wirral you see huge chemical plants and industrial complexes. In the Midlands it's logistics hubs and automotive. London? Finance and consulting, of course.

But Sussex? Past Gatwick, it's harder to pin down. We have a bit of everything - but in micro form. Precision engineers in Lancing, creative studios in Brighton, food and drink entrepreneurs scattered along the coast. Tucked-away firms making remarkable things, but not shouting about it. **It's a region of niches.**

That diversity is a strength, but it's also a weakness. We don't project a single story. We don't have the obvious industrial identity that Midlands logistics or Manchester manufacturing can rally around

Sussex is quirky, experimental, small scale - and proud of it. But that makes it harder to stand tall on the national stage.

Here's what I think a mayor could do:

- Back the niches. Sussex will never churn out products at Far East prices or Midlands volumes - but that's not the point. Our strength is precision, quality, design and repair. Small batch manufacturing. High value creativity. It's not about cheap, it's about distinctive
- Champion the brand builders. So many Sussex businesses are about ideas, packaging and positioning - they outsource production but own the concept. That's a different kind of economy, but one that **can** grow. Innovation here is less about factories, more about ingenuity

- Make it part of a unifying story. People move here to do something interesting. Often after stepping away from the corporate treadmill. Too often though, it stops at being a lifestyle business

What if the Sussex brand said: this is the place where you start something new, where quirky ideas turn into serious business?

What we need is a bold, unifying narrative that resonates with many and excites young people. Not "we make widgets better than anyone else" but, something that makes people say 'Yes - that's why I want to live here, build here, stay here.'

Other places are trying this on a town-by-town basis, but it's too small. **Sussex has the scale to make it real, if we're brave enough to tell that story.**

Devolution could give us the chance to do just that.

Not a three year plan that's out of date before it lands, but a long term commitment to shaping Sussex's identity as the home of niche, high-quality idea-led businesses.

A place where innovation isn't just an aspiration - it's who we are.

“
Our strength is niche, quality and ingenuity — but we need a story big enough to inspire the next generation
”



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