

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DEVOLUTION LIKE GROWN-UPS



NATALIE ORRINGE is a communications strategist who works at the intersection of insight, policy and public value. Based in Sussex, she leads Strategy + Impact, advising leadership teams on aligning strategy with clear internal messages and a credible external story.

Previously Chief Marketing Officer at the London Borough of Newham, she pioneered a 360° model linking resident insight with policy, research, digital, communications, marketing and media to improve service delivery and trust.

Natalie chairs Together Co, the Brighton & Hove loneliness charity, where purposeful networking and partnership have unlocked new momentum.

I JOINED THE SUSSEX AND THE CITY PODCAST

to talk about the need for devolution to be treated as an opportunity to reset trust in local government.

This begins by closing the often deep mismatch between what is being said, what people experience, and therefore what they believe. For devolution to succeed, we have to rethink how, when and why we communicate.

My insight comes from a career in communications and local government leadership. I hadn't followed the usual government route, starting in fashion PR (a questionable life choice), then running an agency before taking the leap into work I believed had more purpose.

This included time as Chief Marketing Officer at a large London borough council; and what I learned was stark. Councils generate thousands of pieces of content each month, but much of it misses the mark. Wrong tone. Wrong channel. Wrong moment.

The trust problem in local government isn't about messaging. Inconsistency, complex language and ineffective use of channels erode trust faster than any headline.

In my view, we've undervalued the strategy and discipline of communications and marketing. Done well, it means using systems, data and process to listen. Then, using insight to improve creative output, measure what works and do more of it.

Instead, government communications often prioritise policy and media relations; response rather than planning. This is compounded by a lack of focus on the power of networking as a way to engage and mobilise communities.

Through my experience chairing the befriending charity Together Co in Brighton, I have seen the value of leaders doing purposeful networking. Too often 'partnership' sits in a silo. It should be central to how we earn trust and make change happen.

Part of why partnership works is because there's far more interest and support for making positive change happen than we often realise.

Take devolution. A topic that could easily be dismissed as outside what most people care about, yet, when I chaired a recent Brighton Chamber event, hundreds of people showed up to find out what it would mean. There is real appetite to find out more and Sussex could capitalise on the opportunity.

Consultation is vital, but we need to treat people like adults. Be clear about what you're asking, what happens next and when you'll report back.

Show how input feeds into milestones. Close the loop. Stop the two-week "consultation" periods and expensive platforms no one uses.

Share what failed as well as what worked.

PEOPLE WANT TO BE INVOLVED.

But they expect to be taken seriously. This means having the same clear, adult conversation again and again. Resist the urge to over complicate. Too many consultations are designed to tick boxes, not close loops.

We need to be braver: share outcomes, show progress, invite challenge and repeat. This matters because the stakes are about to rise. In 2026, local government reorganisation and mayoral elections will collide.

Personalities and party lines will compete with statutory complexity.

If we don't tell the story well, someone else will and probably not on our terms. Devolution gives us a rare opportunity to rebuild confidence through simple, human, relentless communication. If we can do that, we won't just earn the right to make difficult decisions - we'll build the public mandate to stand by them.

“partnership works because there's far more interest and support for making positive change happen than we often realise.”