

EXPERT OPINION: DR CARA COURAGE



DR CARA COURAGE is a globally recognised placemaking leader, culture and communities consultant, editor and researcher. She is chair of Phoenix Art Space in Brighton and a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Place Management and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Cara led Tate Exchange at Tate Modern (2018–22) and has held senior roles in museums and arts organisations, including a contract post as Executive Director at MOCAD.

She holds a PhD from the University of Brighton and runs her own arts-based placemaking practice, with a specialism in public engagement in the built environment. She is editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking* (2021), co-editor of *Trauma-Informed Placemaking* (2023) and *Creative Placemaking and Beyond* (2018), and author of *Arts in Place* (2017). Cara lives in West Sussex.

THE SUSSEX WE
COULD BE;

PEOPLE, PLACE
AND PURPOSE

Sussex is often spoken about as if it were one place, but anyone who lives here knows it is far more complex. It is not just a landscape of coastal and inland, rural and urban, east and west difference, but one of many local identities, each with its own histories and rhythms of life.

As Sussex moves towards devolution, bringing these strands together becomes essential. Its long term success rests on creating a civic identity that reflects the county's diversity, so we need approaches that start with people, not administrative boundaries. Placemaking, the process through which people shape the places they live in, offers a way to do this by recognising the richness of Sussex's many communities and helping them see themselves as part of something larger without losing what makes each distinct.

Communities of place, interest and impact

For Sussex to thrive under devolution, it must be understood as a system of interconnected communities rather than a single territory. These include communities of place – our streets, villages, cities; communities of interest, think anything from our history nerds to our sports fans; and communities of impact, from our small businesses to our young people, our carers to our faith groups.

When these communities intersect, they create opportunities for civic imagination. They help people move beyond competition between localities towards a shared ambition for the region. Placemaking can support this by centering community voice and enabling dialogue across difference.

What a place-based approach offers devolution

Taking this approach reframes devolution from being primarily a transfer of power from Westminster to the regions to becoming an expansion of local purpose. It makes governance human by rooting it in lived experience. Decisions made through a place-based lens are grounded in how people actually live, move and connect, how they see themselves in the world.

A place-based approach could transform collaboration in Sussex. It would build trust through local decision-making, encourage partnerships across sectors and geography and make policy more relational. Devolution could then become not simply an act of delegation but a platform for civic creativity and belonging.

The role of the Arts, Culture and Heritage sector

This is why the arts, culture and heritage sector is central to the Sussex conversation. Creative practice provides the tools and spaces through which people make sense of their place and contribute to shaping its future, activating the county's civic conscience and its collective imagination.

A visionary mayor, not a managerial one

The Mayoral role calls for imagination, empathy and an ability to convene others around a shared civic story. This will be a new Sussex and it demands new leadership qualities. The manager in chief is out; the meaning maker is in. The Mayor needs to lead through collaboration, connecting the strengths of our communities of place, interest and impact into a common purpose. They must act as a storyteller for the Sussex we could be, not only the Sussex we already are.

Towards a shared civic story

Devolution is as much about belonging and imagination as it is about funding pots and new forms of decision making. The Mayor's role will be to nurture that belonging and connect the many parts of Sussex into a collective whole. If we get this right, Sussex can become more than the sum of its parts: a living example of what happens when people, place and purpose come together to shape their future.

TWO THINGS THE SECTOR NEEDS TO BE DOING

- 1 Find a collective mechanism through which to engage the new Mayor. Without a joined up voice, culture risks being seen as an afterthought in devolution planning rather than a driving force.
- 2 Continue investing in and advocating for creative work that helps communities articulate their hopes, frustrations and lived realities, making culture an essential insight partner for any Mayor wanting to govern with, not for, the public.

TWO THINGS A NEW MAYOR NEEDS KNOW

- 1 Culture is not an add on to economic development; it is a contributor to the county's economy and part of the civic infrastructure that enables other sectors to thrive.
- 2 Cultural practitioners are already expert in working collaboratively, across difference and at multiple scales. This expertise is central to building a new civic identity for Sussex – call on us to help you.

TWO EARLY ACTIONS FOR LASTING IMPACT

- 1 Convene a Sussex Civic Forum bringing together communities of place, interest and impact to explore shared priorities. This should be a platform for civic imagination where people across the county shape the narrative and strategy for a devolved Sussex.
- 2 Create a Cultural Advisory Group to embed culture within the mayoral agenda, drawing on the knowledge of artists, heritage professionals and cultural leaders so that every policy area, from environment to economy, is informed by cultural intelligence and public participation.

Disagreement as default and common ground by design

Let's normalise the obvious: disagreement is the default. We have lived different lives; of course we will see things differently. The trick is to design for overlap: define the three or four things we must agree on, the non-negotiables that anchor a 30-year settlement, and agree to keep negotiating the rest in good faith.

Servant leadership helps here: an elected figure who acts in service of an idea larger than their own agenda; someone who can hold a neutral space, reflect what people are saying, and articulate a shared path without pretending unanimity.

And underneath all of this is pride, not a defensive badge, but everyday civic pride: clean streets, safe parks, libraries that work, buses that come, people who feel seen. When those things hum, no one remarks that "the lifts are working"; they just work. Good, at its best, is quiet. The role of a mayor is to make quiet good more frequent, and to make the reasons visible enough that people feel it is theirs.

The prize

If Sussex can learn to talk better, decide better and deliver while it learns, we can stitch our small pieces into a shared purpose without losing what makes each place itself.

That looks like quieter services that just work; clusters that collaborate; councils with clearer remits; communities with more agency; a mayor who is visible, listening and servant-minded.

It won't be tidy. It doesn't need to be.

Change is both loss and renewal. Name the loss; build the renewal; keep going.

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