

EXPERT OPINION: PROFESSOR CHIRANTAN CHATERJEE



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ONE MAYOR, MANY WINS:

HOW SUSSEX CAN TURN IDEAS INTO GOOD JOBS WITHOUT LOSING BRIGHTON'S SOUL

Brighton & Hove is famous for creativity, inclusion and a healthy suspicion of top-down schemes. So when people hear talk of a single elected mayor for Brighton & Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex, the reflex is to ask: will this bulldoze local identity? It doesn't have to.

Done right, a mayor can knit our coast and counties into a working innovation system, turning university science and Brighton's creative edge into local jobs, cleaner energy and better health.

This isn't theory from somewhere else. It's the tradition Sussex helped create: organising science, firms, finance, skills and the public sector as a system, the approach pioneered by Christopher Freeman at Sussex's Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU).

The friction- why ideas leak to London

We're good at research but slower at turning it into Sussex jobs. REF 2021 rated 89% of the University of Sussex's submitted work world-leading or internationally excellent; 93% of impact was "outstanding" or "very considerable." That's a serious platform being underused for venture creation.

On outputs, the Nature Index places Sussex with an overall "share" around 19 in the latest year, evidence of steady high-quality publication. Yet founders still head up the line.

Why? Fragmented commercialisation services, thin early-stage capital and a shortage of flexible "grow-on" lab/office space-problems seen across the UK.

The national picture explains the pressure. After rising in 2023, patent applications to the UKIPO fell 5.1% in 2024 to 18,953 (trade marks rose). That's exactly when regions need to work harder to turn research into revenues.

At the European Patent Office, UK applicants filed 6,076 applications in 2024 (up from 5,895 in 2023) amid a global total outstanding-healthy momentum, but you only feel it locally if firms scale here.

Closer to home, the South East remains one of the UK's most inventive regions - 1,841 UK-resident applications in 2021, second only to London - so Sussex has room to lift its share.

Brighton’s identity is an accelerant, not a brake

Some worry that a “hard-edged” innovation plan might jar with Brighton’s progressive identity - LGBTQ+ inclusion, gender studies, and creative counter-culture. It shouldn’t. Those very features attract the diverse, non-conformist talent that drives new products and companies like it has done for San Francisco. The task is designing growth so it reflects Brighton’s values: mission-led ventures, inclusive procurement, and diverse boards for our accelerators and funds.

We’ve done this before at city scale. The 2014 City Deal anchored a creative-tech cluster around New England House and the FuseBox/Digital Catapult - a reminder that targeted, place-based investments work here.

Our obvious anchors

Sussex already has “anchor tenants” that can pull in suppliers, capital and talent: the two universities, NHS Sussex, Gatwick and the clean-energy coast. Gatwick’s footprint alone supported ~63,800 UK jobs and £4.6 bn GVA in 2023 - a scale few regions can match.

Offshore, Rampion 2 (up to 90 new turbines) has government consent and is expected to create up to 4,000 jobs during construction, with capacity estimates around 1.2 GW (roughly a million homes’ worth of power). Those are sussexable supply chains if we line up space, skills and procurement.

What “excellent” looks like and the local gap

Benchmarking against the leaders would be important. Cambridge has the world’s densest science cluster by population because it co-located science parks, venture funds, specialist law/accounting and scale-up space, then kept firms local.

The UK overall remains a serious innovation player (EPO data above), but Brighton & Hove’s 283,870 residents will feel it only when we convert papers and patents into customers and jobs along the coast and into the Gatwick corridor.

SIX THINGS A SINGLE MAYOR CAN DO NOW

1

Name two missions everyone can see

Health & Care Innovation Coast: make Sussex the UK’s living lab for prevention, AI diagnostics, and med-tech adoption through challenge calls with NHS Sussex (first-customer effect).
Clean Coastal Powerhouse: tie skills and supplier development to Rampion 2 and port electrification at Shoreham/Newhaven so contracts stick locally. (The anchor is real; the spillovers are a choice.)

2

Build the “Sussex Innovation Spine”

Create a walkable corridor Falmer ⇄ New England House/FuseBox ⇄ Shoreham ⇄ Crawley–Gatwick with affordable wet/dry labs, testbeds and grow-on space - so spinouts scale here rather than relocating. This updates the City Deal logic for a mayoral scale.

3

Land and empower anchor tenants

Offer long leases, planning certainty and coinvestment to one global med-tech/AI tenant at Falmer and one offshore-wind OEM/O&M hub at the ports. The aim isn’t subsidy; it’s signalling: anchors de-risk the region for investors and train the people who found the next wave of firms (as seen in Bangalore, Boston and Tel Aviv).

4

Procure like a venture investor

Run SBIR-style challenge competitions via the mayoralty and NHS Sussex (waiting-list tech, community health, retrofit, port decarbonisation). Early revenue shrinks the valley of death far more than another grant programme.

5

Pool capital for scale-ups

Create a £50–100m evergreen “Talent & Capital” fund, blending mayoral, NHS, local pension and corporate money, perhaps even local philanthropists - to coinvest with angels and VCs. Focus on scale-up space, data infrastructure and decarbonisation. Gatwick-area businesses are already among the most productive in the UK; a regional fund helps founders tap that market without moving.

6

Make it a learning system

Stand up a Sussex Evidence & Policy Lab with SPRU-SUSSEX to publish a public dashboard - spinouts, survival, local jobs and pay, diffusion into SMEs, carbon saved - and then iterate. If something isn’t working, fix it fast.

Why residents will notice quickly

Because it’s tangible. Rampion 2 is consented and shovel-ready; Gatwick’s growth plans (subject to final approvals) unlock private investment; and City Deal-era sites are already familiar to readers. Tie contracts to local apprenticeships and supplier development and you’ll see the benefits in household incomes and business rates, not just in glossy brochures. Leverage here for a wellness economy, the cricket and football ecosystem too.

Because it’s distinctively Brighton & Hove. The city’s values - openness, creativity, inclusion - aren’t a thing to be “balanced against” growth. They are the competitive edge that differentiates Sussex from copy-paste tech parks elsewhere. Use them to design better health tech, fair-work standards and user-centred clean-energy services - and we’ll keep the graduates and founders who now drift away.

The local compact

Here’s a simple compact the mayor could offer:

- No displacement, no hollowing-out. Growth corridors will be designed with local traders, renters and residents, not around them
- Open books. The evidence lab publishes what works and what doesn’t - so the public can see where money flows and who benefits
- Fair work in the supply chain. Every pound of public co-investment comes with apprenticeships, skills and good-job standards attached

The prize

Geography matters. Innovative clusters form where people and ideas collide. The collision points in Sussex are obvious: Falmer labs, Brighton’s tech cluster, the ports and Gatwick.

The job now is to connect them under one mayor with clear missions, a couple of anchor tenants and a rule that first customers come from here - especially the NHS. Brighton keeps its soul; Sussex gets the jobs.

If we organise our strengths as a system - exactly what Sussex’s own innovation scholars like Chris Freeman have argued for half a century - we can show the country what inclusive, coastal, clean-growth looks like. And we can do it without pretending to be Silicon Valley.

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