

EXPERT OPINION: CHRIS GOODMAN



CHRIS GOODMAN is a Sussex-based entrepreneur and the co-founder of Focus Group, a UK telecommunications and IT business founded in 2003 in Shoreham. It was the first Sussex-grown business in the 21st century to be valued at over \$1bn.

Having sold the business, Chris co-founded Focus Foundation in 2020 with his wife, Elaine Goodman. The foundation is a grant-giving organisation focused on supporting grassroots charities and strengthening community-led provision, with particular emphasis on wellbeing and tackling mental health stigma. They have awarded over £1m in grants so far.

**WHY SUSSEX
DEVOLUTION
COULD HELP MORE
EFFECTIVE
PHILANTHROPY
TACKLE THE
POSTCODE
LOTTERY IN CARE
AND CHARITY**

Devolution: less faff, more consistency?

If you are running a private-sector business like I did for 20 years, devolution won't suddenly rewrite your life. Don't expect economic fireworks - other than better planning decisions and the benefits of dealing with fewer local authorities.

Where it can matter is wherever business provides services to the public sector. Anything that reduces complexity helps, especially for SMEs. Standardising tender requirements, frameworks, and procurement approaches could remove barriers and make it easier to work with public bodies. If devolution can simplify how decisions get made and reduce needless duplication, that's not a small win - it's a productivity win.

But the bigger issue I care about is the charity and voluntary sector across Sussex. And devolution could have a big impact.

The real problem: a postcode lottery for support

Focus Foundation is a charitable funder. We're not a "doing charity"; we grant money to the people doing the work. That means we get a wide-angle view of what's happening across lots of social issues and lots of places.

And here's what's stark: the challenges are broadly consistent across the county, but the quality and accessibility of support varies wildly. Not just East versus West, but sometimes town to town.

A clear example is cancer support and counselling. We work with Brighton Therapy Centre on a programme called Hope and Healing. It enables grassroots charities to refer cancer patients and families affected by a cancer diagnosis for counselling. We're currently funding £50,000 a year as a pilot.

When we looked for partners to provide similar counselling elsewhere in Sussex, we saw a really obvious gap. Near Hastings and St Leonards, you've got fantastic provision through the Sara Lee Trust - well-established, embedded, doing brilliant work. But their honest position was: "We've got this covered in our area." Great for people who live there. Less great if you're in Crawley, Horsham, Eastbourne, Seaford - places where there isn't an equivalent, and where people can't just magic up the same level of support because a boundary line says "not our patch".

SIX THINGS A SUSSEX MAYOR CAN DO FIRST

1

Publish a “postcode lottery” map of charity-backed support

Commission a simple countywide picture of where front-line support is strong and where it’s patchy (start with a few high-impact areas like cancer support and crisis mental health). Make it public, update it regularly, and use it to guide measurable decision

2

Create a Sussex funders’ table with actual teeth

Convene a small, practical working group of major local grant-givers (family foundations, Sussex Community Foundation and other key trusts) to share intelligence: what’s working, what’s failing, where the gaps are, and where collaboration would stop duplication

3

Back capability, not just projects

Launch a “charity strengthen-up” offer: governance support, trustee recruitment, finance basics, safeguarding, impact measurement, leadership coaching. Lots of grassroots groups don’t need another tiny restricted grant, they need the know-how to handle bigger funding properly

4

Scale what works by replication partnerships

Identify the charities with models that are genuinely replicable (the “leading lights”), then help them work with peers in other towns to replicate delivery locally. The goal isn’t one charity expanding everywhere; it’s spreading the method through partnerships

5

Scale what works by replication partnerships

Build a public giving campaign that invites residents and businesses in, then matches donations via a pooled fund from local funders. Crucial bit: publish where the money goes, what it achieved, and what was learned, otherwise people smell fuzziness and keep their wallets shut

6

Mobilise Sussex employers as community investors

Create a straightforward “business giving pledge” with practical options: payroll giving, volunteering time, skills-based support, and pooled contributions into local funds. Frame it as workforce resilience: if staff are struggling, businesses can’t pretend it’s somebody else’s problem.

I see the same kind of issue with access to mental health support for people who are suicidal. There are great national helplines and online services, but in-person care, in-person support, the thing that can genuinely catch someone before they hit the floor: it’s not evenly available. Not even across a relatively small county like Sussex.

This is where devolution has to be more than a badge. A Sussex mayor should be able to name a handful of 5-10 priority challenges, and go after the unevenness with proper intent.

Why Sussex gives less than it could (and how a mayor could change that)

Sussex has a lot of wealth. Plenty of people have made money and chosen to live here: the lifestyle, the coast, the countryside, the people.

And yet, too much charitable giving still flows elsewhere: to London institutions, to big national causes, to the university someone went to decades ago. Meanwhile, grassroots groups down the road can’t get seen.

Part of this is structural. Grassroots charities (those with income under £1m) massively outnumber larger charities, but they’re quieter. Nationally, around 85% of charitable funding goes to 4% of charities. That tells you everything: the small ones are doing a lot with a lot less, and they don’t have the budget to shout over the crowd.

So you need a forum that connects people. A Sussex mayor could help create that visibility and connection at scale.

One very practical approach is reviving a modern version of what local fundraising used to be: a county-wide call to action, supported across media and communities, not reliant on everyone reading the local paper, but using today’s channels to create the same shared moment of collective effort.

There are also interesting tools like match funding, where a collective of funders matches public donations into a central pot, then distributes them carefully to organisations that are best positioned to use the funds well — with transparent reporting, so scepticism doesn’t fester.

Businesses need to stop pretending this isn't their problem

We also need a call to arms for Sussex businesses. Not just high-net-worth individuals: businesses. Because our employees live in these communities.

I'd love to believe none of my staff ever needed a food bank, or struggled to afford mental health or SEND support for their child. The reality is: some always. And today's cost of living makes that unavoidable for many, if not most, households.

Any company wanting to look after its team, also needs to care about the ecosystem of support around them. Sometimes that means giving without a gala dinner attached. Sometimes it means supporting the unglamorous core costs that keep a charity functioning. And often it means simply knowing who's out there, so when a family is in crisis, someone can point them to the right door.

If a Sussex mayor can help make that support more consistent, more visible, and easier to access, and can bring funders and businesses into a smarter partnership, then devolution won't just be a governance reform. It'll be a step towards a county that feels fairer to live in.

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