

EXPERT OPINION: SARAH WILLCOX



SARAH WILLCOX is the founder of Fairisle, a Sussex-based consulting practice specialising in organisational change, team facilitation and leadership development. After years running delivery projects, she shifted focus to the human side of change: how people experience uncertainty; how leaders create the conditions for honest dialogue; and how organisations keep delivering while they adapt.

A Sussex resident for nearly four decades, Sarah works with businesses, public bodies and charities to help them “*do the things they can control attentively and courageously*”, while staying open to what will inevitably shift.

NAVIGATE THE CHANGE, BUILD THE CONTAINER:

HOW SUSSEX CAN MOVE FROM SMALL PIECES TO SHARED PURPOSE

Where to start when everything is moving

I don't think of “change management” as a neat process. I find it more helpful to think of it as navigating change. So much sits outside anyone's control - politics, budgets, headlines - that the real work is helping people pay attention to what they can do, and to do it with care.

Sussex is heading into a period of deep reorganisation: a new mayor, a combined authority; local government reshaped beneath it. The timescales reach 30 years but the emotions flip week to week. If we want this to work, we must learn how to have better conversations, more often, and earlier than feels comfortable.

“Good” conversations sound obvious, but they're not always easy. They require a shared language. Or at least a shared understanding that language will be fuzzy and contested for a while.

Agreement is not the aim, but comprehension is. When stakes rise, practiced habits are what help. An ability to pause; listen; ask what problem we're trying to solve. If we can name the hard bits without treating them as failure we give ourselves a solid base. Acknowledging that “this is messy”, “we disagree here”, “we don't know yet” can really help humanise the process, and enable teams to form around honesty.

Another essential approach is building while driving. Change in Sussex won't arrive after a tidy pause; services must continue as structures shift. That means creating delivery teams that can execute today's tasks and test tomorrow's arrangements by evaluating, iterating and adjusting in the open. It is the organisational equivalent of changing a tyre while the car is still moving; it's safer when roles are clear and feedback loops are short.

A third lens is scale. Sussex is a patchwork of small things (towns, parishes, micro-businesses) knitted between sea and Downs. We haven't grown up around giant corporates or big civic machines. So rather than leaping from “small and local” to “big and central”, let's think in clusters and nodes; groups that can act together without losing identity.

I like Gandhi's line about “production by the masses” not *mass production*: lots of capable units, coordinated enough to move as one - like the winter starling murmuration over the pier. And an interesting fact is that you're more likely to find starlings over the Brighton Palace Pier these days, and not the West Pier; even starlings gently change their habits over time.

Story before structure

Regions that have settled devolution well, started with a clear proposition: “this is the problem we must fix; this is what the mayoral model unlocks.” Sussex has, at times, felt the reverse - a solution in search of a story. That’s not fatal; it’s honest. The pivot is to ask: what could this solve for us? Skills pathways that match our economy; infrastructure coordinated across boundaries; long-term investment certainty; new civic participation tools. Then make that story ours and not a copy of somewhere else.

Mergers always surface competition, for power, profile, budgets. It helps to treat the new authority as genuinely new: not Wealden-plus, not Brighton-plus, not a zero-sum carve-up, but a fresh partnership. What does each area bring (assets, know-how, networks?), and what do we build together that none could build alone? In practical terms, that means early work on shared principles and behaviours; not just structures and headlines.

Being honest about the human toll

The hardest part of change is human. Many brilliant public servants across Sussex are exhausted; keeping services going on thin budgets, absorbing anger for decisions they did not make, and now asked to design themselves out of a job. There will be grief, resentment, pride and professionalism, often in the same week. The least we can do is name it. Leaders should be clear about what will be lost, not just what might be gained; mark endings as well as beginnings. In change there is always loss. Acknowledged loss is easier to move through.

Teams need practices that protect energy and sanity: agreeing what “good enough” looks like; prioritising openly against values and outcomes; moving resources to where they matter most; checking in on each other’s load and limits. Rigour and agility are not opposites; they’re companions.

There is also a civic culture shift to consider. Sussex has relied heavily on the public sector, as employer, funder and default problem-solver. In some places that has bred an unhelpful paternalism and dependency. A combined authority and mayor won’t (and shouldn’t) run everything. Their job is to set long horizons, align money with mission and choose who is best placed to deliver - sometimes councils, sometimes social enterprises or charities, sometimes private firms working to clear standards.

If we use the transition to rebalance roles, with the local state as custodian and convenor; communities and sectors as co-producers, we may find more creativity, more ownership and, paradoxically, more resilience.

SIX THINGS A SUSSEX MAYOR CAN DO FIRST

1

Create the container: then keep using it

Set up a standing “Sussex Conversation” with citizens, staff and partners: regular assemblies; practical workshops; online forums with real moderators; a public log of “what we heard” and “what we changed.” Build habits of dialogue before the flashpoints, so they exist when stakes rise.

2

Run delivery and design in parallel

Set up two braided teams: one to keep services steady; one to prototype the new arrangements. Give both a single, visible backlog of priorities; publish fortnightly updates on what moved, what slipped and why. Clarity reduces drama; cadence reduces noise.

3

Agree on the non-negotiables; then live by them

Co-write, with councils and communities, four principles that outlast electoral cycles. As an example: fairness across places; openness by default; participation early and often; investment aligned to long-term outcomes. Test every funding decision against them and show your working.

4

Back clusters, not just centres

Map existing “nodes” - sector clusters, town centres, innovation hubs, cultural ecosystems - and fund collaborations between them rather than forcing everything into one big box. Support the connectors: transport links, shared skills programmes, lightweight procurement frameworks that small players can use.

5

Name the losses; support the people

Publish a human-centred transition plan: clear timelines; fair processes; coaching and career support for staff at risk; mental health provision for teams under strain. Mark endings with respect; celebrate what has been built; talk plainly about what comes next.

6

Shift the state from parent to partner

Use combined authority powers to commission more through social enterprises, charities and capable SMEs; set simple quality standards; measure outcomes that people actually feel in daily life. Seed-fund local capacity where it’s thin; step back where communities can lead.

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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