

‘A Time of Monsters’ – Reform and the Rest. What is to Be Done?

Brighton & Hove Compass Coffee Morning Meeting Notes
31 January 2026 - Friends’ Meeting House

A sense of concern, and of really wanting to do something about it permeated the audience of 65 at this coffee morning on how to counter Reform and the far right. Thanks to our speakers, we were able to refine our understanding of populism and learn some ways that will help us engage with Reform voters. And thanks to some joint planning by Brighton & Hove and Lewes Compass steering groups, we were able to offer several ways to do something about Reform together locally.

Top take-aways

- Listen – hear issues. Empathise. Engage with them and respond to the way they’re raising it.
- We feel deeply about these issues too. Develop your own narrative, including your emotions.
- Be careful about uniting. A diversity of views is more real and avoids falling into Reform’s binary view that politics doesn’t work.

Joint Brighton & Hove and Lewes Compass effort – Presented by Jane Foot, Lewes Compass

The new Sussex Mayor will be elected in May 2028, preceded by the new Sussex Unitaries elections in May 2027. This has prompted Brighton & Hove and Lewes Compass Groups to work together to prepare for these elections. There is a real danger that Reform could win in one or all of these contests; their support now is 25-30% but the action in Crowborough shows how volatile this situation is.

In 2025 Reform had some breakthrough wins in Sussex. The party moved from fringe to competitive in

- Hailsham West (Wealden) — 48.43% (won 2025 by-election)
- Ashdown & Conquest (Hastings/Rother) — 32% (won ESCC by-election)
- Marine Ward (Arun) — 26% (won district by-election)
- Mid Sussex (GE 2024) — 11.1% vote share

(Based on 2024–2025 Results)

We are proposing five strands for our joint work:

- Getting out and about to build and connect to progressive networks across Sussex. Can we organise around the idea of a progressive Sussex identity?
- In line with Compass principles, we want to promote and advocate for pluralism and collaborative politics. Proportional Representation might help us if we have the trusted alliances and networks to call on.
- Planning a joint Democracy Day event on May 23rd [Date Change – Now planned for fall 2026]
- Developing a ‘playbook’ of ideas, arguments, and personal examples to use in our person to person contact with voters.
- Collate examples of progressive, positive and pluralist government and community based activities that are having an effect.

Find a fuller description here: [Progressive Sussex: Working Towards the Mayoral Election in 2028](#)

If you would like to join in the effort, please email brightonhove@compassonline.org.uk

Paul Taggart - Characteristics of populism

- Populism is not necessarily right or left wing. It attaches to other ideas. Movements grow in different ways in different places.

- Subscribers reject politics. The media, politicians, teachers of politics, have failed. So we have to reinvigorate politics.
- Populists treat politics as binary. If we exclude them, it reinforces the belief that politics doesn't work.

Lena Swedlow – Compass' national strategy

Political leaders are not going to save us. We need to do the work ourselves.

Compass' strategy has 3 parts:

1. Work within government and political parties. Build relationships with and between parties.
 - Develop arguments, polling, negotiate, build trust
 - Because Labour is the party in power, worked inside Labour to launch Mainstream
2. Work in public – Be principled, pluralist.
 - Roundtables, reports, podcasts
 - Connect policy ideas. New economy, housing, etc. in one narrative about how to change the country.
 - Provide examples of what's working
3. Work in civil society – alliance is forming
 - Fair taxes, fair media, fair democracy

Compass is supporting other local groups' efforts as well.

How should we respond to Reform? What should we do to reinvigorate politics?

Paul Taggart suggests:

- Take on their agenda, to rob them of their appeal? Doesn't work, because "Why go for the copy when you can have the original?"
- Be pluralistic. Not 'gather all the progressives'. Don't mount a united front, as that plays into the binary theme. Have different reasons for criticising politics.
- Take them seriously. Listen to their concerns. Empathise. Accept that they think that. Communicate without 'othering.' We are part of the problem if we don't understand why they and Trump are popular.
- Politics is about tradeoffs. Not winners. Think long-term.

Lena Swedlow suggests:

- Hope is local and we do get to build that here.
- What are you angry about? Sharing = commonality.
- Look for a connection of emotion, not of agreement
- Do uncomfortable things. Go to spaces you're unfamiliar with.
- Practice principled, grounded disagreement. Noone has disagreed with these people well. Lena shared a personal story about how conflict within a thriving movement stopped it in its tracks.
- People who feel abandoned will look for someone to listen.
- Compass members show direction. Politics can be hostile. We need to do it differently.
- Show up. We don't have all the answers, but we have a process.
- Route is to be tolerant, curious, negotiated – 'I don't know. Let's work it out together.' Not control.
- Most Reform members are not extreme.
- We need a progressive anti-system narrative. Politics should be about un-rigging the broken system.
- Charities can help shape narratives, even if they can't be in politics. Wellsbourne GP center is an example of that.
- Keep our compass pointed to the good society.

Q&A with Speakers

PR: Paul felt that PR is not the answer. Other European countries populist, even with PR system. Agrees FPTP exaggerates power of the government. Progressives more likely if FPTP here. 2 parties better at social change.

Lena disagreed, saying that when 2 parties are 95% of voters, FPTP makes sense. Now, with 5-6 parties, PR can make more of a difference.

“Peace, land and bread.” Point was raised that poverty and isolation make people easy prey to mob behaviour. Policies such as a universal basic income and services such as social clubs for all ages, and medical support can help. Meet people at their point of need.

Coalesce around issues? Is there an issue progressives can coalesce around, e.g. poverty? How make it pluralist? Paul said this is risky – could reinforce divisions. Social justice could be interpreted as removing immigrants.

Closing remarks

Paul: Listen – hear issues. Engage with them and respond to the way they’re raising it.

Lena:

- Focus on “What do we want from a mayor?” Take that around Sussex. Tactical voting is blunt. And with multiple parties, contentious. Difficult with current polling.
- AI and algorithms – think about how to use independent media orgs to get around algorithms. We need work-arounds. Progressives are typically strong outside of media. Social media isn’t where we’re going to win.
- It’s up to what WE decide to do. A fun, inclusive democracy event. What do we want the Mayor of Sussex to be like? What issues can we get behind locally? Let’s protect what we’re already doing? Get people to feel involved.
- Please tell us about orgs we can reach out to, to network. Talk to your groups about Compass. Be a bridge.
- Create a narrative about our emotions. We feel deeply!
- Fact-check Reform.
- One difference between progressives and Reform: Progressives want to change the political system, not knock it down.