

Boris Johnson

SUPER-HIGHWAYS TO SUSTAINABILITY

London,
United
Kingdom



On 28 November 2014, visiting Mayor of London, **Boris Johnson**, shared his insights into a new 2050 plan for the English capital with Koh Buck Song of the Centre for Liveable Cities. Sustaining “the most liveable city on Earth” covers everything from cultural attractions to crime prevention, as well as building infrastructure for residents, especially women, to feel safe and confident commuting across vast networks of bicycle super-highways.



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● **London is, quite clearly, still flourishing and growing as a city. With all this growth, it must pose some challenges on infrastructure, including for transport. How do you go about responding to these challenges?**

We certainly have to plan. We have just set out a 2020 vision. We are now doing a 2050 infrastructure plan, which sets out all the things that London will need in 2050: housing, transport, sanitation, electricity, and so on. There are all these things that we need to do, and it is a very big operation, a very big plan. It will cost £1.3 trillion for the whole thing. That is a lot of money that we have to put in, and we are trying to build a consensus around all the things we need to do: all the tunnels, all the bridges, all of it.

● **What is the overall approach or the strategy to keep London liveable, attractive and competitive as a city?**

Our strategy is to keep London the most liveable city on Earth, to make it a place people want to come and live in, invest in, have fun, and it is working. We had more tourists last year than any other city on Earth; we had 16.9 million tourists. We had more overseas visitors than New York, more than Paris. We used to have families move out of London, but now we have large numbers of families who stay in the city because the schools are getting better. So, there has been a big change. It is not like when I was growing up in the 1970s, it was very different. Some aspects are much better now.



Mayor Johnson at his interview with **URBAN SOLUTIONS**.



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● **So what are the key strengths of this strategy for promoting, and developing, the liveability of the city?**

I think air quality is important, the distance between your place of work and your home – your commute and the cost of your commute; dealing with crime is very important, green spaces – parks – that matters a great deal, and things like traffic – making sure that you keep the traffic flowing smoothly. There has to be great cultural attractions. London has nearly 400 ‘live’ music venues, so it has a lot going for it.

● **Amidst all that, how important is promoting cycling?**

Cycling is very important. I would not say cycling is the number one thing, but it is very important. We have a huge cycling agenda. We are putting about a billion pounds into some of the roundabouts and junctions to make them safer. And putting in big cycle super-highways as well.

● **What is it that cycling adds, or contributes, to liveability?**

I think cycling is a wonderful way to get around. You feel better, you arrive at the office in a good mood. You have ideas, your endorphins are going through your body, so you are charged up, and you are optimistic. You get fitter a bit. I myself go so slowly that I don’t really get fitter. But that is what you should get – fitter. And then, you take people out of cars. So, instead of people being stuck in a car, they are on bikes. You get a car off the road, you relieve the pressure on public transport, it makes a lot of sense. And cycling has massively increased in London in the last few years – something like 150% or 200%.

● **Of course, infrastructure is a big part of all that, including your cycle super-highways. What are some of the learning points from having to put in place all this infrastructure?**

Be brave. Recognise that in a democracy, you will incur a lot of anger and you have to be decisive. You have to work out what the best plan is, and then, just do it, because everybody is going to object to something.



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01 Mayor Johnson cycles on a London cycle super-highway.

First of all, you have got to see whether the objection is valid or not. Then, if it is not valid, you just make the points about how the traffic will flow, about the economic benefits, the environmental benefits of the cycle super-highway, and you just get on and you do it.

● **The other important aspect is increasing the takeup and usage of cycling, getting people to buy into it, and then embracing it as a way of moving around. How have you gone about this part of it, getting the buy-in and encouraging usage?**

I think you have just got to make it safer. It is all about making it safer and making people feel more confident on bicycles. We particularly want to have more female cyclists, because they tend to be less brave – or less confident, I should say. They tend to hang back a bit. We want to see them feeling that the road is for them as well, so we are trying to ensure that is the case. It is about trying to get this message through: cycling is not just for people dressed in Lycra, and with dreadlocks and stuff. Cycling is for everybody, including people in suits – fat people in suits like me.

● **What has been your experience of addressing and overcoming the objections?**

When I say you've got to just do it, I must qualify that: if you can improve the design, you should. There are projects where we are trying to be as subtle and flexible as we can. So when I say, "be brave", I don't mean "be stupid." Be rational, but when you have decided what you are going to do, then put it in. So at the moment, we are building the biggest, continuous cycleway anywhere in Europe – putting in a big East-West cycle super-highway – and there are a lot of objections. But we are going to do it. We are going to find a good way through.



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● **In your promotion of cycling, what are the next new features coming up?**

We are trying all sorts of things. We are trying some electric bicycles in one part of London, and we are intensifying the cycle hire network. We are putting in more docking stations before we can make the next big expansion. We want to get it really working well in the centre of town and the quiet ways through the centre of London – the network of little paths.

● **The bikes on hire already bear your name; they are nicknamed the “Boris bikes”. So, it looks like this will clearly be one of the highlights of your legacy as a Mayor. How do you feel about leaving this legacy behind?**

I’m very proud to have any part in the cycle hire scheme. It seems to be working well.

01 Mayor Johnson poses with some bicycles from the Barclays Cycle Hire.

02 The Garden Bridge across the Thames will be one of the next big projects that London will be embarking on.





● **In the UK, you already have a cycling culture to begin with – in your other towns, and in the countryside – so you already have that advantage. What advice would you have for other cities where there is less of this cycling culture?**

I think it can be difficult. For example, I notice that in Singapore, you have a lot of cars and you don't have many cycle lanes. I think the state – if it believes in cycling – has to get behind it. And it can actually be very easy. You have to paint some cycle lanes on the roads, or something like that, because people need to feel that there is an area where they can cycle safely.

● **What other new features can we expect to see soon in London?**

We are building a wonderful bridge across the river which is going to be a garden bridge, a beautiful bridge just right in the middle of the Thames, with trees and plants, birds and butterflies, and bunny rabbits. It is between Blackfriars Bridge and Waterloo Bridge, right in the middle of the city. It will dramatically galvanise the area on either side of the river, and we are starting it next year.

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● **What other lessons, tips or takeaways do you think London can offer to Singapore, and to other cities, on enhancing liveability?**

It would be impertinent for me to try to advise Singapore. You do things that we would not dare to do – like with chewing gum and stuff. It is extraordinary. In London, we have a problem with chewing gum too. It is everywhere, like little blobs on the pavement. Horrible! Blobs like fungus, growing everywhere. There are millions of blobs, from people who try to give up smoking, they blob it out. And you have this system which I support. It sounds fantastic. Well, I can't do that. I don't have the power to compel people to not to chew gum. But that is an interesting idea.

● **Aside from mobility, are there other international trends relating to the liveability of cities – such as building smart cities, or enhancing city resilience – that are interesting, or important, to you?**

Yes, I believe in smart cities, but I think most people are too impatient. Most people do not have the time or the intellectual energy to spend their lives going around their homes and checking the thermostat, or looking at their apps and working out when is the optimum time to have a shower, and how to make sure all the lights are turned off, or whatever. I think most people want it done for them. The only thing that worries me about the smart city idea is that it presumes that people are smart. People may be smart, but they are very busy. So you've got to make life easy for them.



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● **Are there any other trends that you find interesting, that you might want to try implementing?**

Driverless trains on the underground are very good. I like that. We should do that. We should have more automation on our mass transit system.

Listen to the full interview:



<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGKE0U1p8RxgXyfX77V3pVU0FiLVJBXFI>

01 Mayor Johnson (right) in animated conversation with CLC Adjunct Researcher, Koh Buck Song, during his interview with **URBAN SOLUTIONS**.

02 The city of London today.