



INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH
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Advancing Climate Action through Global and Local Policies



| Image: Daniel Hambury / @stellapicsltd



Cities can inspire others to go further and faster not just locally but globally in understanding emissions, setting targets and implementing climate action plans and initiatives to reduce emissions.



Rapid urbanisation is occurring globally, and by 2050, more than two-thirds of the world's population is projected to live in cities. Drawing from your experience as London's former Deputy Mayor, and as the current leader of various international organisations focused on cities, what do you think is the role of cities in advancing climate action?

Cities are absolutely critical to driving climate action. Most of the world's people, economic power, and investment are in cities and whilst they cover only 2% of the world's land surface, they use over 75% of the planet's material resources. They are also the places where we see the highest inequalities in society, and are often at the frontline of climate change and air pollution impacts. Over 2.6 billion people live in cities that do not meet the World Health Organization's guidelines for air quality.

But cities are also innovation and wealth creation hubs, with a strong civil society that can drive community-led action. They can play a leadership role by demonstrating local solutions which can then be replicated or scaled up to encourage sustainable behaviours.

This leadership is about inspiring others to go further and faster not just locally but globally too. C40's latest report demonstrates the huge progress cities have made in understanding their emissions, setting targets, and implementing climate action plans and initiatives to reduce emissions. These cities recognise that acting on climate change is not only a matter of self-preservation and protecting the vulnerable but also a huge economic opportunity. C40 Cities estimate that 50 million good green jobs can be created by climate action and building resilience, and recently reported that 16 million jobs are already supporting this transition.



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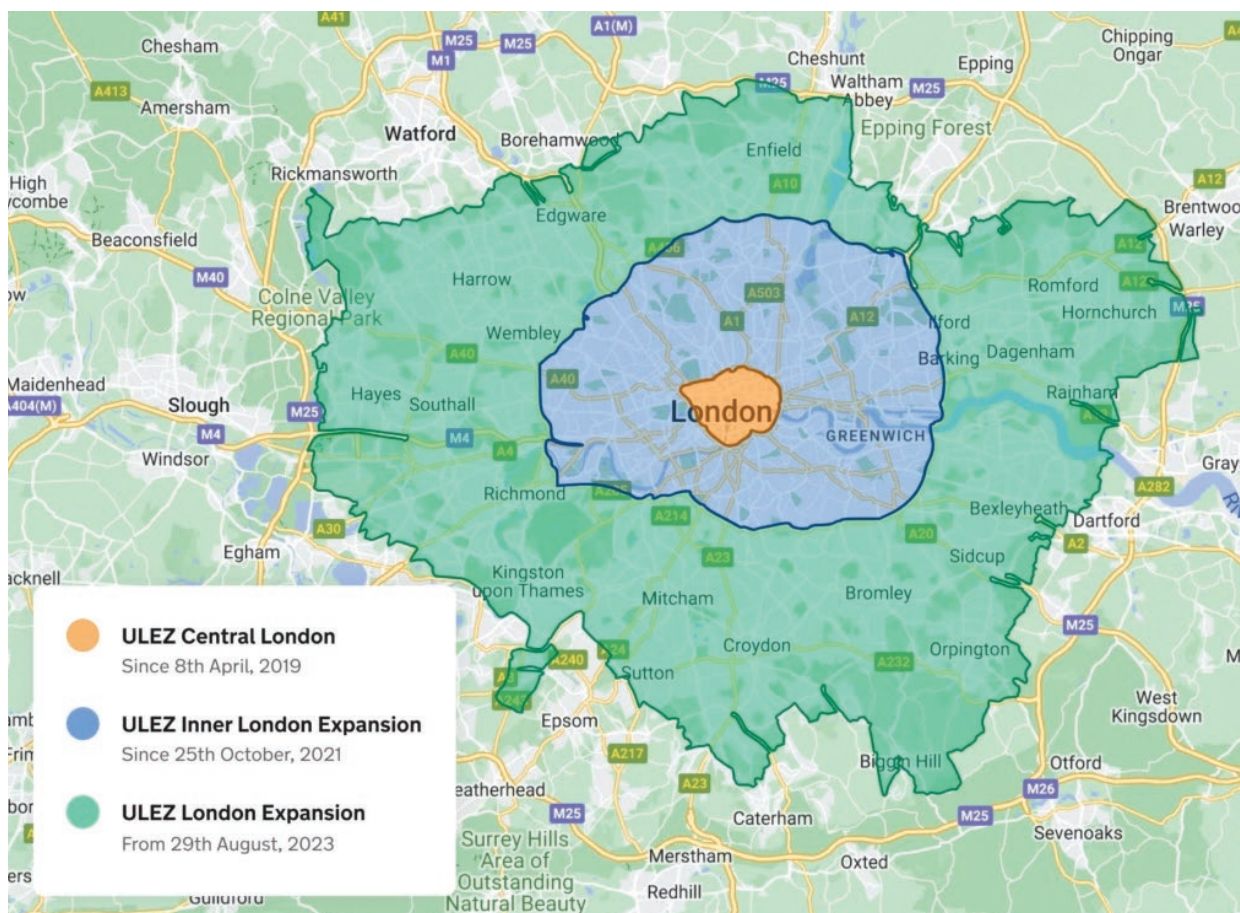
The Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) was enacted during your time as deputy mayor to Mayor Sadiq Khan. It alleviated air pollution by creating chargeable zones that limited the use of polluting vehicles. The ULEZ was initially implemented only in Central London, then expanded to inner London in 2021. In 2023, the ULEZ was expanded a second time to all London boroughs—covering 9 million people across 1,500 km². What were the factors that enabled this scaling up to happen, and what are some of the learnings that other cities can take away from this initiative?

Poor air quality impacts everyone, everywhere. It is now the second leading risk factor for death, ahead of tobacco use—people are increasingly more likely to die from breathing toxic air than from smoking. Another is the issue of social and racial justice—the poorest are least likely to contribute to air pollution but are much more likely to live in the places with the worst air quality.

The situation in London was no different and ULEZ was successful because it was part of a larger set of policies that addressed this issue of poor air quality.

From the onset, we made sure that improving the environment whilst addressing inequality was core to the scheme. We focused on areas where we had the greatest power to act, such as transport. We built a robust case for action with strong evidence using independent research from many stakeholders, including universities and business organisations. This drew attention to a wide range of health, equity, and economic factors such as the economic cost of workers getting sick due to poor air quality.

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The Ultra Low Emission Zone was expanded in 2023.
Image: Motorway

We also provided alternative options of travel, and mitigations for drivers who would be affected by schemes like the Superloop (a network of 10 new express orbital bus routes in Outer London). The cycling network was quadrupled, the clean-up of buses and taxis was accelerated with more zero emission vehicles, and 18,000 electric vehicle charge points (making up a third of the UK's infrastructure) were installed.

Any initiative seeking change has its detractors—but what has markedly increased over the last few years has been the level of misinformation and disinformation, and divisive political rhetoric. So, a key measure was building coalitions with those directly affected by air pollution—parents with children sick from air pollution, their doctors, business leaders, and faith groups. They were able to act as trusted messengers reminding people of the true cost of air pollution from people's lived experience.

In London, these efforts have paid off with around 97% of all vehicles in London now ULEZ compliant, up from 39% when the scheme was first mooted. Harmful roadside nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) concentrations are estimated to be 27% lower across London. And, for some of the most deprived communities living near London's busiest roads, there has been an estimated 80% reduction in exposure to illegal levels of pollution.

Another key priority during your term was rewilding London—bringing nature back into the city. According to the Final Report of the London Rewilding Taskforce (2023), London has invested more than £28 million in greening the city since 2016, and has over 1,600 sites covering 20% of Greater London protected for nature conservation. How does London balance human needs with ecological goals? Please share some of the strategies that London has adopted that you think can be replicated in other cities.

Ecological goals and human needs are not an either-or situation. We are dependent on our natural systems which help us to be more resilient to the impacts of extreme weather, as well as improve our health and wellbeing. Equally, the competition for land in urban spaces can lead to conflict as we seek to build more housing.

In London's example, Mayor Khan responded to this challenge by putting environmental and climate change at the heart of all his strategies, and making clear the need to balance these demands. The London Plan serves as a key vehicle, setting out the requirement to integrate nature into the built environment. Under the London Plan Guidance (LPG), the city has introduced an Urban Greening Factor tool to evaluate the quality and quantity of natural features proposed as part of development applications. Developers have to consider how they can install or retrofit more green infrastructure to enhance biodiversity and habitats, be it through sustainable urban drainage schemes, green roofs, or more accessible green spaces to act as places of respite from the heat or tackle flash-flooding. Often, such green-blue-grey infrastructures are more cost-effective than hard infrastructures.

Another area of opportunity that has been identified is integrating nature into our highways and streets. Transport for London and local boroughs have been installing rain gardens, and planting more trees and wildflower verges to attract bees and butterflies as well as provide shade for pedestrians. These actions help to make the highways more resilient to flash-flooding and improve overall air quality.



Two beavers were born in West London, an indication of the success of reintroduction through the rewilding of London.
Image: Londonist



An image of Waltham Forest rain garden.
Image: Liveable Neighbourhoods 2023, Transport for London



London Fire Brigade using the UK's first electric-hybrid fire engine.
Image: ITV



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As the former Deputy Mayor of London, you led programmes to tackle the impact of climate change in cities. Now, on the committees of international organisations, you advocate for the development of policies and initiatives at the local level. Can you share how local governments and international organisations can foster innovation to tackle climate change in cities? How are their approaches and strategies similar and/or different?

Local governments can pilot and fund innovative solutions to the problems their citizens face by using their areas as living laboratories. They are asset owners and procurers of goods and services which are major levers for driving change. The Greater London Authority and its agencies in London spend around £10 billion annually, and they set policy and regulation in many areas. London Fire Brigade's development of a first-of-its-kind electric-hybrid fire engine to reduce carbon emissions is just one instance of what local governments can do to drive innovation.

Their most powerful tool though is in welcoming and supporting innovation by facilitating and convening key actors in their cities, including business, universities, entrepreneurs, and community organisations. A brilliant example is Undaunted, a climate innovation hub consisting of Imperial College London, the Royal Institution, and the Grantham Institute—Climate Change and the Environment, and supported by the Greater London Authority. It has helped start-ups develop technology to tackle climate change and has secured over \$1.3 billion investment to scale their innovations whilst creating jobs.



This November, on the eve of COP30, the Mayors of London and Rio de Janeiro will bring together cities at the C40 World Mayors Summit, showing how cities can accelerate the global climate agenda. From left to right: Governor Sakaja Arthur Johnson of Nairobi, Mayor Giuseppe Sala of Milan, Mayor Anne Hidalgo of Paris, President of the C40 Board Michael Bloomberg, Mayor Sadiq Khan of London and Mayor Eduardo Paes of Rio de Janeiro
Image: C40

Whilst cities may have different politics, capacities, or governance systems, they all can benefit from participating in international networks like C40. These networks provide a platform for connecting with peers, sharing the problems and successes of different approaches, driving experimentation with technical support, and even getting funding. As a collective, they can raise ambition through friendly competition and drive progress, often faster than their national governments.

Having worked with many cities in your capacity as leader of international committees, can you share some memorable examples of innovative and impactful policies, or strategies that cities have adopted towards advancing climate action?

A couple spring to mind. The city of Oslo inspired the concept of climate budgeting to mainstream climate action and this is now being taken up by many other cities such as London, New York, and Mumbai. In London it is embedded in the financial budget process and this means that every budget decision of the city government is assessed with a climate lens. So, new projects like a new solar membrane for London's Olympic Stadium get higher priority, while decisions that are contrary to climate goals—like buying new fossil fuel vehicles—are replaced with more sustainable options.

The other is the Breathe Cities initiative. This partnership between Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Clean Air Fund, and C40 Cities is working for a 30% reduction in air pollution across participating cities by 2030 to save lives, improve health, and cut carbon emissions. This initiative demonstrates how data and technical capacity can be leveraged to invoke inclusive climate action. Using local knowledge to design solutions that are specific to their

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city's needs, local communities are empowered to reduce their exposure to air pollution. This is driving the establishment of stronger policies that reduce air pollution, such as the first city-owned air quality monitoring network in Nairobi, or Warsaw's Clean Air Zone which could reduce traffic-related pollution by half within this decade.

Moving forward, how can we build a collaborative ecosystem where international organisations, local governments, and city leaders complement one another's efforts in advancing climate action?

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It is key for all of us to work together to cut emissions and to stop further accelerating the impacts of climate change. Greater collaboration with businesses, for example, can cut emissions and climate risk, bringing about better outcomes that mutually benefit stakeholders. At the same time, we also need to work with informal communities to incorporate grassroots solutions. And of course, working with national governments too. On the eve of COP30, as part of the Local Leaders Forum co-hosted by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the COP30 Presidency of Brazil, the C40 World Mayors Summit will bring together mayors from around the world who are delivering urgent, fair and ambitious climate action.

At COP28, the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP) for Climate Action was established to enhance cooperation between national and subnational governments in the planning, financing, implementation, and monitoring of climate strategies. This is a reflection of national governments' growing recognition of the pivotal role that cities and their leaders play in influencing national level decisions. CHAMP now has 74 national governments committing to greater collaboration with their cities and regions on their national climate strategies, as well as nationally determined contributions (NDCs) for COP30, Belem. But more still need to come on board.

We all have to collaborate, whether formally or informally, and leverage our strengths to prevent the worsening impacts from climate change, and to protect our people and nature. 🌱