

Curb Enthusiasm Episode 19 Transcript

00;00;16;19 - 00;00;19;15

Emily Weidenhof

Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof.

00;00;19;18 - 00;00;20;29

Huma Husain

And I'm Huma Husain.

00;00;21;02 - 00;00;26;01

Emily Weidenhof

Our guest today is James McAsh, the Council Leader of London's borough of Southwark.

00;00;26;04 - 00;00;30;29

Huma Husain

As council leader, McAsh sets the overall vision, direction and priorities for the Southwark Council.

00;00;31;01 - 00;00;41;20

Emily Weidenhof

Since 2018, McAsh has served the council, prioritizing walking, cycling and street design aimed at creating a safer, greener and more pedestrian friendly Southwark.

00;00;41;22 - 00;00;44;15

Huma Husain

It's our pleasure to welcome Councilor James McAsh to the show.

00;00;44;22 - 00;00;49;12

Emily Weidenhof

Welcome, James. Thanks so much for joining us on Curb Enthusiasm today.

00;00;49;16 - 00;00;51;04

Cllr. James McAsh

It's great to be here. Thank you so much.

00;00;51;06 - 00;01;05;19

Emily Weidenhof

You're joining us from south London. And from a city of five boroughs, would love to have you share a little bit about your city of a few more boroughs and the borough you represent, Southwark.

00;01;05;21 - 00;01;33;18

Cllr. James McAsh

So, I'm James McAsh, and I'm the leader of Southwark council, and it's, Southwark's one of the one of the London boroughs. There are 32 London boroughs plus this, the 33rd thing called the City of London, which is very complicated and very archaic as a lot of things are in England, in fact. And I'm trying to explain what my role is, in kind of American terms and there isn't really an equivalent in New York.

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00;01;33;18 - 00;01;54;28

Cllr. James McAsh

So, it's, I suppose borough president wouldn't be miles away from it. I guess the difference is our boroughs have a lot more power than boroughs do in New York. So, a lot of the kind of functions that are provided at a city level are provided by at a borough level for us. So, highways, for instance, waste, social care, quite a lot of a lot of things.

00;01;55;00 - 00;02;06;02

Cllr. James McAsh

But then at the same time our boroughs are much, much smaller. So, Southwark represents 330,000 people out of London, which is, you know, quite a small proportion of the whole city.

00;02;06;04 - 00;02;10;27

Emily Weidenhof

Great. Amazing. Could we, hear a little bit more about Streets for People?

00;02;10;29 - 00;02;29;27

Cllr. James McAsh

So, we started from the position of saying our streets are publicly owned resources. You know, it is actually a very precious resource. We're a densely populated part of the world so, the space we have is limited. And we need to make sure it's being rationed out in a way that's equitable and that is aligned with our values.

00;02;29;29 - 00;02;52;15

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

Cllr. James McAsh

And it was very clear to me that was not currently the case because we overwhelmingly allocate, street space to private motor vehicles. And in Southwark, 60% of residents don't have access to private motor vehicle. And that, for me, struck me as a point of inequity. You know, this is a precious resource. We need to share it fairly.

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Cllr. James McAsh

But it's also point about the climate and about social justice as well. So, Streets for People have four categories or four themes running through it. So, one is Streets for Community. And that's about the idea that streets are places where people can come together, where you can connect, where you can meet your neighbors, where children can play, which are indeed are accessible to everyone.

00;03;13;25 - 00;03;35;20

Cllr. James McAsh

Streets for Journeys, obviously, journeys are a big part of why we have streets. And that's, we've got very clear hierarchy of the types of journeys we want to promote. Then you've got Streets for the Economy, which is the idea that these publicly accessible, public owned

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streets should be to encourage local business to thrive in an equitable way. And then lastly, Streets for Nature.

00;03;35;26 - 00;04;03;05

Cllr. James McAsh

You know that recognition that the way we use our space is about protecting our natural environment in terms of big picture things like the climate emergency, but also, you know, much more local things. So, looking at all these different four aspects together is about how we reallocate space from socially harmful uses, which is, you know, private motor vehicle use to socially progressive uses, which are more equitable.

00;04;03;07 - 00;04;11;19

Cllr. James McAsh

And then I guess the level below that is how we do that. And I think this links in very closely with the topic of today of low traffic neighborhoods.

00;04;11;22 - 00;04;13;27

Huma Husain

Can you describe what a low traffic neighborhood is?

00;04;13;29 - 00;04;43;14

Cllr. James McAsh

Absolutely. So, a low traffic neighborhood is an area defined by boundary roads, which are the main roads where you can't get from one boundary road to the other without going on the boundaries. So, you can't cut through the residential streets.

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

We recognize that some motor vehicle journeys need to happen, you know. So, we started by looking at the map for the borough and identify what is our traffic circulation network? what are the key strategic routes that are needed to go long distances

00;04;43;17 - 00;05;09;27

Cllr. James McAsh

by private motor vehicle? Whether that's freight or whether it's people. It's the main roads. You know it's the busy, it's the big, big main roads. And we much of those out. And then we look to the areas within those roads. And so, if you imagine kind of got maybe three roads like this, this bit in here is what we called a zone. It's just kinda the word we used. And this zone,

00;05;09;29 - 00;05;28;27

Cllr. James McAsh

the idea of that is you want to take all the traffic out of it as much as possible. You know, I'm not saying pedestrianizing it, but you want all the journeys in that zone to be either to or from a place in that zone. So, they're not cutting through. It's access. And that's kind of the principle of low traffic neighborhoods.

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00;05;28;29 - 00;05;51;13

Huma Husain

Streets are in high demand. And they're a limited resource. And definitely in New York City, that is the case as well. And when we're trying to change how we utilize the street, we often face challenges with residents and businesses on those streets. And, you know, the fear of change. What kind of challenges did you face when you were implementing some of these changes, and how did you approach those conversations?

00;05;51;15 - 00;06;18;07

Cllr. James McAsh

We did who very big, low traffic neighborhoods at the same time. And we can learn from those because one went much more smoothly than the other. So, I'll talk about them both. So, there was one in this area called Walworth. Walworth is an area with a lot of deprivation. It's very ethnically diverse, very few people own cars, It's very dense in terms of the population.

00;06;18;09 - 00;06;39;21

Cllr. James McAsh

Then you got a place called Dulwich, which is very leafy, very green, very white, very wealthy, a lot of car owners. And we basically tried the same thing in these two places. And at the beginning, the reaction was kind of similar. At the beginning, people, you know, people don't like change. And in this particular instance, we didn't consult, we just kind of put it in.

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Cllr. James McAsh

That's because it was during COVID. We wouldn't take that approach now. But it just kind of went in and people are like, "what's going on here? This is, you know, we don't like this." But the difference is that over time, people got very, very used to it and very, very keen on it in Walworth. And the big difference there is if you live in Walworth, your experience of traffic is people from outside your neighborhood driving through it.

00;07;02;27 - 00;07;21;19

Cllr. James McAsh

And when that goes away, it's really really nice. All of a sudden, you know, your kids can play outside and you know, you can hear the birds and you can walk around, it's a nice place to be.

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

If you're in a Dulwich, often your experience and most traffic is being in the traffic and, being trying to drive somewhere.

00;07;21;21 - 00;07;41;27

Cllr. James McAsh

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And what essentially happen there is people, you know, who previously could take certain routes now couldn't take those routes. So, it became a lot more challenging. So, there ended up being quite a lot of changes along the way. And the learning would kind of take from that is twofold. Firstly, you know, do the community engagement early, that's really, really important.

00;07;42;01 - 00;07;57;04

Cllr. James McAsh

Although that said, you'll never get everyone to buy in to it at the beginning. Some people won't like it. But then also think more holistically. You know, think about, okay, if this, if this road is going to close, what's going to happen to the roads next door. And I think that's something we didn't really do properly at the beginning.

00;07;57;04 - 00;08;09;16

Cllr. James McAsh

And that's why that kind of zonal approach is so key where we're looking at the whole borough and identifying what are the roads that we will accept there to be displaced traffic on to because they're main roads and what roads would be not.

00;08;09;19 - 00;08;23;02

Emily Weidenhof

And so, you're talking about managing access in these zones. Could you talk a little bit about some of the strategies or design tools that you use to manage vehicular access in and out of the zones?

00;08;23;04 - 00;08;48;25

Cllr. James McAsh

I mean, often it is really as simple as putting like a planter in the middle of the road. So, the road that was previously a through-route is now not a through-route. It often really is as simple as that. Sometimes we have camera instead. And there are advantages and disadvantages to both of those. If you have a physical barrier then you essentially create a public space, because no vehicle will ever go through it, that that space in the street

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Cllr. James McAsh

now, you know, you can put trees in, you can put rain gardens, you can put chill areas for children to play. Sometimes we put in a camera. When you put in a camera, what that inevitably means is some people do break the rules. So, you do still get vehicles going through. So, you, you can't you can't reclaim that public space in quite the same way.

00;09;07;25 - 00;09;29;16

Cllr. James McAsh

But what it does allow you to do is create some exemptions. So, there's an area, actually where I represent, in East Dulwich where you've got three parallel roads and they all connect, they're all residential streets that connect to main roads. And we took the view

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that they should not be cut throughs, they should not be route runs, so, they should be closed.

00;09;29;19 - 00;09;51;29

Cllr. James McAsh

And through the, the approach we did, by which I mentioned a moment ago about kind of drawing those maps on, we establish that loads of people use one of them for cycling and loads of people use two of them for walking. And actually, one of them isn't really used a huge amount. So, what we ended up with is we ended up with a kind of really key cycle corridor going down, one which is completely blocked off

00;09;51;29 - 00;10;10;16

Cllr. James McAsh

so, no motor vehicles can, go through that road, they can still access it, they can't go through at the other end. Then you had one, which is exactly the same approach except with less of a cycle focus on it, And it's more, it's actually near to schools. So, it's kind of making sure that walking and the supply kind of areas for, for children to hang out there as well.

00;10;10;19 - 00;10;25;08

Cllr. James McAsh

And then the one in between them has a camera and it allows taxis through and it allows emergency services through. So, what that means is actually the, you know, the fire department can get through faster than they could before

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

Cllr. James McAsh

because they're the only people using that road.

00;10;25;10 - 00;10;32;11

Huma Husain

We'd love to understand how traffic has changed on the boundary roads with the implementation of a low traffic neighborhood.

Cllr. James McAsh

Really good question.

00;10;32;11 - 00;10;53;02

Cllr. James McAsh

So, the simple answer is varied. So, we tend to see, by definition, big decrease in traffic on the internal roads. The boundaries can go either way to be honest. So, we've had some examples where traffic on the boundaries has dropped quite a lot because there's just fewer journeys in the neighborhood as a whole. And in some cases, the traffic on the boundary roads have, have gone up.

00;10;53;05 - 00;11;22;22

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Cllr. James McAsh

What I would say, though, is that doesn't mean the scheme has failed. You know, it's, if we're saying that we want to make our streets safe for children, then we can say, "well, actually, some of these streets are less safe, and we, but we have routes next door that you can kind of go along." So, I would say in designing a low traffic neighborhood, you want the boundary roads, traffic to drop, but this is as a as the success criteria because ultimately boundaries are the main roads where traffic should be.

00;11;22;24 - 00;11;43;05

Emily Weidenhof

You started to talk a little bit about what else you can do with the street. Once you start to remove the heavy volumes of vehicular traffic, can you talk about some of your favorites or some of the transformations that you feel have been most successful through, implementing low traffic neighborhoods and these strategies.

00;11;43;07 - 00;12;03;19

Cllr. James McAsh

It's been a real range. So down, we've got one I suppose, it's called Dulwich Square. It wasn't originally called Dulwich Square; it was originally called the junction of these roads. And because that's now completely closed off, it's become a public space that is, you know, used for like carol concerts and that kind of thing at Christmas. It's being completely reclaimed.

00;12;03;21 - 00;12;23;08

Cllr. James McAsh

It's right outside. And there are like coffee shops. There's like loads of seating there. It's just like a really nice place to be. That's like one example of one kind of big space. Then, in fact, I showed you this, Emily, when you're visiting recently in London, we've got a number of kind of very child friendly bits in Walworth.

00;12;23;10 - 00;12;40;21

Cllr. James McAsh

And instead of being one big space that's like a number of different spaces around. And the idea there is, it's on the way to different schools from, you know, the various kind of homes in the area. Children will come across these different areas and it's, you know, it's like it's not a replacement for Park.

00;12;40;22 - 00;12;46;01

Cllr. James McAsh

You know, it's not a big kind of park, that you spend hours and hours in. But it's like a fun place to go along the way.

00;12;46;07 - 00;13;08;21

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah. Hey listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast. For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from

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you. You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at nyc.gov/curbenthusiasm. And now back to our conversation.

00;13;08;24 - 00;13;34;03

Huma Husain

So, you've talked a lot about how the way people move has changed, right? More cycling, more walking, more playing. People are feeling more comfortable doing those things and getting out of their cars. I'm curious how commercial activity has changed, if at all, if the way businesses receive deliveries are changing within the zone or outside the zone, whether they're changing their modes, you know, from a larger vehicle to a smaller vehicle or some other type of change.

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Cllr. James McAsh

Yeah. So, we are seeing that. So, there's been a lot of work on freight consolidation and trying to get the kind of last mile deliveries being done by walking—Not by walking—by kind of, cargo bikes and so on. That's definitely happened. The other thing we've introduced are Bookable Loading Bays and this has been, you know, really quite like game changing for us.

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Cllr. James McAsh

So, in the UK, the rules are that if there's a space, you can load for up to 40 minutes normally and often that including in places where parking isn't allowed like including double yellow lines. And what we've done on some specific areas is instead of saying anyone can load at any time, we've created bookable bays and they have the electronic ink on them, you know, like a Kindle where you have to in advance say you want this slot and you want it for this particular time

00;14;28;14 - 00;14;45;04

Cllr. James McAsh

and here's your registration plate. And what that means is it's completely free. So no, people don't have to pay for it. But what it means is that for the for the business, they know they've got that slot guaranteed. They don't have to circle around forever trying to, you know, find a space. They've got it. They know they've got it.

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Cllr. James McAsh

What it means for us is we can enforce it much more clearly because we go, the enforcement offices turn up, they see a vehicle there, they look at the registration plate. Is it the registration plate that's marked, yes or no? They don't have to worry about, like, timing, how long they've been there or anything like that. All kind of all kind of managed.

00;15;02;26 - 00;15;30;10

Cllr. James McAsh

The other thing it lets us do is in peak times for pedestrians, we just don't have to have the day bookable at all. So, it becomes part of that sidewalk at that point.

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Huma Husain

Oh, interesting.

Cllr. James McAsh

So, which has really made a really big difference. The thing we haven't done yet but could and probably will do in the future is link up those two things, link the bookable loading bay to the camera that's facilitating access.

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Cllr. James McAsh

So, as well as having an exemption for emergency services and taxis, which are kind of pretty straightforward to to police, you can have, create a whitelist. You can create a list of vehicles that are being booked into bookable loading time, and therefore they have access Street. And once we do that, we've got a huge amount of, flexibility in determining what the traffic movements are like on our on our high streets, which are often the challenging bit because, you know, you can't close the high street to the business access for loading.

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Cllr. James McAsh

But if if people can load and people also drive through it because of parking it and so on. So, it's a way of kind of really reducing the number of vehicle movements on a busy high street while maintaining loading access.

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Huma Husain

And do you find that businesses within the zone can still receive their deliveries, or has it been, there been a change in how, how those deliveries or how the businesses in the zone access, the roads that are, I guess, the slower streets or have design changes?

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Cllr. James McAsh

Yeah. So, it's it's not always universally loved. The, there's definitely a push back from, here and there. What tends to happen is, businesses are initially less keen, and actually, it's less about loading as there's a loading element too, but often it's about customer access. And I think often businesses will feel that a lot of their customers come by car, and they'll be very worried that the lack of car access, or the more difficult car access will mean that their business will be really affected.

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Cllr. James McAsh

What we found overwhelming is that turns out not to be the case. And there's this interesting study that applies in the UK; I don't know if it applies to the United States as well. Where the perception of spending by drive is, as in the perception by shop shop shop owners and businesses, it's much, much higher. And the reason for that is if you're driving, you're more likely to do a single big purchase.

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Cllr. James McAsh

So, it looks like if you're kind of, you know, on the till, like adding everything up, it looks like a big purchase. And then, you know, they get taken to a car. But if you're walking, you're more likely to go along the high street and do lots of little purchases. You know, you go to the coffee shop, you grab something there, you go to the, you know, buy a pair of jeans next.

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Cllr. James McAsh

And, you know, so what that means is actually the average spent is higher for, pedestrians visiting our high streets than it is for car owners. But the individual spent per transaction tends to be higher for cars. So that's something that, you know, it's quite hard to persuade people, but they see it happen and they see that actually this is like a really great space.

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Cllr. James McAsh

And and there's one example that really sticks with me where there was a restaurant, that had a sign up saying, like, "re-open our road," kind of thing. And then was this one evening where it was this event in the street and everyone wanted to get a pizza from this restaurant. So, like, there's a street pie happening and they were like selling so many pizzas that the next day the poster just like came down.

00;18;39;29 - 00;18;45;08

Emily Weidenhof

What about, any change in patterns to residential deliveries?

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Cllr. James McAsh

That's a good question. I'm afraid actually I don't think I've got any research on that, I'm afraid. Nothing I can really, sorry.

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Emily Weidenhof

No worries. Something we think a lot about in in New York with, multiple Amazon packages a day.

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Huma Husain

Yeah. We are managing many residential deliveries and trying to think about kind of a zonal topography where we have like hubs outside the zone. And then, you know, they can deliver by cargo, bike or handcart into the zone, especially for residential deliveries where packages are much smaller.

00;19;15;11 - 00;19;20;18

Cllr. James McAsh

Yeah, yeah. No, no that sounds good. I think, we could do more on that as well.

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Huma Husain

So, I wanted to take it back to the, loading bays and your curbside technology. I'm curious if you faced any or the delivery companies have faced any challenges with accessing the space, like how do you keep the space clear through enforcement or other mechanisms, or do they have challenges, even reserving the space in the first place? Like is there a higher demand for the space than availability for the for the delivery driver?

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Cllr. James McAsh

Yes, the the businesses love it. They absolutely love it. They, the, at the moment, as it currently stands, the demand does not exceed the supply. But frankly, we could produce more bays if we needed to. It's Yeah, like that could definitely happen. Enforcement can be a problem. So, it's some vehicles do park and, and, we don't have the statutory power to enforce my camera, for, for loading violations, which is very frustrating.

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Cllr. James McAsh

That's something that I'd like to change, but we don't have that. So, we have to have, what we call civil enforcement officers, So, traffic wardens, parking wardens, kind of going around and, and I think we have quite a few. So, we have a fair amount of resource and into that, not just the loading bays, but for other things as well.

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Cllr. James McAsh

And I think, in fact, I think when, Emily, when you visited, I think we saw four in the space of a few minutes. So, there's lots of them there in the street, but they pay for themselves. Because every, ticket that they issue, like, more than pays for the cost of having them there.

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Emily Weidenhof

And there's an option for the public to push a button or notice if the, if the bay is not booked but being used, is that correct?

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Cllr. James McAsh

Yeah. Not quite the public, but the person who has booked the space.

Emily Weidenhof

Ah, got it. Yeah.

Cllr. James McAsh

So, if they get to a space and it's it's not available, they can press a button. It's not like a special button like wired into their van, it's on an app. They press the button and then that will alert the traffic enforcement people to come down and look at it.

00;21;19;08 - 00;21;51;27

Emily Weidenhof

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So, I wanted to ask a bit about communications. The way you communicate Streets for People is both so understandable, relatable, you know, kitchen table issues. But also really, multifaceted. You kind of highlight just, you know, that streets can be superheroes in terms of doing so many different things. How do you think about, the kind of importance and power of communicating, these types of efforts?

00;21;51;27 - 00;22;07;03

Emily Weidenhof

You obviously spend a lot of time in the public communicating to the public. So how do you how do you think about the communication piece of this, and any kind of key lessons learned in the conversations you've been having?

00;22;07;06 - 00;22;31;00

Cllr. James McAsh

We try to be very upfront with the fact we're asking people how to achieve our goals. We're not asking if the goals are right because we we feel confident that they are right and, you know, we have an elected mandate for for that. So, we say we're trying to reduce car journeys. And what that means is we put out a scheme and if someone comes back to us and says, "look, this really doesn't work cuz previously the journey

00;22;31;00 - 00;22;49;09

Cllr. James McAsh

I went to the shops, which is about two minutes by car, and now it's more like ten minutes by car. And that's going to be really I don't really like that." Our response is well, "That is kind of the point. So, I'm sorry you don't like it. But that is what we're trying to do," however, if people come back to us and say "this is gonna be a real nightmare for our loading.

00;22;49;13 - 00;22;58;19

Cllr. James McAsh

I'm a business. I won't be able to load because of this, this, and this." That's the kind of conversation we want to have. We want to kind of address that because it's about trying to achieve what it is we're trying to achieve together.

00;22;58;21 - 00;23;14;24

Emily Weidenhof

Beautiful. So, we have a question from our listeners that we wanted to ask you. You've been doing amazing work in, Southwark. And our listener wants to know, what can New York City learn from what you're doing in London?

00;23;14;26 - 00;23;30;28

Cllr. James McAsh

What can New York City learn? So, I mean, I think in New York you're doing some really exciting stuff. But in terms of low traffic neighborhoods where I think perhaps you do have things that we can we can share with you. The key thing I would say is be really upfront and honest about what it is you're trying to achieve.

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Cllr. James McAsh

I think people respect you. If you have a clear vision, explain why you're doing what you're trying to do, even if they don't agree with it, they don't like it, then they respect it in a way that if you're sort of meeting mielie mouthed about it and sort of be apologetic and you're not maybe being straight with people, then people don't like that at all.

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Cllr. James McAsh

So, you know, we say really clearly, we are trying to reduce car journeys. That's not something we're trying to do. And set yourself realistic goals. So, the thing you're trying to achieve is by making these internal neighborhood streets safe for children with lower traffic, you know, that's something you can do. There's lots of other things that you might do like very often air quality improves.

00;24;09;14 - 00;24;32;18

Cllr. James McAsh

That's often quite hard to prove. Very often the traffic on the boundary roads, the main roads, also improves, but not always. But if you set out, that you're going to say really clearly, really kind of upfront, "we want to make these neighborhood streets safe for your kids to walk down. And that means reducing traffic." The you will do that through a low traffic neighborhood, and you will have achieved the thing you set out today.

00;24;32;23 - 00;24;45;14

Emily Weidenhof

Amazing. Great. So, before we close, we want to ask a few questions that we ask all our guests. First, what is your biggest breach of transportation etiquette?

00;24;45;16 - 00;25;06;10

Cllr. James McAsh

Okay, so I am in general, quite libertarian. I am quite for people living their lives how they how they want to live them. The exception are those people who put things on their cars to make their cars louder. I don't understand why people do that. I hate it, I think it's appalling. And I would have those people in jail.

00;25;06;12 - 00;25;11;17

Huma Husain

Okay, and final question. What are you enthusiastic about for the future of transportation?

00;25;11;19 - 00;25;27;00

Cllr. James McAsh

What am I enthusiastic about? We're hoping to extend our underground line, through Southwark. So, the subway. That's one thing I'm very excited about. And I'm very excited about improving our busses. Very similar actually to what you guys are doing in New York is all.

00;25;27;00 - 00;25;43;24

Emily Weidenhof

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Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much. Again, really appreciate all of your, knowledge sharing, amazing work. We are certainly, excited to continue to watch all the amazing things, that you're doing in your borough and beyond.

00;25;43;27 - 00;25;46;16

Cllr. James McAsh

Likewise. Thank you so much for inviting me on here to speak to you both.