

20/20 VISION ON VISION ZERO

INTERVIEW WITH
SEB DANCE

ELABORATED BY
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London is often cast as a **Vision Zero** leader, but what does leadership feel like from the inside?

Seb Dance unpacks a city still pushing forward, from SUV risks and 20mph streets to data gaps, borough politics, and shifting behaviour.

POLIS: London is often described as a leading city on Vision Zero and urban mobility. That said, leadership can be a difficult label from the inside. How has the approach evolved in recent years, and what does success look like for a city already so far ahead?

Seb Dance: It is good to be seen as a city that is ahead: we do not always feel that way because we are quite self-critical. We are proud that fatalities and serious injuries are declining, but we need to go further.

The latest iteration of the plan builds on what has worked, using data both to reinforce success and identify where more action is needed. A clear example is oversized vehicles, which were not



*20 mph street in London
Nick Beer, Shutterstock*



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part of the original 2018 Vision Zero plan. We now know that collisions involving Sports Utility Vehicles are far more likely to result in serious injury or death, particularly for children. They also raise issues of space and equity in the public realm—a new area of focus.

POLIS: That feels like a fairly significant shift from earlier thinking. What triggered that change in focus?

SD: As we learn more from data, we adjust our approach accordingly.

POLIS: So there is both a learning element and a systems adjustment happening in parallel?

SD: We also continue to learn from other cities. Governance differs everywhere, but there is value in understanding what can be adapted.

Speed reduction has been one of the most effective interventions. Lowering limits to 20 miles per hour (approximately 30 kilometres per hour) has delivered major safety benefits without meaningfully affecting journey times.

Average urban speeds are still below 30 kilometres per hour, so the gains are clear.

The shift has not only been about policy but mindset: working more closely with boroughs on street design, running driver campaigns, and making clear this is about appropriate urban speed, not inconvenience.

POLIS: And beyond street design and speed, where else has that practical learning been applied?

SD: We have also expanded engagement with freight operators, delivery services, and micromobility providers, alongside manufacturers of bicycles, scooters, and Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs). The Direct Vision Standard for HGVs is a strong example. It initially faced resistance on cost grounds, but has since gained broad acceptance and influenced policy beyond London, including at the European Union level.

Ultimately, no one wants their workforce involved in a serious Road Traffic Collision. That recognition has helped build wider support. Still, too many people are injured or killed. These incidents are preventable, and it is our responsibility to design systems that reduce that risk.



**20 mph street with double-decker
and delivery van in London**
Gints Ivuskans, Shutterstock



Pedestrian crossing in London

Andriy Blokhin, Shutterstock

POLIS: You have emphasised the role of data. Where are the gaps still emerging?

SD: Bus safety is one area where progress has lagged, although identifying that has helped accelerate action.

More broadly, we take a wide view of data. Even incidents not directly caused by operations, such as passenger slips, are recorded. Early on, we made a deliberate decision to take responsibility for the full system rather than narrowing accountability.

Otherwise, you lose the full picture. A paving issue, for example, may sit with a borough, but it still forms part of the wider safety environment.

The bigger challenge is governance. Around 95% of London's streets are managed by 33 boroughs, so we work with 33 local authorities. That makes coordination essential.

On top of that, multiple police forces, such as the Metropolitan Police Service, the City of London Police, and the British Transport Police are involved, and that creates a complex data landscape.

POLIS: In practice, you are dealing with overlapping systems rather than a single unified one?

SD: It is complex, but Transport for London is the coordinating body that brings it together.

We have a shared commitment, and stakeholders trust that there is a citywide authority taking responsibility, which makes data sharing more natural than it would otherwise be. By taking on responsibility in areas some might see as beyond our strict remit, we are ultimately helping the system function more effectively.

POLIS: If you step back from institutions for a moment, how much of this is shaped by lived experience and feedback from people affected?

SD: We run a Road Victim Support Service within Transport for London, working with police services depending on the incident, and signposting people to support organisations.

Some people do not want to engage, which is understandable given the trauma involved, but many do, and those conversations are extremely valuable and often reveal how uneven experience is across time, place, and demographic groups. That challenges assumptions and improves understanding significantly.

POLIS: If you had to isolate one policy lever that has had the most visible impact, what would it be?

SD: If I had to pick one, we would not have Vision Zero, because all of them are necessary.

But in terms of impact, speed reduction has been the most significant in recent years: the difference between 30 and 20 miles per hour is small in journey time but substantial in safety terms.

That said, it only works alongside street design. You cannot separate the two: a road designed for higher speeds undermines lower limits, while a well-designed street makes safer speeds feel natural.

POLIS: At borough level, is there variation in how this agenda is received, or is it broadly aligned now?

SD: I would not single any out, but overall, there is strong alignment across boroughs, regardless of political differences. However, in some cases, narratives framed around a 'war on motorists' can make progress more difficult.

Our focus is not on restricting drivers, but on ensuring all road users understand their responsibilities: different users carry different levels of risk, and that needs to be reflected in both policy and behaviour.

POLIS: There is also a sense that these categories are more fluid than they are often presented.

SD: Yes. It is about recognising that people move between roles. As my mum once put it, 'a pedestrian is just a motorist who has found somewhere to park'.

POLIS: Wisely said! And that idea of fluidity is interesting, especially when you look at the next phase of delivery. What needs to shift to accelerate progress?

SD: Our long-term goal is for 80% of journeys to be made by public transport or active travel by 2041. For this to happen, mode share is central. When walking, cycling, and public transport become the default, the system becomes more intuitive for everyone.

We have made progress among London residents, but challenges remain for those commuting into the city, which means that strengthening connections between outer areas is particularly important. The Superloop bus network is one example, connecting outer London town centres and significantly increasing ridership.

Superloop's stop at Hatton Cross Station

W223





POLIS: If we zoom out to the wider European context, which cities have been most influential in shaping London's approach?

SD: Many cities offer inspiration: Oslo stands out for safety outcomes, Copenhagen for zero-emission buses and high safety standards, and Berlin for its continued expansion of the tram network. Brussels is also making progress in reallocating space toward pedestrians and cyclists.

What has shifted more broadly is that this is no longer a fringe debate. The assumption that road deaths are inevitable is increasingly being replaced by the idea that they are preventable through design..

POLIS: Finally, stepping back from specific measures, what do you think London brings to this global conversation?

SD: London shows that even a large, complex city can deliver Vision Zero: here, reductions in deaths and serious injuries have been made possible across very different environments, from dense urban centres to suburban roads.

More importantly, we have learned the value of designing systems around how people actually behave, rather than how we think they should behave, and that requires responsibility, partnership, and a willingness to work across institutional boundaries.

At its core, this is something everyone agrees on: nobody should die on our roads.

20 mph sign in London

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