

People's Question Time
Building a Road to Economic Recovery
22 July 2009

Introduction

Steve O'Connell

**Member, Greater London Assembly
Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development, Croydon Council**

Good evening, everybody. It is good to see you here in Croydon tonight. This is the third of the Mayor's public question roadshows and tonight we are going to be talking about the economy, and economic recovery. The form of tonight is the panel; our illustrious panel will introduce themselves and give us a few minutes, and hopefully Boris will give us a few more minutes than that, and then we will take questions, which is the whole point of the evening: the public questions. I want to get through as many questions as possible tonight, so questions are great; speeches, not so. So we look forward to taking that further.

Croydon tonight, why Croydon? As we know, Croydon is the largest London borough, a city within a city. I am Steve O'Connell, I am the GLA member for Croydon and Sutton, and I am the Cabinet Member for regeneration and economic development. It is very important that we recognise Croydon's place in the family of London and the importance of Croydon, and I think that is why it is so important tonight and it is significant that the Mayor has chosen to come and talk about his plans for our economy within Croydon. But it is not just a Croydon piece; this is for London as a whole. I know there are representatives, chief execs and leaders from other London boroughs.

So without further ado, again I welcome you all tonight, I see some faces that I know, and some faces I do not know, but I really look forward to the questioning that is going to come from the floor tonight. If you do not get the time to get your question in, please write to the Mayor or to me thereafter, we will come back to you with the answers.

So the panel tonight, a great panel, giving up their time, for which we are very grateful. We have on our right, Peter Pledger, the Chief Executive of South London Business. We have Anthony Browne, the Mayor's adviser on the economy. The chap in the middle, not too sure who he is! But moving beyond, we have Peter Bishop, Director of the LDA. Sue Tepilowski, who is the Chair of Federation of London Businesses, and at the end is my new colleague, Tony Kildare, I am really pleased tonight, who has taken the post of Chief Executive of the Croydon Economic Development Company, and I am looking forward particularly to working with him going forward.

So the form of tonight is we are going to ask the panel to introduce themselves and give us their take on the economy, what we need to do to move out of the recession, and moving forward to prosperity, and then we will take some questions. So first of all, I think I would welcome particularly, with honour, with pleasure, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

Opening Addresses by Panel Speakers

Boris Johnson

Mayor of London

Thank you, good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you, Steve, for being here tonight and all the hard work you do for Croydon. It is great to be here in this historic theatre, I am thinking of Shakin' Stevens and Cannon and Ball, and according to the sign in the dressing room, I must not incite you, no matter how excited you may become, to dance! You may dance if you like, but I cannot incite you to do it! Also, what I want to do is whilst you are - whilst you restrain yourselves, I want you in a sedentary position, to be full of confidence about the Croydon economy and about the London economy. There is a picture of me up there, I was wondering why you were all staring up there, it was a bit spooky!

One thing, particularly, about this fantastic borough that we currently inhabit, that we are in, and Steve represents, is that the other day I read that Nicolas Sarkozy had outlined a new vision for Paris, he saw in his mind's eye a new way of approaching the banlieues of Paris: he had a vision of a new urban district with well designed tall buildings and excellent public transport links into the centre of down. Of course it now transpires he has an acute case of Croydon envy! Apparently Carla Bruni spent some time here in her youth, and I do not think you can blame either him or her.

It is obvious that Croydon is making fantastic strides towards becoming the third city of London; an economic powerhouse, in its own right. We have all seen some of the amazing plans, the urban projects at Wellesley Road, the plans support really rather distinguished new office space (about which I cannot comment on in detail, without fettering any future discretion I might have!). We know, because we look at the demographic projections, over the next 10-15 years, London will get back up in population terms to the levels of 1961 or perhaps even 1939: we will go up to over 8 million people, and I believe that your plans, the Croydon plans, are sensible. They are predicated upon an economic recovery that will certainly come. What we have got to do – and I think there are some interesting signs of that recovery already by the way, in the sectors of the London economy that are in credit crunch denial – but what we have to do is we have to help people through the recession. That means doing things to help the poorest people on Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, cut price travel, you all look too frisky to be eligible for the Freedom Pass. Anybody got a Freedom Pass here? I hope you notice it is now valid 24 hours a day, that is important for old people in search of work.

We must bear down insofar as we can on the taxes that people face in London. That is why we have been making savings in City Hall. I do not just mean a 50% cut in the number of Deputy Mayors! I also mean getting rid, for instance, of The Londoner newspaper, and making economies across the board: 30% cut in the accounts of the LDA, £2.4 billion cut in TfL budgets, £100 million cut in the GLA budget, and by doing so, we are able to deliver what I think Londoners wanted first and foremost from a new administration, that was the first ever freeze in our share of the council tax. We have been able to take the savings and spend them on the things that I think Londoners want their money to be spent on: fighting crime. I was very pleased to hear in Croydon, we deployed the first Safer Transport team, there has been success in the sense that bus crime has gone down 18% across London and knife crime down 8%. Sir Paul Stephenson has broken up the old system whereby police had to go round in pairs; he is encouraging, insisting upon one man patrolling, or one officer patrolling - not to be sexist – and what is the result? Another 65,000

patrols every year on the streets of London, and I think that is the kind of reform that Londoners wanted to see.

But what they also want, and what they also need for us to get through this recession, is continued investment in the things that really matter to the long-term future of the city. I am talking about the big investment in the infrastructure projects that will deliver long-term improvements in the quality of people's lives. How many of you have had a bad experience on the Tube recently? Right, okay. Good, it is obviously getting better!

Let me tell you this, if you felt that you were overcrowded, if you felt you were being crushed into the Tube like a ball of socks being pushed into an overstuffed suitcase, then do not blame me. Blame the people who cancelled Crossrail back in the recession of the 1990s. Crossrail, whatever people may think about it and I know there are divisions of opinion, Crossrail will expand London's rail capacity by 10%. The upgrades to the Tubes by 2012, that London needs and that London is promised, will expand tube capacity by 30%. We are doing a huge amount to make sure that by the end of this year, everybody will be able to use their Oyster Card on the Overground as well. We have an integrated system for the first time ever, with a single integrated map.

If you take all these projects together: the Crossrail; the Tube upgrades; the Thames Tideway Tunnel, the vast, super-colossal thing that is going to be constructed underneath the Thames; the Olympics project, an extraordinary investment in East London, the likes of which has never been seen before, which will do, for the first time, enable us to try to lift those boroughs of East London towards convergence with the rest of London. If you take all those things together, those big investments, they will deliver jobs and growth now, in the short-term during this time of economic hardship. They will also make London more liveable, more attractive for people in the long-term, and you add in also what we are doing with urban rail projects, what you are doing in Croydon with urban rail projects, with the cycle hire scheme, with better air quality, new electric vehicles. You can see ways in which London will become and will lengthen its lead as the most attractive place on earth to live and to work. It is our job to get all that done, and also, to remind the world, because the world is in danger of forgetting this, that London is not just founded on the strength of financial services. They are important, they always will be important, we must defend them against ill-thought-out directives proceeding from Brussels, but they are not the only reason for London's success.

We have the best universities in the world, we have the best culture, creative and media sector in the world, the best law firms, the best accountants, and so on and so forth. But what people forget is that we also have a very strong manufacturing sector, and that needs to be talked up and defended, and people who represent it need to be supported. That is what we are doing with the London Development Agency, with the funds that we are making available to support small businesses, who employ 80% of people in work in London. I believe that there can be astonishing successes, just by entrepreneurship. The other day I read in the paper that there is a firm in London, I think it was in The Times – and I believe it! – there is a firm in London that is making shortbread, brownies and chocolate cake. Maybe not shortbread, but puddings, that is it: puddings, brownies and chocolate cake. Do you know, this is a firm in Walthamstow, baking these, and it is exporting, every year, thanks to this Government's masterly policy of devaluation of the pound, it is able to export now to the continent £5 million worth of puddings, chocolate cake and brownies. And which country do you think is buying these chocolate cakes? Do you know? France! Yes, France: the French are buying our cakes. My message to Sarkozy and the people of France is: let them eat cake! Let them eat London cake!

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming along tonight. My message to you is if we can give Londoners the opportunities that they deserve, if we can give them the infrastructure they need to make the city ever more liveable and more habitable and attractive, then I have no doubt that with our natural flair for entrepreneurship, for devising new financial instruments and, of course, for cake making, that London will lead this country out of recession as it did in the 1930s and London will emerge stronger than it has been before. Thank you very much.

Steve O'Connell

Thank you very much, Mayor.

I forgot to mention earlier, the support that is given to us by LBC, London's Big Conversation, I need to get that plug in, otherwise I will be told off! What I would like now to do is go along the panel, stay seated otherwise I am going to get a personality complex on who Steve O'Connell is, so Peter would you give us a couple of minutes?

Peter Pledger

Chief Executive, South London Business

It is a bit hard to follow Boris, but I will do my best.

I am the Chief Exec of a company called South London Business, which has one objective: to support and help business across all 12 South London boroughs, as you all know, Croydon is bang in the centre of South London. The question we were asked to address was what do we think about the recession, what is going on and what should be going on to help us out of it? Cake obviously is one option, but I have one or two other options that may be worth considering.

The first thing about this recession is I am not one of those people who actually share the doom and gloom that you hear from the BBC and from other media. Yes, it is true that many, many businesses are on their knees, and are having difficulty. But at the same time, we are seeing real positive development, and you will know that only at the start of the recession, what opened off the Purley Way? Costco, and 200 jobs were created in this area providing another retail outlet when others were closing. We have shops supporting greater sales, and even some car dealers saying the market is turning, and for the first time, some estate agents are not as depressed as they once were. You may not be so pleased about that!

But the market is certainly changing, and so while I will not talk about green shoots, it is quite clear to me that the picture is not all bad. I have hinted, I should say green shoots, but perhaps not, but things are not all bad. But there is a problem, and the most important problem, which is the one key indicator that everybody worries about and that is jobs. Whether you have a job or have just lost your job or have never had a job, it is the number one issue on your mind. While an economist may say unemployment is a long-term indicator: not much comfort if you have lost your job after working for a company for five or ten years. No doubt, unemployment is increasing and increasing in areas where we have not seen unemployment in the past; in areas where people have held jobs down for decades and for the first time people are confronted that they have not got a job to go to on the Monday morning.

The centre of Purley - historically low unemployment, is now getting high unemployment, not just Croydon, but across South London. That is creating new problems and challenges for us all. Clearly it has an impact on businesses; people without jobs do not spend and less income for services and products and other businesses get in trouble. The number one priority for everybody, national Government, the Mayor and his administration and local Government has to be without doubt support and creation of jobs. Everything else has to be secondary to that. I am delighted that the Mayor and the GLA family and also Croydon Council and London councils across South London are fixated on that particular issue because we all realise that is the top priority.

One or two other things perhaps we can do that would help businesses in not laying off people in the first place. The first on that list is National Insurance. Yes, we all pay taxes and we all pay National Insurance but every employer has to pay 12.8% of your wages in additional tax for the privilege of actually having you work for them. That is a tax on jobs. It is a tax that needs to be eliminated albeit for the short-term, take pressure of employers so they do not have to put people on the dole.

Secondly, business rates. Now, I heard a number of statements about that, you may not know business rates are planned to go up by another 10% across London, and London already pays more than its fair share of business rates in the country. A 10% increase across businesses over half a billion pounds extra. Business rates are not controlled by your local authority, it is a national tax where you have no controls and no direction of and again such UK tax in the time of recession cannot be justified.

Thirdly, London is not just zone one. The people and businesses of Croydon are just as important as the people and businesses in the City or Westminster and therefore we should have a fair share of any public sector funding and support that is available. Now I know that the Mayor supports this message and he has demonstrated that by creating the Outer London Commission (OLC), an initiative to do something about outer London. What I would hope is that that Commission is not just a talking shop, but is a Commission that does focus on the town centres and realises the importance of Croydon in South London and gives this area and surrounding town centres the support it needs to develop. Why do I say that? Is it just because I am from South London, live and work here and my wife and daughter are in this area? No, that is not the reason.

The reason is whilst we know what is happened to the financial services sector, there are other sectors and other institutions and jobs that already exist and can be grown in outer London. But for a bit of help and support we can ensure this recession is out and used out working intelligence, gall and resilience we all show every day of the working week.

It also means we should start to work with businesses in South London to tackle some of the problems that prevent businesses from moving into South London. For most South London businesses the challenge is not do we go to Central London or South London, but look at Surrey, Sussex and other areas. What do they complain about? Parking, they complain about having to confront louts as they come and go from work. They complain about lack of services, lack of the good public transport; the tube system in Central London which are not as evident here. We know much is happening to make it better but we hope to do more to work the way out of recession in the businesses in the area.

Finally, South London: it is a great place to live and work, you know that and I know that because we do it. I think we can do a lot more to help London and the country work its way out of recession, by developing business, creating jobs and changing our live and the lives of people who we work with and support. I know I support it; Mr Mayor, I know you do too. Thank you

Steve O'Connell

Thank you very much. I work very closely with Peter and he is very industrious in supporting the businesses across South London and it is a fair point made about the importance that the Mayor leading up to the election and now, the importance the Mayor gives to the outer London boroughs, the power houses of outer London, of which Croydon is one but of course there are others. I would like now to turn to the Mayor's advisor, Anthony Browne. Really pleased Anthony can make tonight and look forward to hearing what he has to say. Thank you.

Anthony Browne**Policy Director – Economic and Business, Greater London Authority**

Steve, thank you very much. It is a great honour to be here in the home of the horse-drawn train, I found out to day, absolutely amazing, it went down the road, and you have been enterprising ever since: you won a prize to be the number one enterprising borough in London in 2007 and are full of small businesses. I lead on economic and business policy for the Mayor and have always believed in judging people by results. When Boris was elected, the London economy was booming and it is now in recession: I clearly have not done that good a job!

It is actually not, and I want to echo the point Peter made: things in London are not as bad as most people predicted. We had a time about eight months ago, the cover of Time magazine saying London was finished it was going to close down, everybody was leaving, the credit crunch, the close of financial services, property price doom. Other cities were rubbing their hands with glee. Things have been difficult, unemployment is rising, businesses are failing, empty shop on the High Street but it is not half as bad as everybody predicted. We have been surprised there are signs of life in the London economy. I am not allowed to say 'green shoots', but there are sectors of the London economy that have been doing remarkably well.

Retail sales in the West End up, for example, 5%; and a lot of hot spots in the property market coming back. It is actually really amazing the London has defied the national trend in many ways. Actually now in London although unemployment has risen and it is bad, London has lower unemployment than the national average for the first time in over 20 years, showing how strong the London economy is. People do not realise how strong it is: not just number one in finance and number one in law – the top legal centre in the world – the top accountancy sector in the world. Universities: we have more international students then anywhere in the world, more international tourists than any other city, the world's top visited music venue now, the O₂ centre which came from nowhere to overtake Madison Square Garden in New York in just one year.

It is not just inner London, lots of to our London businesses, world leaders as well. Like the company I saw recently: Eidos in Wimbledon, one of the top games companies in the world with the Lara Croft Tomb Raider games. London is an amazing place and amazing economy. Not taking it all for granted, we are doing what we can and launched the whole economic recovery package in December, with over 60 measures to help small businesses and help individuals to stop losing jobs in the first place and help them back into work. We launched a whole range of advice services, personal advice services for people and companies: how to survive the recession, cope with downturn, how to get credit and so on. We have done marketing campaign for tourism to try and encourage tourists to come here. We are doing what we can.

The biggest threat – I want to pick up on a point Peter made – is actually, increasingly national Government policy, a lot of policies. We are hit day after day with policies that unfairly target London. Business rates they just announced: that will suck £600m out of London businesses, Croydon businesses and pump them into the rest of the British economy, businesses elsewhere. London businesses are the only ones who will have a sharp rise in rates. Things like European Financial Services Regulation, which targets London; the 50p tax rate on high earners, I know they are unpopular, but the tax rates affects London four-times more than the rest of the UK. So, we are doing what we can for London, trying to lobby the rest of the national Government to do what it can to treat London fairly. It is a bit of a tough ride but London has had a great past behind it, a world leading city for a long time and if we get it right now we can make sure London is a great world leading city in the future. Thank you.

Steve O’Connell

Words that I would reinforce completely about the powerhouse that is London, the fair deal London must get from national Government, I know the Mayor takes it very seriously when it comes to lobbying a fair deal for London, which we have not actually received in the past. I would like to pass you on to the next guest. Peter spends a lot of time now in Croydon, I think is buying a season ticket to come down here. Lots of good meetings, working close a close with the GLA family and the LDA is an important part of that.

Peter Bishop

Group Director – Design, Development and Environment, London Development Agency

Glad to be here again, another visit to Croydon. The London Development Agency is a regional development agency. Our role is to act as a catalyst to bring forward economic development. We do not have a huge budget and it means we have to be really focused on how we apply those and constantly try and find the areas where we can invest to make a significant difference to make things happen that would not happen otherwise or to make things which are happening, better and more effective. Even those who remember the early 1990s recession would say this is far and away the worst recession we have lived through. And the worst recession in living memory. Anthony has said a lot about the strength of London: one of the very, very significant differences between now and the 1990s. London is in for more robust shape now than then. It is diverse, dynamic, a global leader and we have a lot of creative industries and creative people to build that recession on. The other thing that is different, between now and the 1990s is that even if you, as a business or a developer, have an absolutely brilliant business plan and idea, the difference is that still, now, it is extremely difficult to find the money to implement it and to make it forward.

That is leading us increasingly as a development agency to think how can we do two things. First of all in the present economic climate, how to make the recession a bit shallower than it would have been, and how can we prepare London to pull out a bit faster than it would otherwise do. To do that, the LDA has gone through a significant period of change over the last year. We have restructured, reduced staff by 30%. More importantly, started to really focus on getting a number of projects through which will make a significant difference. We are focusing on our area priorities, inevitably with the Olympics and the regeneration of East London a lot of work in East London and the Mayor’s OLC has been instrumental in thinking how to unlock the latent economic potential of outer London and in particular how to engage with boroughs like Croydon,

who are really keen to engage with us, bring through exciting proposals that can unlock true development potential in an area that has huge advantages of location and the history and location of the industries and the firms who have located here in the past.

One thing we can do is work out bespoke solutions: solutions where we align with the London Plan and the planning, economic development policies and transport policies of the Mayor's Office. It may not sound particularly exciting or clever, but only in the last year that the major bodies of London Government, the planning powers of the Mayor's office, Transport for London and Development Agency have really started to come together to work out how we can collectively intervene to make a difference. If you add in a new organisation called the Homes and Community Agency, who have had a very, very large budget for investment in housing, now we are beginning to join up all Government agencies there is real opportunity to make a significant difference in areas like Croydon.

Finally, the other area of major growth is the green economy and the whole of the Climate Change and Environment Agency. Despite the fact we have had the budget squeezed, we are putting more money into investment environmental measures to address climate change than in previous years, partly because we have a responsibility as a major city to do so; partly because it is a major priority of the Mayor and also because it is good economic sense. The growth in the world economy is likely to be focused in the environmental sectors more than almost any other area and the same time we are putting major investment into retrofitting office and residential buildings to reduce the carbon footprint and we are looking to put in other major investments to look at things like decentralised energy schemes and to streamline revolutionise the way London deals with its waste. It is a big agenda, a complex agenda; we are really excited. We are really excited to work with other agencies, work with areas like Croydon, which are really willing to engage with us and to start the dialogue. We do not have the solutions to come and impose. What we want to do this evening and in forums like this is engage with you and other boroughs and organisations to find out how collectively we can resolve some of the major problems we are dealing with to prepare the platform for London to emerge as the great global player it is. Thank you very much

Steve O'Connell

Thank you, Peter. Two points I would like to pick up on.

Peter mentioned the OLC, a body which shows the emphasis the Mayor puts on outer London, and we are honoured that our leader, Mike Fisher, sits on that Commission.

But also the point Peter is making around the single conversation, it sounds a bit dry, but we are proud in Croydon again to be the model for that one conversation, about the investment plan for the borough; getting the whole GLA family - LDA, TfL and others - in the same room, to drive through investment for the town, we are pleased that is going forward.

Our next speaker is Sue Tepilowski, the Policy Chair for the Federation of Small Business. Pleased you could make tonight and look forward to hearing from you.

Sue Tepilowski

London Policy Chair, Federation of Small Business

The Federation of Small Businesses are a member led organisation, led by our members, I am a member, and there is 216,000 of us in the UK. Yes, as we heard, the recession is hurting, and it is hurting bad in some sectors.

But there are businesses that are surviving, and there are businesses that are growing. I was with a number of insolvency practitioners, as you can imagine, they are having a field day at the moment! But there is a lot to be said, the recession is global, there is not much we have got control over here in London, but there are things we can do to help each other, and things we need to bear in mind to be doing in our daily actions.

One of the big projects the Federation launched just over 18 months ago now is a campaign called: Keep Trade Local. It is something we all need to think about, when we are doing our shopping, actually purchasing, is thinking, can I buy this locally? Can I help our local economy? Because those are the areas where we really can make a difference, and start to help the road to recovery. So I would like you to think about this, when you are out there next time and doing some purchasing, can you buy that locally, can you buy that on your doorstep, can you help somebody in your local area? There are 700,000 businesses in London, of which 40,000 of them are micro-businesses, and they employ over two million people. If those businesses all took on one extra person, it would really help alleviate our work problem. But we need help and support to do that.

London has the worst uptake of apprenticeships. That is because it is not helped, and we have all heard today that jobs is a big issue. So let us think about how we can actually help apprenticeships and get that back into our ethos, and the respect it should have in our economic climate. There are some other quite alarming facts, we did a survey of all our members in March, and what it said was that 40% of those businesses that are now established in London: they would not have actually set up again in London, because they do not find it a place where they really want to do business at the moment. It is echoed by what Peter said at the beginning. My business rates, personally, are now 50% of my rent. That is not economically sustainable in a company. It is something that everybody needs to campaign about, and every needs to think about. I do urge you, with local elections coming up, to say to your people that knock on the door, what are you doing to help small businesses? How are you getting this message across, that London really cannot sustain the whole of the UK by rises like this.

I would like to also pose some other questions to you, and make you think about things. As we have mentioned before, Crossrail, it is really vital to everybody in London; it will take away a lot of people out of the transport system. But we in particular want to make sure that the upgrades to the Underground are not forgotten, because those are equally important, and it is not an either/or option. I think that is something we all who echo every time we can, and make sure it is heard loud and clear. We also need to give much, much greater priority to business crime. That is on a major increase at the moment, and it is petty crime that is growing. It is something we really need to think about, because the people that do this business crime, and get away with it, are the people that then go on and start taking things from people's houses. If they think they can get away with small crime, they get very cocky and go out and do other things. So business crime is really important and it needs to come further up the agenda. I think I have spoken enough; it is time you took the floor, so I will now end my speech.

Steve O'Connell

Thank you, Sue.

Coming at the angle of small businesses is something I am aware of, because my wife runs a small business, and I know the pressures they are under. I thought I would mention her just to embarrass her! I would now like to introduce our last panel member, I am pleased Tony is here tonight, the new Chief Executive of the Croydon Economic Development Company: we have members of the board who are actually here tonight, like the Chairman. I am pleased they could come along, looking forward to working with Tony going forward, in the years going forward, if the electorate is happy with me, and to bring forward the regeneration of Croydon, so Tony.

Antony Kildare**Chief Executive, Croydon Economic Development Company Ltd**

Thanks, Steve, good evening. As Steve has said, I have been here a matter of six weeks or so, so I am very well aware of the challenge that lies ahead, not least because of the economic recession.

As Peter has said earlier, these are very unpredictable times that we are in; we have not seen the breadth or the depth of some of the challenges that are being faced by economies at a national level, never mind in Croydon itself. It is very difficult to know just exactly where some of the emphasis should be placed. In terms of the Economic Development Company, some of you in Croydon and I am sure some of you in the audience will be aware of the predecessor organisations that will now form part of the foundation for the Company going forward, so Croydon Business; Envive, dealing perfectly with sustainability and developing and stimulating sustainable business practice; Croydon Enterprise. All have been doing some very, very good work, but the Economic Development Company is looking to do something quite different: it is building on that base, but it is wanting to raise the bar in economic performance terms for Croydon.

Now I am sure many of you will be aware of the challenges that Croydon itself faces, not just because of the recession, but, we have not seen growth in employment for some years. We have a greater share of financial jobs compared to outer London boroughs, but we also have 30% of the jobs in Croydon in public sector, and that is much higher than the rest of London. We have the second lowest wages of London and we have 13% and more of people who are on benefits within the borough. 32% of our population are under 25 and we have 11% of people in self-employment, which is much less than you see in the rest of London and elsewhere in the country. So there are some challenges there, that we need to look at, and that is very much what the Economic Development Company is there to address.

Now what it is that we are aspiring to do, and that is in working with others, is look specifically at how we can diversify the business base, how we can have true deep markets and segments within markets that we can say represent the way that Croydon is moving in the future. It is also about creating a quality business environment, and I am sure many of you have made comments about some of the challenges that we face, you know, what we have around us, some of the public realm that is there, and already there are some fantastic master plans that I have seen and read about and spoken with council colleagues about, which will raise these aspirations, and will create some of the demand and the interest from people outside.

It is also about improving Croydon's external connectivity, and you have heard colleagues on the panel talking about some of the transport linkages and some of the other infrastructure linkages that need to be considered. So these are very important. I think it is also about the skills base; we have quite a long way to go yet on developing a true higher education base in Croydon, but the aspiration is there. If we can create the higher-level skills that we require, it will be even more attractive as an offer for investors when they are coming here.

Also, inward investment generally, and it is not just about, you know, inward investment from around the local area or from London, but it is from other parts of the UK and indeed from overseas: what are we going to do? What are we going to say about Croydon's offer and making that happen?

So these are some of the challenges that I am looking ahead to, and I am looking forward with a great degree of excitement. I know that there has been a huge amount of work already gone on in Croydon. I am impressed by the way in which the business base has already engaged, and is keen to kind of participate in that. I would also commend to you Croydon Crunch, which is a collective response from a number of public sector players and partners in Croydon, in directly responding to businesses which are in recession; businesses which are facing difficulty in dealing with their debt collection or in meeting their rent or rates; and also about individuals who are in fear of their jobs or redundancy, and the Croydon Crunch website is providing information and for and advice and signposting people to where they can get some help. So these are some of the things that are happening in doing that, but I am delighted to be here this evening, and delighted at the prospect of joining the Croydon team, as we move forward on raising the bar for Croydon, so thank you very much. .

Steve O'Connell

Tony, thank you very much. Two points there.

Tony has come on board to build up the EDC, but he is building from a very firm base, and his colleagues in the audience, have made a real contribution to that base. Also to that inward investment: one of the aspirations I have as a cabinet member is to double the inward investment into this borough by the end of the next administration, if elected. What we need to do, as partners, is to make the environment in Croydon such that it is attractive to businesses to come to Croydon, and not conducive for businesses to close in Croydon. So to attract businesses big and small into our town, and that is something we all need to do as partners and I know many people in this audience will work towards that.

Questions from the Audience

Steve O'Connell

This is the part of the evening that I have been looking forward to, because it is the question time. You have here in front of you the key players. I am here as well just to make the numbers up, and what we are going to do is take questions. It might be helpful, if you do not mind introducing yourself, you do not have to, it might be helpful, and if you are here representing somebody, it might be useful to hear who you are representing. I am keen to hear from people who we do not normally hear from, I make no bones or apologies around that. So I will just get my pen out, hang

on a minute, that is my Status Quo ticket that I bought tonight. That says more about me than any biography can!

Audience, who would like to ask the first question? The gentleman down on the right, that is my friend Jack, would you like to stand up and introduce yourself?

Participant

Good evening, thank you for inviting a question from a real Croydonian! I would like to ask the Mayor and any of the panel as well. I will make this a brief question, where is your real evidence of these results that you want to achieve? The Mayor has been in office for over a year now, he has appointed all his advisors, who have had to later resign. The three main issues that this borough has problems with is transport, benefit claimant cases, and housing. So if the Mayor wants an advisor on bad housing policy over the last 50 years, will he come and see me, and bring a TV crew with him, and I will show him exactly where and what the problems are.

Boris Johnson

Thank you. Of course, I am very pleased that we have been able to make significant reductions in the headcount in City Hall, because as I said, it has enabled us to cut costs across London and freeze the council tax. So I do not think, harsh though your criticism is, I take it in good part, I think it is a vital part of what we are doing.

On housing, and the problems that you particularly mention: there is a massive job of work to be done here, and everyone recognises that people in London have the most acute housing need of anybody in the country, there are more people on waiting lists than anywhere else in the country, the cost of housing, in spite of what has happened, is still punishingly high, for hundreds of thousands of people in the city. We have to build more social housing, both for social rent and intermediate, and we have to build more housing full stop, and that is what we are doing. Of course we are using the £5 billion Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) budgets between now and 2011 to jump start housing where we can, but as anybody who works in the sector will know, it is very, very difficult. They are not moving. Those private developers are not going ahead. I want them to be given a kick in the pants – I do not want to be pejorative about it, they are great guys in many ways – but need to get on with it and we are using the HCA funds to unlock developments where we can. But of course, when you have a reluctance on the part of the private sector to go ahead when they are in the credit crunch the grant rate we have to contribute to get a unit of affordable built, is higher and that is a problem we are having to deal with at the moment.

What I want, I think everybody should do in Croydon, is say to the Government, ‘If they are going to raid our funds’ – which they have done – ‘for the London Development Agency to create this £1.5 billion new housing pot for the whole UK let us get the point across that the lion’s share of the funding needs to come to London because that is where the housing need is, and that is where it should be spent.’ Not just for the sake of people in London who need housing but for the sake of UK economy as a whole. If you want me to come with a TV camera to make that point, I am more than happy to do so.

Participant

The question for the Mayor: in May 2008 you said you were not sure there were any historic mews of Croydon and that high-rise buildings were an adornment at a Question Time. Do you still stand

by your May 2008 comments, especially in light of the fact the Menta application has been withdrawn and your policy that Croydon is a suitable place for clusters of skyscrapers, do you agree with advisor Sir Simon Milton's view that skyscrapers are a disasters?

Boris Johnson

I do not think I said 'skyscrapers'. I might have said that there are places in London, with Croydon was an example, where well-designed, tall buildings, with – and this is the key point – the support of local people and local politicians, could be acceptable, if they were in clusters and well done and going to add to the amenity and beauty of the neighbourhood. As to your question about strategic views, I am not going to get drawn into any such discussion, because there are applications, indeed something has crossed my desk this very day. It would be quite wrong of me to say any more on this subject. Some smart lawyer would observe what I said and use it to prevent me from exercising any further discretion in the matter. Suffice to say, I think there are wonderful views in Croydon, it is a fantastic place - it is wonderful place. I note the decision of the Borough Council and I gladly accede in what they have said because it is an emanation of the local will, which is what I support.

Steve O'Connell

Thank you, Boris. The point to add to this is what is really significant and we welcome very much, is the lightness of touch by the Mayor and his acknowledgement that the Borough Councils, frankly, know better and unless there is a particularly strategic reason the Mayor should intervene, we should be allowed to get on with it, as we have with that particular application, that clearly we have already published a refusal for.

Participant

My name is Barry Wheatley, I am a retired brewer. One of the major attractions for many years for many years has been the English pub or the local. The latest figures at are the 30 a week are closing. By the time the Olympics arrive everyone will need athletic training to find a pub! Can anything be done by local authorities to allay this decline in the pubs? Thank you.

Boris Johnson

I have just one idea, if more people rode bicycles and fewer people drove cars you would not have to worry about the drink driving laws and I sincerely believe that. I have absolutely no prohibition about drinking a pint of two of beer and riding my bicycle where as I would not do that in a car.

Steve O'Connell

I agree sir; one of the problems with this town is that in previous years, there have been far too many clubs and vertical drinking establishments based in the middle of town, which neglect decent pubs around the edge of the town. As someone who enjoys the occasional beer, I would very much agree with your comment.

Anthony Browne

I am glad you asked that question, it is a cause close to my heart as well: the great English pub. The one near where I used to live was turned into flats and it was a complete disaster for the whole community. I have had officials look at the precise issue and they are talking to the different organisations representing pubs and the Campaign For Real Ale people. There might be something we can do at the moment but it does come down to boroughs, and we do not want to interfere with the rights of boroughs to decide what to do with pubs. If they want to close down pubs and turn them into flats, it is their planning decision and not a strategic planning issue for London. We are looking if there is anything to do at strategic level if only a campaign to help save the pub in London.

Steve O'Connell

As a speaker for the boroughs, we are putting together a development planning framework for the borough, and this is now the opportunity to weave into that planning framework clauses around protection to things like public houses etc.

Participant

I thought how ironic that the public is building the road of economic recovery. There is a traffic problem in London: as Mayor, what are you going to do; there is a gridlock in London. I have some solutions myself.

Boris Johnson

I would be delighted look at your solutions. Some of the things we are doing to improve traffic flow in London, we are rephasing 1,000 traffic lights a year to make traffic smoother without prejudicing – very, very important – without prejudicing the rights of vulnerable road users, particularly pedestrians, there are things we can do. But the biggest saving, there are two big savings – do you know what causes delays? 41% of delays are caused by accidents. As Chairman of the Metropolitan Police Authority, I am launching an initiative to make sure the police are faster in clearing up the consequences of those accidents. Some countries, for instance Sweden, where they are incredibly quick at getting the traffic flowing back to normal. We are not good at that in London, we must become much, much better for economic reasons.

The other, the second big delay, do you know what that is? Road works: 36% of delays by time are caused by road works and we have a breakthrough in the last few weeks. We have a new transport secretary, Andrew Adonis, the first guy to recognise what we need in this city, is proper lane rental. What we are going to do is to institute a permit system with the utilities who are a very, very powerful group of people, and they can basically dig up the roads without so much as a 'by your leave', they will be given permits, if they breach the terms of the permit, if leave the thing unattended or leave a crater for too long, or they do not get on and do it or spend too long, then, they will be penalised with substantial fines. That this only way to do it.

Participant

The problem is so many bus stops everywhere.

Boris Johnson

There are issues around buses, I am a great fan of buses but we will certainly look at what you propose.

Participant

Rosemary Rigden, I have live here 43 years and I absolutely adore Croydon. The thing that worries me most that has not been mentioned is culture. It is really important the creative side of things when the recession is on and also it is big business and Croydon is dithering about it, having meetings but closing certain things, not supporting its local theatres properly, not buying a new piano for the Fairfield. I feel sad about it. I think it is a consideration that we need something extra apart from business: culture is a business, too.

Steve O'Connell

I agree completely; it is very much important from the Council's point of view and it is our responsibility to encourage culture in the town and if you feel we are slipping up on that you need to talk to us and challenges about it. Tony, you wanted to comment?

Anthony Browne

In general rather than very specific, because I am still getting to grips with some of this in Croydon. But the point the questioner has made is absolutely right: creative industries, creativity and culture are absolutely vital to the fabric of Croydon. I see we have a very diverse population, so there are lots of different cultures there. I think there are lots of ways in which those activities can be embraced. I think you are absolutely right, there is something that needs to be done about culture and creativity and I am certain the work going on with the Council just now with 'Imagine Croydon' is beginning to capture that. It is an absolutely well made point.

Participant

I am a local business owner. We have heard lots of references to the various investments that have been made in infrastructure to help London out of recession. Something I have not heard the Mayor speak about directly it one of London's greatest strengths: multi-cultures. I would like to ask what role the Mayor sees this plays in bringing London at of recession.

Boris Johnson

If you think about the attractions, it is the same point that can be made about culture as about multi-culture. One of the huge strengths of London it that it is so diverse, dynamic, and that we have such a range of industries and communities here. The statistics people do not know, when the Olympics comes to London in 2012, there will be 50 countries coming to London – athletes coming to London – who will find a home crowd here of more than 10,000 people. You see the point of the statistic? There is no other city like it on earth in terms of diversity of population.

There are 300 languages spoken in this city. That is why, when I became Mayor, I was absolutely determined to keep up the support for all the ways in which we try and encourage Londoners to learn and understand about the different cultures and different communities there are within London. That is why I packed everything from Eid, Diwali to Hanukah, to all the things that take

place in Trafalgar Square. It is fantastic, huge part of the strength of London and it is our job in the GLA to show a lead in supporting those things. I know some people urge me to cut them. I think that would have been wrong and counterproductive. It neglects one of the great economic strengths of London.

I mentioned the Olympic effect: we want firms to come and locate their headquarters here and all the evidence is if you are a Chinese company or from Latin America or wherever it happens to be, and you want to locate in Europe, you are far more likely to do it if you feel you have got in that city a welcoming community of people who understand you and your culture. That is a strength we have in London, that we should play upon, an economic strength that we can actually use to attract inward investment into this city, and that is why I think it makes economic sense for us.

Steve O'Connell

You'll be aware that in a couple of weeks time we have got the *mêlée* in Lloyd Park, one of the best attended cultural events in London.

Peter Pledger

Yes, it is a very good question, and one that I think we need to say more about is exports: if a company is not doing well in London, one way to get more customers and income, is to sell your product or services abroad. We have a whole range of different communities in London, in South London and in Croydon, who can use their knowledge and skills and their connections to try and export abroad. That is all well-meaning. But South London business is actually going to do something about it.

From September, we will be organising an event in six boroughs, including Croydon, aimed at businesses who are not exporting now, but who want to export. We will give you the help, the support and advice to be able to do that. That will do two things. One, it will actually increase your business base, so you can actually earn more money and sell your product abroad. Secondly, it may help tackle that number one problem; it may help you to actually grow your business to take on more staff. We will be releasing the dates of those events in the next few weeks, but certainly August, but there will be an event in Croydon, just for Croydon businesses, that we will be putting on, as well as in five other boroughs that we are organising, so hopefully I will see you at one of those events.

Participant

Forgive me if I remain seated, my name is John Preston, and I think the elephant in the room is money. I was thinking of localism, and often the white papers or green papers about localism say 'Local authorities will be permitted to do this' or 'they have the right to do this'. Surely if money collected in Croydon by tax revenues or whatever, remains in Croydon, money collected in London remains in London, we would not lose 30% while it is circulated and you would have a lot more economic recovery, because you get 100% efficiency on how the money is collected and invested.

Boris Johnson

And you would have 100% accountability by the politicians who are spending it, and they would therefore spend it more wisely. It is completely true, I see Mike Fisher nodding: we should be making sure that money spent locally is raised locally.

London is 12% of the UK population; we contribute about 19 or 20% of UK GDP. We export huge sums in tax revenue out of London, I think about £18 billion. Between £8 and £18 billion according to my economic adviser – that seems rather a wide spread! – let us call it £18 billion! I do think it is unjust, frankly, that people in London, which also contains four of the poorest boroughs in the UK, are exporting quite so much money in tax to other parts of the country.

Do not forget, the key point to get across to any member of the Labour Party that you meet, and there may be many here – we are all friends – do not forget that if you want to invest in the UK economy, and you actually want to boost Sheffield and Newcastle, can I tell you the truth? The paradox is that pound for pound, you are better off putting the money in London, because London is the motor that drives not just the English economy but the British economy and the UK economy as well.

The gentleman in the front says that most of the money is going to Scotland! With a Scottish Prime Minister and a Scottish Chancellor, I am not going to be drawn into your polemic!

Steve O’Connell

Sue, did you want to contribute?

Sue Tepilowski

I did. Join our Keep Trade Local campaign: go to the website, sign the petition, because that is what we are all about, it is making sure that local money stays local.

Participant

Thank you very much. I spoke about the issues facing many small businesses. Two weeks ago, I went to the Mayor’s event, and he was kind of passing me off to Anthony Browne, who then passed me on to Stephen Diamond.

What was interesting was the speed: what I want to say is that kind of benefit, people get to know what is available very quickly, and what I want to know is what has been done to help the outer London boroughs like Croydon, for the smaller business that cannot go into inner London all the time, what is being done to help them partake in the economic development strategy? Because I believe that Croydon has an example of good practice, what we did through the LEGI (Local Enterprise Growth Initiative) programme a couple of years ago, it was called the ‘YES Programme’. It was a good model, reached over 2,500 small businesses, and 27% of those businesses were willing to be mentors to young people who are not working, so what can we do to duplicate and help that programme?

Steve O’Connell

Who would like to take that?

Boris Johnson

I just want to say, obviously Croydon has been hugely involved in the whole OLC process, as we said already, Mike Fisher has served on that.

I think what you are outlining is actually immensely fruitful for the whole of London at the moment. We are going to have 100,000 graduates coming on to the market in London, we have got huge numbers of kids with no graduate qualification, who are going to be looking for jobs, NEETs, this summer. If people have businesses, and I know this point has been made already, but I make it again: if you have a concern that you could do with an extra pair of hands, and you can take someone on cheaply, just as an apprentice, perhaps even on a voluntary basis, or whatever it happens to be, then I think it would be far, far better for them to be doing that, than to be on the scrapheap or looking for a job. It is far, far better that businesses across London take on apprentices now, I really do urge you to think of it. I congratulate you on what you have done to ensure Croydon has a pioneering role in that. I would like to see that happening across London this summer. It is the single best investment our society can make at the moment.

Antony Kildare

I think just a word about the comment there in relation to LEGI. LEGI, in lots of parts of the country, has achieved some very, very good impacts, particularly for difficult target groups. But I think it is very important to recognise that that LEGI funding is not available in perpetuity, and already we will see that coming to an end within about 18 or 20 months time. It is quite uncertain yet, in terms of Government policy, what will replace that, if anything at all, because the climate is difficult.

I think the second point I would make around that, which is really important, is often public sector funding or Government funding is used as a way of lubricating difficult places in the market, or to address market failure, but ultimately, it is about the market picking up that failure, and being able to deal with it in a sustainable way. Sometimes you can find that projects are very good, they have very good impacts, and they deliver targets, but there is no way of that continuing, it just disappears, and the market then will move on to something else. So I think it is a really important point that you make, but I think one also has to recognise that there has to come an end, sometimes to some of the public sector funding to support it.

Participant

Thank you, good evening, everyone. First of all, this question is directed more so to the Mayor, and then open to the panel. Suffice to say, I have hijacked this conversation on the economy somewhat, because I have been trying to ring your office to get a meeting with you to discuss an area I am really passionate about, which is our youth of today. You have mentioned about the demise of our pubs, but what about the demise of our youth? You have seen the statistics today, we have spent a huge amount of money, £7 million, on trying to tackle knife crime; it has not worked. I have set up a company, we talk about businesses, I have set up a company off my own back, which is a life coaching company called 'Imagine Life' – that is a quick plug – but the fact remains is that I have left a very good broadcasting job to actually go out there on the streets as part of the community and reach our youth, to champion them to be leaders of tomorrow.

Boris Johnson

What is your name?

Participant

Simone Ashley. I have hijacked this conversation, because you will be hearing from me tomorrow again, when I ring your office, to have a meeting, because I would like for us all together in this room to really pledge to do something about our youth, and what is happening: the demise of our youth.

No investors from the Olympics will come to our communities if we have the spate of crime that is currently happening. And I believe we owe it to them, the future leaders of tomorrow, to do something about it, and hence I would like you to commit to a meeting with me.

Boris Johnson

Thank you very much. You are so right, and it is one of the things that I think Londoners care most about, and it is of direct economic importance, because they are, of course, our human capital. We talked about investing in all these tunnels and sewers and what have you that are going to make London more liveable in the long-term. We have to make sure that we have a younger generation that is not only going to be able to work, but will be able to pay our pensions, frankly – speaking personally and entirely selfishly, but that is how it is going to work – and to be a workforce for this city to make it the most economically dynamic city on earth, which it should be.

That means investing in organisations of the kind that you have been right to set up, and that is why I set up the Mayor's Fund for London, which is helping groups such as yours, and obviously, we had to make our number with you, but that is something that is going to be speedily rectified, but that is also why I have told the London Development Agency that I want this to be a priority. I hope you are familiar, Simone, with Time for Action, which is what we are doing across a huge front, in London, to address the issue of youth opportunity. I certainly will have a meeting with you, but before then, you should meet James Cleverly, who is my Ambassador for Young People.

Participant

He is involved in the Windsor Fellowship as well.

Boris Johnson

Yes, that is him. He is a very good guy and also, like Steve, a member of the London Assembly. He is my Ambassador on this subject. There is also Kit Malthouse, the Deputy Mayor for policing, who is taking an interest in this, but go to James first and he will sort you out! I am speaking colloquially. He will ensure that you get the access that you need!

By the way, I want to make two quick points. The first is actually knife crime is coming down; we should not forget that. The second point: I will not accept the phrase, 'the demise of youth'; I do not believe it. I think the huge majority of young people in this city are fantastic and are achieving wonderful things. I know how important your point is, and that is why I support you so much, but we have got to get the language right and the balance right, because we can accidentally deprecate and denigrate too much of the things that young people achieve.

Steve O'Connell

On the theme of really decent community-minded young people, a question towards the back there, if we could get, I think that is Laura.

Boris Johnson

Oh, I know, that is the bus.

Participant

Hello, for those of you who do not know, my name is Laura Wheeler. You are aware of the cancellation of the N213 bus. It runs between Croydon and Sutton and is a vital service at night for many people who live along the highly-populated route.

In economic terms, this must also impact on leisure businesses in Croydon, as many people will simply not bother to go out in Croydon, or will be forced to leave early in order to get home safely. We would like to know what you, Mayor Johnson, propose to do to put right this absurd decision by Transport for London.

Boris Johnson

'Je vous ai compris', as General de Gaulle said shortly before ratting on some deal!

I understand completely what you say, and thanks for the demonstration earlier on. I think we are extremely well-mannered and I have got the petition: I know the strength of feeling about this night bus, and I am going to take it back to Transport for London, of which I am the chairman! I am going to say to them, I am going to ask them, and the next time they decide to cancel – which I hope they will not for a long time – next time they cancel a night bus, can they possibly make sure I am not going to speak that very week in the borough in which the cancellation is taking place!

I do think the point you have made is a good one: you make two points. Basically there is a point about security and safety, people do need night buses; they are very important, particularly for female travellers, and of course it has economic benefit as well. We talked about the connectivity between the outer boroughs. I will go back and look at it. Laura, we will revert to you on that subject.

Steve O'Connell

Laura, you know I have also written to the Mayor to support this.

Boris Johnson

Steve has been badgering me as well. It is now officially the most famous bus in London. Apart from the bendy bus which is going on the 27 August. The first bendy bus is being exported to Coventry!

Participant

Good evening. This question is for the London Mayor: my name is Jennifer. Just a quick question: at the moment the lack of grants for start-up black businesses.

Boris Johnson

We met - I met you as well. I know you!

Participant

I met you and I have never got any reply from you!

Boris Johnson

Oh, right.

With persistence like that I do not think you are conceivably going to fail in your business. You are showing the first great strength of an entrepreneur, which is persistence. I will undertake, Jennifer to see what I can do to help. There is a fund that we have set up that we were able to use to support businesses that have good model, a really good business plan, but cannot get the credit they need because of the credit crunch. The LDA is financing it. It is good thing to do. The problem is the banks are not lending: great businesses out there that cannot get the money they need. If your business falls into that category, it may well be the LDA will be able to help.

Peter Bishop will talk to you after.

Participant

My name is Robert Fenton, I am a serial entrepreneur in a series of businesses. I am great believer in apprenticeships and work experience and interns. However, every single time I come across the local councils or any of the schemes to get young kids, especially, back into work it is just insane bureaucracy and it never, ever works. So I run my own programmes now where I have, at any one time dozens of interns – I have one here with me tonight in fact she is so good she is pretty much running one of my companies on her own – to get people back to work. You are always talking about getting people back to work and it never ever happens. Businesses like myself have real trouble getting kids back to work. I have put in a bid for Future Jobs Fund the Government is putting forward. They told me to go to the Council to do that: I am based in Islington. I had 200 jobs on offer, they took seven.

Boris Johnson

You had 200 jobs?

Participant

I am on the executive of King's Cross Business Forum as well and in conjunction with colleagues who run businesses as well, we are offering 200 jobs for the Future Jobs Fund. With Groundworks, nationally 5,000 jobs. Islington Council took seven of the offers.

Boris Johnson

That is pathetic. If you give me the details, I will take it up with Islington. It sounds pathetic. Where you are so right is in your reference to the bureaucracy, the difficulty that is put in the path of anybody who tries to employ someone on that basis, as an apprentice or whatever. I remember I used to run a business with a £12m turnover, called *The Spectator*; it worked perfectly well. We had a hard as nails employment policy, but what I used to do was absolutely shamelessly, take on people as work experience. Someone said to me, 'You need to give them health and safety stuff, where the cardiac defibrillator is', and I said absolutely, 'No. I would not have this health and safety nonsense dictating'. I wrote back to the people who wanted to place young people with me and said, 'If I hear any more nonsense, I will not take the people on', and they capitulated. It worked well, because I think the young trainee journalists did benefit and we benefited hugely in the sense I got them to write my articles entirely for free. Very, very lucrative.

Participant

Thank you very much, Steve. I am a councillor for the London Borough of Sutton and also teach in Croydon. I am going to ask a question about TfL and the local shopkeepers, but before I do I want to let you know I am showing my commitment to youth. I have been teaching in Croydon for five years and previously taught in Lewisham. My question is on behalf of traders in the London Borough of Sutton. I represent Beddington North: I want to ask what are TfL doing for the shopkeepers of Beddington North? I have two points in that context: first of all shopkeepers, customers and residents have been campaigning for months about another bus, having a bus stop for X26 at The Plough, Beddington. We have been calling for months to get the bus reinstated. So far we have encountered a dismal lack of support from TfL but huge support from shopkeepers, customers and residents. Secondly, shopkeepers contacted TfL in April about waiting restrictions being increased from 20 minutes, which they currently are at the Broadway, Beddington. It would make a huge difference for local traders and so far neither I nor the traders have had a reply.

Participant

Before I bring in anybody else, most of my casework seems to be mending bus stops and bus lanes as your Assembly Member. Please feel free to write to me I do not know if the Mayor wants to comment.

Boris Johnson

Just to say X26, along with Croydon night bus, one of the more famous bus routes in London. We have greatly stepped up the service, we are experimenting with the orbital route from Croydon to Heathrow and it has been popular and successful: passenger use is up 80% on X26 and if there is a case for another stop, which there clearly is at Beddington, then that is something I will take up with my people. You have to see the difficulty here because there will be another faction, I am afraid, amongst the users of that service to say, 'Oh no, what we want is an express service that really does not stop much, all because we need to get to Heathrow.'

Participant

We will not keep them there for long.

Boris Johnson

You do not know, they might be so attracted by the shops in Beddington they linger! But it may be feasible that because we have so greatly expanded the capacity, the numbers of the X26, it may be possible to put in a new stop. I will look at it. Who is going to make sure I look at it? Anthony, you had better.

Participant

This is a question for Mr Johnson and the rest of the Panel and really the community in Croydon. I have had an idea whilst sitting here: I do not know how radical that is, but when they built Gatwick Airport, they bypassed Croydon Airport and it remains unused since. Surely the community here would benefit from an airport that could work in a similar fashion to City Airport and provide a service in terms of delivering goods. Croydon economy would go up like that.

Boris Johnson

Take off, so to speak! I am looking at Mike down there in the front row, he is nodding; with you all the way. He is looking at it, sorry: I do not want to misrepresent his position. Clearly, the Croydon Aerodrome has a famous and important history. What you are suggesting is very interesting. I wonder whether a big expansion in flights over Croydon would be what the people of Croydon want. The question is certainly running there tonight so well done you. I would be interested to hear what the local response is. My hunch is, irrespective of the merits for Croydon there may well be arguments both ways. Even if you expanded Croydon Airport, you did use it in a much more thoroughgoing way you would not address London aviation capacity issues and you need to think outside the box.

Steve O'Connell

We are looking at it as a Council, I will not even talk about by Biggin Hill.

Participant

Thank you very much, the comments I tried to make are very important. Firstly, the London buses presented to the London Mayor and he didn't collect it. He proposed diesel engines and solar power adopted [inaudible] and other aspects relating to CO₂ emissions, my bus was zero emissions. The second question is the aspect of fire at Kings Cross. I was at the fire crew at King's Cross in 1987, and the reason quite a number of people died and the reason people died, the escalator was carrying people to the fire. On those escalators, there is no an emergency stop in the middle which would stop people dying.

Steve O'Connell

I am going to stop you.

Participant

A short one. A reference to the increasing number people with unemployment. The reason, the Government stop the organisations which is Patent Office; they actually closed the Patent Office.

60% of small businesses actually tried to get a patent and they did not even get a form. There is a solution for it, the British Library helping other people to start business: those two people or three people who are left, can they move to the British library and have support for it?

Steve O'Connell

I will stop you there if I may. No, I am a very patient guy but please hand in paper work to the Mayor's advisers and I am sure the Mayor will come back with a full answer unless you wish to comment briefly.

Boris Johnson

The Patent Office I will look into it, the employment implications of that, I am not sure what you mean by transferring it to the British Library.

King's Cross: we are going to have a huge renovation of that station with a new ticket hall, and escalators so I think the situation that you describe should not recur.

As for your designs of the bus, I am sorry if they were not successful, but the Aston Martin design is not necessarily a diesel engine at all. The new bus for London will be a low carbon vehicle, of one kind or another, either hybrid or electric or perhaps hydrogen vehicle, but I think that is much less likely. It will be a lighter, greener, cleaner vehicle, that is what we are intent on producing. If you have your design still and would like us to look at it again, we would be delighted to do so.

Participant

I am sorry it is at the end. I have just started a business, taking people down into the 40 abandoned London Underground stations. San Francisco has Alcatraz; Paris has its Catacombs. We have had an asset to bring tourists to London. I have a proposal, I have been trying to get it to TfL –

Boris Johnson

It is brilliant; I love it. London Underground, okay, we are going underground. I want you to bring that proposal to me. How can there be 40 abandoned underground stations?

Participant

Yes, 40, closed in the Second World War.

Boris Johnson

What is going on there?

Participant

They are not being used at all.

Boris Johnson

Rats? You want to create spooky museums there?

Participant

It is very simple: we open them up and take down 10,000 tourists every day.

Boris Johnson

I love it! What is the objection, health and safety?

Participant

I have already put a proposal together.

Boris Johnson

If you go to Paris, one of the most exciting things in Paris is going in the underground to see the Catacombs, there are some people nodding there, one of the spookiest experiences I have ever had.

Obviously I am not suggesting we should install hundreds of thousands of skulls, although they may very well be there anyway! I think that is an extremely interesting idea. You might find it was commercially viable. I am very, very keen that we should look at it. And I mandate Anthony and Peter collectively to look at your proposal.

Participant

Could I perhaps send them a proposal next week, a copy of the proposal?

Boris Johnson

Yes, if it makes sense, then we will fix up a meeting.

Participant

Thank you very much.

Steve O'Connell

That was the very last question. Thank you very much for that.

Closing Statements

Steve O'Connell

Just to wind up, I wanted to give the opportunity to the panel just to, for one minute, two minutes, just to give their final thoughts on today. A quick canter through, and the last word very much to the Mayor, if we can, so Peter?

Peter Pledger

Indeed, I am not going to try and summarise all the points, but you do show that the people in businesses in South London and Croydon are worth listening to and I know the Mayor has got that point.

But I am conscious, just looking at you, the chairs are getting comfortable, you are hot, and some of you did not get to ask your questions, so I think you deserve something in return. I did say to you that for me, the top priority in South London is to make sure that people who are not in work, get in work, and people at risk of losing their jobs are helped. There is help available now, and that help is free, and I would like you to do something for me. If you are at risk of redundancy, you have got a letter from your employer saying you are going to lose your job, or if you have lost your job in the last six months, go to the South London Business website, click on the icon saying Real Help Now, because we can give you at no cost, real help to help you train and help you find another job.

Boris, it is not your money, it is other people's money we are using to do this, but it is help you can have to actually tackle the recession, because while we expect the Mayor to help us, we also need to help ourselves. So if you are in that situation, or any of your friends or relatives in that situation, go to our website, we will help you.

Anthony Browne

Tonight is a real reminder of the strengths of London. We talk about the fundamental strength of the English language, the time zone, the rule of law, and world leading sectors. But London is nothing without its people, and I love the energy, entrepreneurship and dynamism of all the people today, who have come up with different ideas and are trying to make London work, it is fantastic. You are great and the people of London are great.

Antony Kildare

I think it is been said by many of the comments that you have had before, the Croydon Economic Development Company has been created, there are some great things or some good things already happening in Croydon, the Economic Development Company which is business-led, which has a business improvement district at its heart, is about driving from good to great. I have certainly heard some great comments tonight. I believe that is where we are going next.

Sue Tepilowski

Again, I have heard some fantastic comments, and I have made notes here to make sure some of the issues that are being raised are things we are looking at as well.

I would also like to remind you it is not the end of the process. If you go to fsb.org.uk/london, I will take your issue up and make sure your voice is heard. Do not forget, there is an election next year in May, you have a vote, use it, and make sure you use it with your business head on, if I can make that plea, and thank you all very much.

Peter Bishop

Thank you, I came to Croydon tonight, I am going back to two proposals, potentially, for new businesses. I think that is great. I suspect it is the tip of the iceberg and the one thing which I will take back tonight, as a development agency, we do need to actually find ways in which we can listen, pick up some of these ideas, help people develop them, and turn them into new businesses for tomorrow.

Boris Johnson

I just want really to repeat what my friends and colleagues have said.

I do not think I have ever been to a public meeting in London where there has been, in spite of such a deep and for many, painful recession, such incredible evidence of a can-do spirit. People have suggested, amongst the business propositions that I have had tonight: expanding the Croydon Aerodrome; proposals for a new bus for London, a hydrogen bus; someone speaking up for local pubs; a social entrepreneur; and last but not least, this extraordinary plan to re-open 40 disused tube stations, and do heaven knows what underground with them.

If that is not entrepreneurship, I do not know what is. What we have got in this city is the most fantastic natural resource, which is the skill and dynamism of its people. It is nowhere more evident than in Croydon. Our job, in City Hall, is to help you, in any way that we possibly can. I have a feeling that we are going to be dealing with quite a few of these ideas over the weeks and months to come, and who knows, they may indeed turn into fantastic businesses. Thanks very, very much for having us all along tonight, and I have no doubt whatever that Croydon, the third city of London, is going to lead London out of the recession, and London, as I said before, is going to lead the UK out of recession, as it has done before. Thanks a million!

Steve O'Connell

Lastly, I would like to thank you all for coming along tonight. I would like to thank the organisers, I know a lot of work went into this.

If you didn't get your questions answered, please write to the Mayor or myself, I think there is a questionnaire in your paperwork, to give us some feedback, and again, thank you so much for coming along, thank you, panel, and good night to you all.

This Full Transcript was produced by Ubiquis ☎ +44 (0) 20 7269 0370