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# ‘Dealing’ with Governance and Planning? The Limits of Urban Intrapreneurialism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines ‘deal-based’ policy responses to local and sub-regional governance dilemmas, drawing on issues around strategic planning policy in Oxfordshire, UK. Deal-based policy is conceptualised as a form of urban intrapreneurialism, explicitly designed to cultivate change within local state operations and to promote associated organisational innovation, institutional proactivity, and policy reorientation. A general evaluative frame for urban intrapreneurialism is derived and then deployed for the Oxfordshire case, assessing the extent to which deal-based policy is able to respond to the distinctive and challenging set of governance dilemmas which pertain. Finally, broader conceptual and policy implications are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Governance; strategic planning; deal-based policy; evaluation; urban intrapreneurialism

## Introduction: Deals in Contemporary Urban Governance

Relationships between central and local government are fluid and diverse, conditioned by policy differentiation across national territories and entrenched in historical actions and local and regional identities, often leading to tensions. Attempts to regulate relations have been multifaceted, including notable recent initiatives based on ‘deals’ between the parties, referred to hereafter as ‘deal-based policy’ (Beel et al., 2018; Gibson et al., 2023; O’Brien & Pike, 2019; Waite & Morgan, 2019). These identify powers, policies, funding and competencies that central governments are willing to ‘offer’ to local governments in return for various local and sub-regional commitments (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). They are thus associated with contemporary central government agendas around decentralisation, devolution, and localism.

In England, the foundations for deal-based policy models can be traced back to the 2004 Local Area Agreements (LAA) introduced by the Labour Government under Tony Blair, closely followed by Multi Area Agreements (MAA) implemented from 2008. Heralded as a radical new approach to relationships between central and local government, and between local government and their partners, LAAs and MAAs enabled stretching targets to be negotiated and agreed, against which successful performance would be financially rewarded (DCLG, 2010; Higham, 2021). The process sought to improve local flexibility and to place a heightened emphasis on local target setting and delivery. However, it was often perceived as overly-

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prescriptive, with centralisation and fragmentation impinging on success (Johnson, 2007; DCLG, 2010).

From 2010 the Coalition Government's anti-regionalist agenda saw England's regional institutional architecture abolished on the premise of localism and 'radical devolution' (HM Government, 2010). The Localism Act 2011 extended deal-based policy into an initial round of 'City-Deals,' based on agreements between government and larger city-regions regarding certain powers and freedoms (Beel et al., 2018). Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg claimed these were not "invented in Whitehall... they have been created by local business people, local authorities and local leaders, they own it and what we've said in Central Government is that if there are things you need to deliver the city-deals, we'll help you" (ITV News, 2013). A 'Core Cities Amendment' allowed for city authorities to make the case for new powers, this new model intending to build strong urban and regional growth through smarter strategic planning, investment, and local governance (KPMG, 2014; HM Government, 2015).

Deal-based policy subsequently expanded to include 'Growth Deals,' 'Housing Deals' and 'Devolution Deals,' amongst various other formulations (Beel & Jones, 2021). Each follows a broadly similar structure by devolving powers, responsibilities and sometimes budgets or certain funding lines, tailored to specific areas and with associated conditions, such as requiring restructured local governance arrangements (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; MHCLG, 2017a). They commonly focus on strategic transport investment, local skills development and single-pot capital funding for infrastructure delivery that can help to act as a catalyst for growth. As of February 2021, over 60 deals had been agreed, spread across the UK, reflecting the country's forerunner status in developing this policy form.

Deal-making has also evolved internationally, with distinctive national inflections, including for example: collaborative (but non-financial) city-deals between networks of cities, national government, and societal partners in the Netherlands as part of a 2015 national 'Urban Agenda' (Dignum et al., 2020); city-deals for productive and liveable cities spanning federal, state and local governments in Australia (Harris et al., 2022), and varied forms of urban contractual policy in Finland, Norway and Sweden (Smas, 2017). Direct emulation of the UK model has been limited, with evidence of significant adaptation in the objectives, design, and operation of policies across nations. The general approach is thus 'recontextualised' in the light of domestic political priorities and particular institutional and cultural contexts (Rose, 2004, p. 10), with policy learning shaped by actors' perceptions and values. In some cases the underpinning neoliberal logic of deal-based policy in encouraging commitments to competitiveness and growth is evident, with implications for the downplaying of social justice objectives and the privileging of elite interests. In the Australian case, for example, Harris et al demonstrate how the design of City Deals plays into business-oriented competition and the associated sidelining of welfare policy, coupled with top-down government influence. Yet the organisational arrangements here are distinct; as Pill and Gurran (2022) demonstrate, for example, while the UK case has compelled rescaling to supralocal and city-regional scales within the context of a centrally-orchestrated localism, in Australia central direction is less evident and local as well as higher tiers of government play respective roles in shaping rescaling.

Meanwhile, in the Nordic countries the focus has been rather different, reflecting the distinctive character of state forms and the Nordic 'comprehensive planning style' (Nadin & Stead, 2013). Here the emphasis has been placed on enhancing coordination between levels and spheres of spatial planning policy, with contractual arrangements established in parallel to the statutory planning systems and focused more directly on implementation and funding.

Generally these are the result of negotiation processes between different government levels rather than legally binding contracts, though they take varied forms. For instance, Swedish contract-based policy is oriented towards specific funding schemes for individual projects, while Norway has developed a more comprehensive organizational framework with different inter-linked contracts and agreements which are linked to the formal planning system. Nordic contractual policies thus represent something of a technical fix within the comprehensive planning approach, rather than a more obvious reinforcement of neoliberal trajectories (for a detailed review, see Smas, 2017).

Also, though, we might note circumstances where deal-making would seem less likely to become prevalent. In Germany, the already high level of devolution to states and cities and the emphasis on consensus driven politics combines with responsive mechanisms for negotiating urban affairs across national, state, and city levels of government (Noring et al., 2021, pp. 1349–1350). Collaborative social and fiscal networks contribute to consensual working across and within German cities and states, and the country's financial equalization system ensures extensive redistribution of tax revenues across the federal states. Thus, German cities and states already possess considerable jurisdictional capacity and significant resourcing for policy implementation, making deal-based policy less appropriate in this context.

Critical academic commentary has highlighted the influence of deal-based policy, emphasising in the UK particularly a perceived central government reluctance to truly cede power and control to local areas (Sandford, 2017; Wall & Bessa-Vilela, 2016). Authors identify a new assertiveness to the central-local state relationship; Kennett et al. (2015), for example, describe a shift of risk from central government to the local state, while O'Brien and Pike (2019) claim that the UK state continues to exert authority and constraint on urban financialisation and governance. Additionally, the wider background of austerity jeopardised the operation of deals even before they were in place (Beel et al., 2018; Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017).

This paper extends such critical assessment by examining the potential of deal-based policy to respond to local and sub-regional governance dilemmas, illustrated through a case study of strategic planning policy in Oxfordshire, UK. A general framework is set out to evaluate processes of change within local state policy and operations, which are at the heart of the deal-making approach. While there has been no definitive statement of the objectives underlying the UK Government's devolution policy (HC Library, 2022, p. 19), three overarching principles have been identified as bases for change: the promotion of local economic growth; better and more integrated public services; and enhanced public engagement and accountability. Additionally, initial guidance on growth deals (HM Government, 2013, p. 3) stated that deals would introduce important organisational innovation and policy change, namely: greater local influence, freedoms and flexibilities over key levers affecting local growth; commitments to pro-growth reforms (for example a co-ordinated, cross-boundary approach to local planning across relevant economic geographies); commitments to collective decision making; and improved use of local authority assets in support of growth. Reflecting these change-oriented objectives we adopt a theoretically-founded evaluative stance based on the notion of 'urban intrapreneurialism,' whereby state organisations not traditionally recognised as being entrepreneurial have adopted risk taking, pro-active and innovative approaches geared towards organizational renewal (Farrukh et al., 2016, p. 598). However, as we discuss further below, the concept of intrapreneurialism has been predominantly focused on the private sector, requiring adaptation in a public sector arena (Miao & Phelps, 2019).

The paper proceeds in four further sections. Section 2 briefly establishes the literatures on intrapreneurialism and urban intrapreneurialism and derives a general evaluative frame for the latter. Section 3 presents a short methodological note before Section 4 then evaluates the efficacy of deal-based policy in Oxfordshire, UK, where a characteristic and challenging set of governance dilemmas has been associated with economic and housing growth. Finally Section 5 concludes on the broader conceptualisation of urban intrapreneurialism and its potential and limits as a theoretical framing device for evaluating central-local relations and local state policy in international contexts.

### Dimensions of Urban Intrapreneurialism: An Evaluative Frame

Literature on the concept of intrapreneurialism draws on various academic fields, including business and management studies, organisation theory, economics, psychology, economic geography, and state theory (see *inter alia* Antonic & Hisrich, 2001; Farrukh et al., 2016; Halme et al., 2012; Parker, 2011; Verreynne, 2006). Antonic and Hisrich (2001) define intrapreneurship broadly as “entrepreneurship within an existing organisation,” referring to processes by which new business ventures, innovative activities, and orientations such as new products, services and strategies, are developed regardless of the size of an organisation. Emphasis is placed upon four distinct dimensions: (i) ‘new business venturing,’ the most salient characteristic of intrapreneurship; (ii) ‘innovativeness’ referring to product and service development and innovation in technology; (iii) ‘self-renewal,’ reflecting processes of reorganisation and organisational change; and (iv) ‘proactiveness,’ or the aggressive posture of an organisation relative to competitors, including greater risk-taking.

Continuing the firm-level focus, Verreynne (2006) defines intrapreneurship as entrepreneurial activity within a large organisation that is typically characterised by the creative bundling of scarce resources, while Parker (2011) emphasises the development of new ventures within an existing organisation through exploiting new opportunities to generate economic value. Elsewhere, the focus is on the individual level; Halme et al. (2012) suggests intrapreneurship as a process deployed by individuals within an organisation to identify and pursue opportunities, recognising that intrapreneurship closely aligns to generative strategy-making and intrapreneurial-strategy making. Meanwhile, Farrukh et al. (2016) highlight risk-taking, proactiveness, extroversion, emotional stability, and openness as characteristics that embody intrapreneurship at the personal level.

Extending the scope of intrapreneurialism, Miao and Phelps identify intrapreneurship within the state context, drawing on an analysis of the city-state of Singapore. ‘State intrapreneurship’ is defined as ‘the latent or actually existing entrepreneurialism apparent *within* public sector bureaucracies’ (2019, p. 316, emphasis in original), key to transformation in both Anglo-American entrepreneurial states and East Asian post-developmental states in response to globalisation and neoliberalism. This provides a distinctive focus on the causes, mechanisms and consequences of internal transformation, and a framework for analysis which recognises the ongoing influence of state forms under the general umbrella of entrepreneurialism and its associated emphases on public-private coordination, the speculative construction of place, competitiveness in attracting inward investment, and progression within spatial divisions of labour. The internal dynamics of the state become “pre-conditions for the extrasocietal functioning of developmental, entrepreneurial and post-developmental states alike” (Miao & Phelps, 2019, p. 319), as state forms exert ongoing leadership in the setting of industrial priorities, in policy development

and implementation, and in the associated management, evaluation, and improvement of policy responses.

Elaborating this in relation to urban governance, Phelps and Miao (2020) identify urban intrapreneurialism as one of four overlapping yet qualitatively different aspects of urban entrepreneurialism, alongside 'new urban managerialism' (reflecting innovative co-production in local services), 'urban diplomacy' (innovative promotion and policy mobility), and 'urban speculation' (rent seeking and the exploitation of market opportunities). Urban intrapreneurialism, or 'processes of innovation and indeed invention within the... central and local arms of governments' (Phelps & Miao, 2020, p. 313), is portrayed as embodying perhaps the 'fullest and most positive sense of urban entrepreneurialism' (Phelps & Miao, 2020, p. 305), providing the clearest organisational and political mandate for innovation in public services. It therefore provides a key dimension within this more detailed classification of urban entrepreneurial forms.

Such a classification system has generated criticism, however, noting *inter alia* an under-emphasis on alternative forms of innovation such as financialization (He, 2020), the increasing influence of environmental politics and policy (Acuto, 2020; Jonas, 2020), the need to move beyond a rather 'flat' reading which underplays the multi-scalar and multi-directional quality of urban policy, and the critical influence of new governmentality techniques in the post-political age (He, 2020). Nonetheless we would argue that a focus on intrapreneurship provides a valuable lens through which to view material processes of urban governance restructuring, emphasising detailed mechanisms of change within important components of the state, and providing insight into the likely efficacy of governance outcomes. With regard to the UK specifically, alongside the deal-making activities that are our particular focus here intrapreneurialism would register the essential internal processes of reorganisation and reconception required in the privatisation and commercialisation of planning practice (Slade et al., 2022), the significant expansion of local authority-owned trading companies and local housing companies (Morphet & Clifford, 2021), and processes of accommodation to digital transformation in planning (Jones & Comfort, 2021).

Urban intrapreneurialism therefore provides a valuable departure upon which research can build, adapting themes in the established literature. Indeed, the objectives of deal-based policy already outlined clearly reference intrapreneurial activities such as process innovation, organisational change, competing for resources, exploiting new opportunities, and risk-taking. We therefore identify and briefly discuss six dimensions of urban intrapreneurialism as the basis for evaluative analysis, namely: innovation, leadership, outcome-orientation, organisational agility, partnerships and relations, and policy reorientation (see Table 1).

First, innovation is the introduction of new products, services, or processes. Within the state, Wu (2018) recognises active state involvement in institutional innovation, including initiating processes that lead to the creation, development and implementation of new practices and policies. This would reference, for example, a stream of market-oriented reforms including outsourcing, competitive tendering of public services and public-private partnerships (Wu, 2020).

Second, urban intrapreneurialism is associated with leadership. For Miao and Phelps (2019, pp. 320–321), this is through: (i) strategic selectivity, or the designing of industrial priorities; (ii) specialisation, meaning the identification and elaboration of opportunities together with decisions made to undertake projects that capture them; and (iii) spatial selectivity, or the domestic and extraterritorial reach of states through intrapreneurial actions.

A third dimension is outcome-orientation. As Osborne and Gaebler (1993) state, traditional public institutions were predominantly input-orientated; however, states that act

**Table 1.** Summary of the six dimensions of urban intrapreneurialism and associated key criteria.

Dimension (and related references)	Key relevant criteria
Innovation (See for example Antonic & Hisrich, 2001; Wu, 2018, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doing things differently to create, develop, and implement new products, policies, services, or processes</li> <li>• New models of policymaking</li> <li>• Accelerated processes and development</li> <li>• New approaches, careful selection, and centralised accountabilities</li> </ul>
Leadership (Miao & Phelps, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designing of priorities</li> <li>• Identifying and selecting opportunities above alternatives</li> <li>• Reluctance to divert from priorities</li> <li>• Ability to negotiate</li> <li>• Enhanced domestic and/or extraterritorial reach</li> </ul>
Outcome-orientation (Miao & Phelps, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on outputs and goals</li> <li>• Setting goals and missions rather than rules and regulations</li> <li>• Policy outcomes favoured over process</li> <li>• Payment-by-results</li> <li>• Shorter term outcomes rather than long-term consequences</li> </ul>
Organisational agility (De Souza, 2006; Gunsberg et al., 2018; Holbeche, 2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to adapt in complex and fast changing situations</li> <li>• Eschewing traditional approaches</li> <li>• Sensing opportunities and mobilising resources</li> <li>• Limited accountability and transparency</li> </ul>
Partnerships and relations (Abdel Aziz, 2007; Cook, 2004; Harris, 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building on old partnerships or creating new partnerships</li> <li>• Creating a platform for long-term central-local partnerships</li> <li>• Credible arrangements</li> <li>• Uneven balances of power</li> </ul>
Policy reorientation (Geels & Penna, 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties implementing different scale targets</li> <li>• Introducing, facilitating, or cementing policy change</li> <li>• Improved local policy delivery ability and outcomes</li> <li>• Politics impacting the orientation and progression of policy</li> <li>• Short-term changes to policy delivery</li> </ul>

entrepreneurially seek to change this, focusing on outcomes and measuring success. Here, research has examined the emergence of performance measurement with the UK public sector since the 1990s and associated critical themes (Fryer et al., 2009; Micheli & Neely, 2010). Miao and Phelps (2019) build upon this, highlighting the outcome-oriented nature of intrapreneurship being driven by goals and missions rather than rules and regulations.

Fourth is organisational agility, traditionally applied at the enterprise-level, though definitional difficulties have persisted (Gunsberg et al., 2018). Becker (2001) simply defines organisational agility as the ability to embrace change and acknowledge the death of predictability, while De Souza (2006) refers to the sensing and processing of signals, mobilising resources, and continuous learning, and Holbeche (2018) emphasises ongoing adaptation in complex and fast-changing conditions. Within the state a corollary of agility is that accountability and transparency can commonly be questioned. Links between governance, accountability and transparency become tenuous, not least in the face of contract-based and secretive agreements (see for examples Ayres et al., 2018; O'Brien & Pike, 2015; Sandford, 2017; Wall & Bessa-Vilela, 2016).

Fifth is the sphere of partnerships and relations, concerning national, regional, and local partnerships, transformed governance arrangements, and what these mean for local areas. Moreover, it concerns how governance networks are established, where their priorities and mandate lie, and who is involved in such arrangements. Recognising the public demand for

improved service delivery, the connection between government and new or transformed partnerships has been fostered in various ways (Abdel Aziz, 2007; Cook, 2004; Harris, 2004), highlighting the importance of adaptability and effectiveness in a complex and dynamic arena. While success may have varied, partnership arrangements have been a mechanism for policies and projects to be delivered, whether these be public-public or public-private partnerships.

Lastly, policy reorientation relates to changes in policy direction and implementation, whether that be overarching goals, technical capabilities, collaborations, or identities (Geels & Penna, 2015). This might include policy influencing central-local relations, models of governance, and, importantly here, strategic planning. Much of the associated academic research into policy reorientation has focused on international foreign or industrial policy; however, as a concept, intrapreneurial states can be viewed as regularly reorienting national and local policies to achieve desired outcomes.

These six dimensions relate directly to the implementation of deal-based policy in England. Indeed, the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal (HGD) Outline Agreement (MHCLG, 2017b) explicitly set out new approaches to collaborative policy-making, ensuring accelerated development, strengthening the growth agenda, revised forms of accountability, new policy mechanisms, a focus on delivery, time-limited flexibilities, enhanced monitoring, payment-by-results, support for new networks and relations, and a revised basis for relations with central government, amongst other relevant objectives. Thus the proposed framework provides a highly pertinent basis upon which to construct the evaluative task.

## Methodological Note

Our evaluation examines how Oxfordshire organised for the HGD bid in 2017, the new mechanisms and policy commitments which emerged around subsequent implementation, and the associated impacts on strategic planning and governance in the county. Alongside extensive documentary review, sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2021 using purposive expert sampling. These combined twelve local and four national interviewees, providing valuable insight into the Oxfordshire case from different perspectives, including from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Importantly, the programme of interviews also built on an established body of research on local planning culture, conflicts and growth challenges in Oxfordshire that has been ongoing since 2010, incorporating over 100 interviews in total, giving more comprehensive insight into local governance, politics, and policy-making. Additionally, a final discussion was organised with the relevant Oxfordshire Growth Board (OGB) officer in spring 2022, to update on key developments.

Data analysis was framed around the six dimensions identified in Table 1. Interview transcripts and secondary data sources were systematically examined to identify statements that manifest with the theoretical framework. Interviews also provided personal insights into the perceived impacts of the Oxfordshire HGD.

## Dealing with Oxfordshire's Governance and Strategic Planning Dilemmas

### *The Context for an Oxfordshire Deal*

Oxfordshire is located in the southeast region of England, with two-tier local government comprising five local government districts (Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council, South



Oxfordshire DC, Vale of White Horse DC, and West Oxfordshire DC) together with Oxfordshire County Council. The county is bordered by Northamptonshire to the north, Buckinghamshire to the east, Berkshire to the south, Wiltshire to the southwest, and Gloucestershire to the west. Oxford is a globally recognised city and the county's principal settlement, subject to substantial growth pressures and high housing costs, but tightly constrained by surrounding greenbelt designation and areas of environmental sensitivity.

Previous research on Oxfordshire has highlighted the primacy of territorial and place relations in shaping governance and strategic planning in the county, where a pattern of 'urban political dissonance,' conflict and tension has tended to dominate. The details of this have been elaborated elsewhere (see Ganser & Valler, 2022; Phelps & Valler, 2018) and will not be further rehearsed, save to note the fragmented local government context, an abrupt urban-rural contrast, and sharply differing policy complexions and agendas amongst the city, district and county authorities. This has produced variable but ongoing political disagreement and an overall lack of policy coherence, together with associated manoeuvring as the respective authorities seek to exploit an uncertain institutional and policy context to their own advantage. Additionally, the context was effectively reinforced through the localism and decentralisation/devolution agendas of the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010.

Against this background, the Oxfordshire authorities responded to the opportunity presented by deal-based policy: new organisations and partnerships developed, a City-Deal was negotiated and delivered, and local government reorganisation experienced a period of intense debate. Gradually, partnership working on cross-boundary strategic planning matters evolved, in recognition of the need for joint-working. However, progress was characteristically disjointed, providing a complex foundation for the HGD subsequently announced in November 2017. This was a pioneering deal with a particular emphasis on housing and planning matters, in contrast to previous deals that included a broader selection of policies and competencies. Additionally, Oxfordshire had a particular governance structure that contrasted to systems seen across the UK, based on a 'growth board' partnership arrangement amongst the six local councils, together with other stakeholders. The development and negotiation of this specific form of deal is therefore briefly explained.

Seeds were sown prior to the 2010 general election in monthly tactical meetings between the Oxfordshire leaders, seeking alignment with the political discourse emanating from the Labour government in its final months. Alongside this, the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Partnership (SPIP) – an informal partnership between the Oxfordshire local authorities – was seeking to work collaboratively across the county, though its remit was recognised as insufficient to meet the needs of a place-based discussion. Under the new Coalition Government, the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) was established in 2011, bringing together the leaders of local authorities, universities, and businesses to provide a broader forum for Oxfordshire-wide discussions. OxLEP then led on negotiating Oxfordshire's City-Deal in 2014, which focused on capturing Oxfordshire's knowledge-based growth potential.

At this time, Oxfordshire's proposed governance came under pressure. Greg Clark, then Minister of State at the Cabinet Office and instrumental in City-Deal policy (O'Brien & Pike, 2019), challenged the partnership governance structure. The local response was to establish the Oxfordshire Growth Board (OGB), bringing together the Local Transport Board, the SPIP, and economic development professionals through a democratically representative body led by local authority partners. This was formed alongside a specific City-Deal Board and was the beginning of a new partnership arrangement.

The joint commissioning of a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA, GL Hearn, 2014) in 2013–14 was another fundamental building block for the HGD. This would support understanding of county housing needs between 2011 and 2031 and therefore inform the next round of Local Plans. It would also enable Oxfordshire’s local planning authorities (LPAs) to meet the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate introduced in the Localism Act 2011. Interview evidence indicated that the commission did not come about easily, and also a palpable sense of shock when the SHMA reported housing need at 106,000 additional homes across Oxfordshire by 2031, including 28,000 in Oxford City. This represented a major challenge to planning policy, marking an increase of more than 40% over the previous South-East Plan target for the county and a spill-over of up to 20,000 units from the city into neighbouring districts, given the tight constraints on development within the city boundary. Yet it also suggests that political leaders in Oxfordshire understood the importance of collaboration to plan effectively, and to establish the housing growth figure which would underpin the HGD:

I have to say, most people were reluctant, but they understood that to be successful, they needed to collaborate... The SHMA and, in particular the 100,000+ houses, was a big, big deal... most collective authorities weren't doing that kind of work. (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021)

Soon though, Oxfordshire’s conflictual politics resurfaced, this time revolving around a potential devolution bid and associated local government reorganisation. Oxfordshire has long debated reorganisation; however, a period from 2014 to 2017 exposed the issue and heightened tensions amongst the local authorities. Multiple proposals were developed for restructuring based on one, three, four or even five unitary councils, both within and extending beyond the existing county boundary. Consultants were appointed, evidence gathering was commissioned, and tensions rose. The local press captured notable events, and the antagonistic nature of relationships was clearly evident (see Valler, 2021 for a review). Ultimately, by early 2017 no solution was found and the unitary debate quietened, but the conflict had illuminated strong differences in opinion between the local authorities. It also highlighted the complexity of relationships in Oxfordshire, where the authorities had collaborated through the OGB to produce the SHMA, but then vehemently disagreed over the unitary issue.

Amid the unitary debate and with the Duty to Cooperate requirement running in the background, officers also began to push for enhanced strategic planning and a Joint Spatial Plan for Oxfordshire, to combat the loss of formal strategic planning after 2010. However, interview evidence demonstrated the level of reluctance, underlining the established political disparities. Nevertheless, in November 2016 OGB partners agreed to commission AECOM to work on an Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OXIS). With the political leaders on board, OXIS looked at Oxfordshire’s growth areas and infrastructure needs, and how they could be brought together. Beginning with OXIS was “kind of strategic planning by stealth” (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021). Shortly after the unitary impasse, talk of a strategic plan was back at the OGB in March 2017 (OGB, 2017a). OXIS enabled politicians to see the benefits of a strategic plan, though there was still hesitancy as to whether “they could sell it to their constituents” (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021). But as government published the ‘Fixing our broken housing market’ White Paper (MHCLG, 2017c), the OGB Executive Officers Group began liaising with central government regarding an opportunity to address intense housing delivery issues.

Over summer 2017, Oxfordshire leaders were asked to develop a housing and growth proposition (OGB, 2017b). By September, the OGB had submitted a draft HGD proposal to feed into

the November Budget, though the process was packed with iteration, deliberation, and almost final disagreement:

I am making this sound linear; it was not. There was a lot of back and forth and iteration (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021)

At the time, government was saying you need to have an elected mayor... so there were a lot of conversations about what the governance of this could look like. (Local Authority Chief Executive Officer, 11 May 2021)

One authority put in a letter trying to undo everything within hours of the budget being announced... it was very 'take it or leave it Oxfordshire'. (Senior Officer, Oxfordshire County Council, 11 May 2021)

Clearly then, the partnership and relations which underpin the HGD had not come about overnight. Rather, it was shaped in a county acknowledged for ongoing tensions around the growth agenda, which set the background to the deal's implementation following its announcement in the November 2017 budget. Key elements included £215 m funding for infrastructure, up to £60 m of this to support delivery of affordable housing, and resourcing for the production of a joint spatial plan. It also required Oxfordshire's LPAs to submit all local plans by 2019, and for central government to explore time-limited planning flexibilities (MHCLG, 2018).

### *Evaluating Urban-Intrapreneurialism in Oxfordshire*

Having established the emergence and negotiation of the HGD we now evaluate this case of urban intrapreneurial policy, deploying the six-fold framework introduced above. First, in terms of *innovation* the HGD required proactive flexibility from Oxfordshire in negotiating and agreeing a deal. The process did not follow a structured, systematic approach but rather was informal, ad-hoc, and to a degree opportunistic. Clearly, the OGB provided a key foundation for the Deal. Elsewhere, deals had been negotiated with devolved metropolitan areas or required revised governance arrangements. However, Oxfordshire's use of an existing arrangement demonstrated variation in deal-making with central government. OGB also facilitated working in an unstructured, rapid process that was not guided by precedent or formalised approaches as there was already a forum that brought partners together. An interviewee described, for example:

It was more than iterative, more like 'what do you think about this? We could do this, if we could do that... no we're not prepared to do that, but we might do this'. So, it was quite a negotiated back and forth process. The problem for civil servants in government was that they had no precedent. They were really making it up, they didn't know what they could really offer. (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021)

The lack of precedent clearly influenced the deal-making process, indicating a new approach to policy-making. Interviews highlighted policy asks that were impacted by this approach, including discussions about infrastructure levies. In the end, it resulted in quite loose commitments to exploring further opportunities being included in the Deal, though interview evidence from MHCLG emphasised the benefits of innovation in this context:

We weren't looking to change national planning policy in every area so we could be quite innovative... So it allowed people to hand-pick ideas... And that for me again was quite a revelation. That if you can offer people a safe space to innovate, they get quite excited about that. (MHCLG Civil Servant, 7 May 2021)

While this flexibility was clearly appreciated by officers both nationally and locally, the implication was that a new approach to strategic planning would be trailed without amending the

regulatory framework. As a result, the speed of the process affected adequate planning and preparation for both partners.

In relation to *leadership*, deals can be seen as an essentially top-down process based around central government priorities and key asks, including preferred governance models. Yet Oxfordshire's local leadership was important in negotiating and securing agreement in the process, allowing a county-wide agreement to be reached. For example, central government initially sought to implement a mayoral model in Oxfordshire, as was customary elsewhere. However, local political leaders rejected the proposal. This could have spelt the end of the potential deal, but local partners were able to convince government by using the OGB model, albeit at the cost of securing only a short-term five-year agreement rather than the 30-year arrangement that Oxfordshire had initially sought.

Additionally here, while previous literature has suggested that deal-based agreements have generally lacked a significant bespoke element (Wall & Bessa-Vilela, 2016), the Oxfordshire deal had more limited central prescription. Oxfordshire was not offered a menu of options but could suggest potential policy content. Furthermore, given that Oxfordshire's HGD was the first of its kind, there was no precedent for central government to follow, providing flexibility around desired outcomes.

Notwithstanding this general flexibility, a clear central government priority was a strategic plan for Oxfordshire:

The Government really wanted us [Oxfordshire] to do a strategic plan. I mean, that was big deal to them. They really wanted a statutory plan. Because of course in this country, there weren't many of those going on at the time ... They could see that incentivising us would be something that was a victory for them because they could convince other collections of authorities. (Local Authority Executive Director, 4 May 2021)

Subsequently, there was negotiation regarding the statutory or non-statutory footing of the proposed strategic plan. This discussion was heavily linked to the political agendas present in Oxfordshire and what it would mean for local leadership. In the event, central government's aspiration for a statutory plan was pursued (MHCLG, 2018), indicating the relative strength of central vis-à-vis local leadership and establishing a new mechanism for implementation by way of a joint strategic plan.

*Outputs*, targets, and measurable ambitions are clearly embedded in Oxfordshire's HGD. Several elements of the Deal demonstrate the influence of this dimension, including principally the 100,000+ homes figure frequently referenced in related announcements (MHCLG, 2018). Indeed, interviews highlighted the importance of housing delivery from a central government perspective. Locally, however, it was suggested that there was a misunderstanding about the 100,000 figure. As we have shown, this was an output of the 2014 SHMA. Though the Deal fortified the figure, the Oxfordshire partners were already working to this target, and therefore the impact of the HGD *per se* upon strategic planning was less apparent. Instead, it was the inclusion of the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan (JSSP) and the related milestones that appeared most prominent as potentially impacting factors.

The JSSP also demonstrates the limits of favouring policy outcomes over process. Whilst both parties, for differing reasons, sought this strategic planning initiative, the desire to reach an agreement on the deal by the November 2017 budget meant that detailed discussions were not held until after the outline agreement had been announced. This meant that the resources and guidance required to deliver an effective JSSP were largely absent, and difficulties were compounded by the changing political dynamics of the county after the HGD was agreed<sup>1</sup>, together with unanticipated influences such as COVID-19.

A further implication of outcome-orientation relates to payment-by-results. While central government sought to pilot innovative models of policy delivery, there was still a lack of confidence in delivery, hence the proviso that Oxfordshire HGD funding would be conditional on outcomes being demonstrated. Consequently, Oxfordshire was required to focus on annual results, potentially hampering the county's ability to tackle the longer-term issues that required the Deal in the first place. Indeed, in early 2021 the Government confirmed it was ending Oxfordshire's three-year housing land supply requirement (rather than the usual five years), due to the delayed progress of the JSSP, though the provision had been a key flexibility negotiated as part of the HGD.

Overall, while work was underway to initiate discussions about local housing numbers and a strategic plan, the HGD effectively secured local authority sign-up to implement them. However, questions remained over subsequent delivery and whether other external factors would influence how it played out. Notably, though, the primacy of announcement-worthy outcomes – such as housing numbers or the commitment to a joint strategic plan – over less tangible issues of governance and accountability was clear.

Moving on to *organisational agility*, the role of the OGB, bringing together the six local authorities, OxLEP, and other partners, was central in enabling the county to come together quickly and secure a deal. As the opportunity emerged, OGB partners recognised the value of mobilising rapidly in response and the Board's executive officer group was directed to engage with government. The emphasis on speed and responsiveness was clearly evident, and in the Oxfordshire case central government was working stringently towards the Budget in 2017. Accelerated policymaking was therefore required to agree a deal by the deadline. The resultant process was rapid, resource-intensive, and required prioritisation. Additional officer support was drafted in to facilitate effective working. However, related concerns developed regarding accountability and transparency. A comprehensive review of OGB meeting notes through 2017 revealed a notable absence of detailed written information regarding the HGD negotiations, and only verbal or brief updates were provided at the July, September, October, and November meetings of the Board. As a result, public questions about OGB's role and the HGD became commonplace at the meetings. Furthermore, the limitations of the associated governance arrangements for the JSSP became evident, slowing down the process:

The Oxfordshire plan is many things, but there are things that it isn't. It isn't backed up by a common governance arrangement. So, each significant decision that needs to be made about the plan needs to be ratified by each of the five local planning authorities in Oxfordshire. They haven't invested their planning powers in one place so there could be one decision. (HGD Programme Lead, 26 April 2021)

The development of OGB over the past decade indicates an important evolution in Oxfordshire's *partnerships and relations*. OGB led the negotiation and agreement of the HGD and subsequently was identified as the body accountable for implementation. Once the HGD negotiation had discounted a potential long-term agreement, the Government acknowledged the value of Oxfordshire's arrangement, or was at least willing to test the OGB model. Interviews suggest that the ability of both parties to build upon an existing partnership supported the progression of the Deal and therefore benefited the process and the associated governance framework. A central government respondent indicated:

We were having chats with anyone basically, we did continue to have discussions with Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes, and Northamptonshire. But the ones in Oxfordshire went a little bit quicker largely because the authorities had already formed into a kind of growth partnership ... and they had a quite a good idea about how much housing they wanted to take. So, we were kind of working with willing partners ... and

a lot of the architecture was already in place in Oxfordshire, which made things a lot smoother and a little bit easier at the outset. (MHCLG Civil Servant, 7 May 2021)

After signing the HGD in 2017 the OGB continued to expand its functions and profile, transforming its structure to align with the pillars of the HGD and completing a review of its own purpose (OGB, 2020). It also produced a strategic vision which set out a shared ambition for the county and acted as a central cog to the JSSP. In 2020–21 the OGB undertook consultation on the JSSP, illustrating that the partnership was progressing the required elements of the Deal.

Relations between the local authorities and other growth board partners also progressed alongside the OGB. For example, OGB enabled OxLEP to engage on a political level when developing the Local Industrial Strategy (OxLEP, 2020), emphasising the production of the strategy in partnership rather than OxLEP dictating the outcomes to partners. More generally, interview evidence suggested that OGB was an important forum for upholding local partnership and tackling disputed issues.

However, considerable shortcomings remained. Firstly, the political and policy disparities that are ingrained in Oxfordshire have persisted. Disputes about the distribution of housing across Oxfordshire have been a significant challenge. Research findings highlight the diverse and developing stances of each local authority, in particular South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) which throughout the HGD process had been opposed to the housing numbers suggested for their area. This had implications for partnership relations, the agreement of the Deal, and for the progress of planning policy in Oxfordshire as a change of leadership in SODC in May 2019 threatened the withdrawal of the council's local plan before this was halted by Secretary of State intervention (MHCLG, 2020; Wilding, 2019). This would have been a clear demonstration of the Oxfordshire partners not meeting the HGD requirement to submit all local plans by 2019, reflecting ongoing local challenges in implementing central targets (Beel & Jones, 2021).

Secondly, the increased profile of OGB's actions in public consciousness challenged the governance model. The HGD subsequently led to the creation of an OGB Scrutiny Panel and the transformation of the OGB as it moved the partnership into a more public position. This was a significant but somewhat unintended consequence impacting governance in Oxfordshire and shows the impact of the HGD as a "step change for OGB in terms of its profile and perhaps importance" (HGD Programme Lead, 26 April 2021)

A final component here is Oxfordshire's relationship with central government. Generally, the HGD benefited the long-term relationship between the two parties, providing a clear opportunity for the local partners to demonstrate their credibility with government, against the more difficult background of disagreement over local government reorganisation and the status of the SODC Local Plan. At officer-civil servant levels, the HGD created strong, trusting, connections. This enabled the building of relationships and active sharing of opinions in an enhanced informal manner; indeed, a close operational relationship was fundamental in the success of the HGD. Nonetheless, one interviewee did emphasise that the traditional central-local power balance remained present, stating: "There is still central government, there is still local government. But I wouldn't overplay that because I think that's going to be the case. That's why there are tiers of government" (HGD Programme Lead, 26 April 2021).

Finally, with regard to *policy reorientation*, the pillars of the HGD provide clear focus on key policy areas: housing, infrastructure, productivity, and strategic planning. Innovative policy initiatives were included across the pillars, including bespoke affordable housing funding and short-term flexible arrangements regarding planning. From these and other examples, the initiatives

sought to implement changes in policy direction, at least in the short term. This referenced a number of reorientated and strengthened policy outcomes including increased efficiency in housing delivery, the cementing of the SHMA numbers, the progression of updated local plans including the distribution of Oxford city's unmet need, moves towards Green Belt release, and driving forward the JSSP.

Since 2010 the foundations for strategic planning have been weakened across much of England besides London and areas that have secured additional powers through deals (see for example Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Harrison et al., 2021a, 2021b). Accordingly, the introduction of the JSSP in Oxfordshire was a notable example of localised policy reorientation. An interviewee argued that the HGD had unconsciously halted the breakdown of strategic planning in the county:

I think we inadvertently prevented the breakdown of strategic planning. If we think about what the 'no intervention' option is, with local housing need coming in, with changes in political control... the Deal prevented things from going backwards... I think we probably would have ended up in a situation where Oxfordshire wasn't really planning for its need, rather it planned for the minimum it probably politically could. (MHCLG Civil Servant, 11 May 2021)

Important barriers remained however, with inadequate funding, an overly ambitious timeline coupled with laborious governance processes, and a lack of formal guidance proving the most noteworthy limitations. Political differences emerged around the JSSP and it might be judged that the length of time taken (four years) to get to a stage where spatial options were considered effectively tempered down complications, only for the JSSP process to be eventually halted in August 2022 when the local council leaders announced that they were unable to reach agreement on the approach to planning for future housing needs in the county. Yet, despite this final collapse it is clear that the HGD was, for a period at least, prominent in facilitating policy evolution in Oxfordshire.

### **Conclusion: The Extent and Limits of Urban Intrapreneurialism**

This paper has evaluated the particular form of urban intrapreneurialism associated with central-local deal-based policy in the UK, focusing on the Oxfordshire HGD agreed in 2017 and currently still in operation. A general evaluative frame was deployed based on six dimensions, namely: innovation, leadership, outcome-orientation, organisational agility, partnerships and relations, and policy reorientation. These do not cover all conceivable aspects of urban-intrapreneurialism, and the contexts in which they are applied clearly vary. Impacts also cross criteria, blurring the boundaries between dimensions. Nevertheless, the evaluative frame here offers a useful template through which to assess the impacts of deal-based policy.

In Oxfordshire the OGB played a central role in overcoming local political and policy tensions in order to secure the Deal. The process required opportunism and agility during negotiations with central government. Through subsequent review and organisational development, the Deal resulted in a step-change for OGB as it took on accountability for implementing the HGD. Furthermore, key commitments were adopted, including a requirement for the county's authorities to submit all Local Plans for examination by 2019 and for a JSSP to be developed, though both of these subsequently encountered significant problems and delays, and in the case of the JSSP, eventual failure. Furthermore, ongoing and reframed arguments around the county's growth agenda, as reflected in local election outcomes in 2021 and 2022, indicate that underlying tensions remain; indeed, at the time of writing Cherwell District Council is the only local

authority in Oxfordshire under Conservative Party leadership, marking a quite radically changed local political context since the HGD was signed in 2017. Thus, it would appear that the intrapreneurial characteristics of the HGD prompted material improvement in certain governance and planning policy symptoms in Oxfordshire, while not transcending the basic territorial and scalar dilemmas which underpin these challenges.

The notion of urban intrapreneurialism is valuable in highlighting multiple dimensions for evaluation including policy innovation and direction, leadership, institutional relations, organisational change, and management. In theoretical terms, in common with much business and management literature, it has the benefit of closeness to the strategic action and calculation of stakeholders, thereby militating against an overly-abstract evaluative stance. However, the notion seeks to transfer conceptual themes into a state arena marked by very different dynamics and structures from its disciplinary bases. Caution is required, therefore, together with an acknowledgment of the distinct nature of state forms and wider social relations. Clearly state organisations have other fundamental logics and requirements – around democracy, accountability, and transparency for example – that don't necessarily fit comfortably with the emphasis on intrapreneurial dynamics.

In adopting this theoretical standpoint we have developed the notion of urban intrapreneurialism within the contemporary English context, highlighted its particular value in exposing the detailed mechanics of change within the local state, and demonstrated its applicability to key aspects of planning reform and associated governance restructuring. Our evaluative frame enables a fine-grained assessment of internal reorganisation processes, and clear judgement regarding the novelty and effectiveness of these revised arrangements. This helps to extend urban governance literatures beyond the more established focus on overall institutional configurations and towards a more forensic and searching examination of internal operations, together with a sensitivity to the constitution of distinctive roles in particular times and places. Indeed, it reflects the argument that “an assessment of mechanics becomes critical in delineating the rise of new governance forms” (Valler et al., 2000, p. 418).

As a theoretical specification, urban intrapreneurialism is categorical and evaluative rather than normative or prescriptive. It is not aimed directly towards causal explanation, perhaps in some senses reflecting the status of Harvey's original formulation of urban entrepreneurialism as “a preface to, rather than a framework for, analysis” (Wood, 1998). However, it is nonetheless valuable in emphasising the potential influence of practitioners at all scales – including the local – over internal organisational arrangements, and the scope to elevate progressive objectives within associated restructuring. Clearly this may be circumscribed, and it is important that the inward-looking emphasis of urban intrapreneurialism not be at the expense of a serious engagement with the constraints of wider political-economic conditions and national state strategies. Also, practitioners face ongoing challenges associated with urban intrapreneurial forms such as the deal-based policy considered in this paper: concerns for example around the lack of transparency, democratic foundation, stability, and predictability of deal-based arrangements. Further questions arise over the complexity, unevenness and adequate resourcing of deal-based programmes, not least in the “radically incomplete and asymmetric” devolutionary context of contemporary England (Kelly & Pearce, 2023), but also evident in other national contexts. Yet despite the likely limitations here practitioners should be aware of their own agency in this sphere and the potential to steer organisational and policy change in potentially progressive directions.



Importantly, a general formulation of urban intrapreneurialism can inform further research in wide-ranging international contexts. Spatial planning and governance is clearly complex and highly differentiated internationally, with diverse political cultures, structures and legal frameworks leading to widely differing planning and governance tiers and varied spatial and organisational structures. Yet across the diversity of state and developmental forms urban intrapreneurialism can be located theoretically as part of wider (national) political-economic strategies and associated political projects to reconcile the contradictions of state involvement in economy and society. Urban intrapreneurialism, as a distinctive set of innovative organisational activities, might thus contribute in tempering associated urban governance tensions, potentially recasting and managing the problems to be addressed and the political and institutional landscape to be navigated. In this way intrapreneurial activity may come to represent an improvised and temporary solution – a ‘fix’ to specific tensions based on particular forms of urban innovation (see Jessop, 2006).

Applying this in particular cases requires the specification of more concrete concepts and related vocabularies to characterise respective local political, institutional and cultural contexts and to delineate respective crisis-tendencies and dynamic spatio-temporal responses. Second-order theoretical and categorical concepts will be required to facilitate thick description and to illuminate the specificity of cases (in the Oxfordshire case we have highlighted the notion of ‘urban political dissonance’ to capture specific institutional and political legacies and associated governance dilemmas, for example). Then the evaluative task is to interrogate the capacity of particular forms of urban intrapreneurial action to mitigate or transcend associated crisis-tendencies. This general formulation should be applicable across diverse state regimes, highlighting the capacity of internal innovation within state forms to respond to specific urban governance and planning challenges.

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## Note

1. The HGD had been negotiated by the Conservative Government nationally and the predominantly Conservative-led local authorities in Oxfordshire. However, following the May 2019 local elections, South Oxfordshire District Council leadership was taken by a Liberal Democrat-Green Party alliance, from a previous strong Conservative majority. At the same time, the Liberal Democrats took control of the Vale of the White Horse District Council, again replacing previous Conservative Party control. Oxfordshire County Council moved from Conservative leadership to a Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Party administration in May 2021. Most recently, West Oxfordshire District Council moved from Conservative control to a Liberal Democrat alliance with Labour and the Green Party in local elections in May 2022.

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