



Local Agency for the Public Purpose? Dissecting and evaluating the emerging discourses of municipal entrepreneurship in the UK

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4 Austerity governance has transformed embedded practices of budgetary stewardship
5 and service delivery across local authorities in the UK (Ferry and Eckersley, 2020).¹
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7 Reductions in grant support from central government, only partially offset by business
8 rates and increases in council tax, have seen council spending on local services drop
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10 by 24 per cent in England (from 2009 to 2017), 11.5 per cent in Scotland, and 12 per
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12 cent in Wales (Gray and Barford, 2018, p. 554). Working within highly centralised
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14 financial and legal regimes, with few powers of local taxation, and often limited local
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16 resource bases, especially in disadvantaged communities in ‘old’ industrial towns and
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18 cities, local authorities have increasingly turned towards new strategies of income-
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20 generation and commercialisation, as they endeavour to fill the ‘funding gaps’ left by
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22 reductions in traditional sources of revenue (Gray and Barford, 2018).
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25 The generation of alternative revenue streams - the ‘marketisation of income’ (Taylor,
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27 Haynes and Darking, 2021) - has embraced a multiplicity of commercial and
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29 entrepreneurial logics and practices of municipal action (Thompson, 2020). Councils
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31 have entered into partnerships with real estate developers, while investing some £6.6
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33 billion in commercial property such as hotels, offices and shopping centres from
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35 2016/17 to 2018/19 (National Audit Office, 2020, p.4). They have also made novel
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37 trading and charging interventions in local markets, launching direct ‘for profit’
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39 trading companies in municipal goods and services; creating public service
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41 cooperatives and mutuals in collaboration with communities; exploiting procurement
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43 policies as a tool to support local businesses and social enterprises; and driving
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45 authority-wide culture change towards entrepreneurship and financial self-sufficiency
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47 (Ferry *et al.*, 2018).
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50 This article evaluates the under-researched motivations and meanings attached by
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52 local actors to such commercial and entrepreneurial forms of income-generation
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54 (Shearmur and Poirier, 2017). Answering calls for a ‘greater sensitivity’ to local
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56 agency under conditions of austerity (Fuller, 2018), it reveals and assesses how
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59 ¹ We thank the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive
60 engagement with our work and for their helpful suggestions on how we might refine
and develop our arguments. Of course, responsibility for the claims remains with the
authors.

officers make sense of entrepreneurship in their everyday practices; the role of local agency in relation to the demands of austerity governance; and the reconfiguration of the local state. In so doing, we recognise and build upon existing accounts that have identified global varieties of urban entrepreneurship (Phelps and Miao, 2020). While we acknowledge variations in cross-national patterns and uneven geographical ‘reach’, we identify and name four dominant problematisations of entrepreneurial practices which are alleged to best fit the case of UK local government: municipal financialization, progressive interventionism, social innovation, and progressive self-organisation. Secondly, we discern and characterize a particular mode or variant of the emergent discourse of ‘municipal entrepreneurialism’, which we name ‘municipal entrepreneurialism for the public purpose’, where entrepreneurship is associated with the provision of a diverse array of commercial services, municipal stewardship and public goods. Thirdly, we detect a number of potential tensions in this discourse of municipal entrepreneurship, including its amplification of political risks; clashes in organisational culture over demands for flexibility; grievances over the naming of ‘surpluses’ and traditional budgetary logics; and the transformation of the roles and responsibilities of officers. Fourthly, while recognising the risks of drawing narrow definitions of such phenomena, we conclude that this emerging discourse creates new possibilities of agency for local authorities that resonate with and contribute to problematisations of what we have named ‘progressive interventionism’.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

In developing a research strategy to address our objects of inquiry, our initial task was to describe the core elements and features that constituted the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship. This involved an analysis of the interpretations and statements of representative subjects and institutional actors - chief officers, project leads, local councillors, and frontline staff - who spoke or wrote about the practices and activities in which they were engaged. Here the main aim of the exercise was to *characterize* the beliefs and interpretations of these selected subjects and institutional actors in different contexts, using our judgement to discern and test the underlying rules and logics of the discourses. More fully, drawing on the resources of poststructuralist

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4 policy analysis, we focussed on the signifier of ‘entrepreneurship’, tracking and
5 tracing its various iterations across multiple contexts, while using these descriptions to
6 construct the discourse. Our approach also contained an implicit logic of comparison,
7 as our descriptions sought to bring out similarities and differences in the multiple
8 articulations of ‘entrepreneurship’ across local authorities (cf. Robinson, 2016). Here
9 the objective was to sketch out a grammar of the different usages of ‘municipal
10 entrepreneurship’, so as to provide a perspicuous representation of the discursive
11 field, and to determine the different variants at work in this field.
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20 Of course, this strategy presupposes a particular conception of discourse and
21 statements. In our approach, discourses are best defined as linguistic and non-
22 linguistic practices that connect ideas, things and activities together to produce
23 specific systems of meaning. This perspective contrasts with other methods of
24 discourse analysis, which focus either on the more restricted analysis of speeches or
25 texts, or more broadly on the role of arguments and the semiotic dimension of social
26 practice (e.g. Fairclough, 2013; Hajer, 2005). Discourses are thus sets of articulatory
27 practices that connect and modify the meaning of contingent elements to form
28 systems of signification, where such systems are demarcated and unified by the
29 creation of boundaries with other discourses. Moreover, in seeking to determine the
30 regularities and linkages between different statements, beliefs and actions in a
31 particular field of discourse, our conception focusses on the way differences are
32 established between contending positions and the creation of political divisions
33 between discourses (XXXX, TBI).
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46 Finally, using the work of Foucault, we define *statements* as ‘serious speech acts’ that
47 are enunciated by officers and policymakers when describing their practices and
48 programmes in particular local contexts (Foucault, 1972). Here the notion of a ‘speech
49 act’ highlights the performative dimension of their utterances and written expressions
50 – ‘saying as doing’ – while the idea of ‘serious’ captures the way these linguistic
51 performances seek to accurately and licitly describe their beliefs, thoughts and
52 practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, pp. 45-56). Our aim was to establish the core
53 statements in the discourse, and to explore their repetition, resonance, reiteration and
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4 transformation in particular spaces and places, as well as their dissemination and take-
5 up in other comparable cases.
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9 More practically, empirical fieldwork and data generation was undertaken in three
10 steps. We began by discerning and naming four dominant problematisations of
11 entrepreneurial practices in local government in different contexts. Secondly, we
12 analysed the council initiatives nominated for the Association for Public Service
13 Excellence's annual award for commercialisation and entrepreneurship. The
14 Association is a member-owned local authority body, which works with over 300
15 councils across the UK. As an advocate of new forms of income-generation, it
16 introduced the award for commercialisation and entrepreneurship in 2015, and by
17 2019 over 37 initiatives had been shortlisted as finalists for the award, with
18 nominations spread across 30 authorities. Thirdly, we undertook case studies of
19 entrepreneurship in six local councils, which have been widely identified as being at
20 the forefront of income-generation activities (see Table 1). The empirical cases were
21 not selected as 'critical cases', which would enable us to generate or test universal
22 explanations or predictions, but rather because they were considered to be *exemplary*
23 *sites* through which to explore the discursive work of 'entrepreneurship'.
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For each case study, the research team assembled and analysed an archive of policy documents, including briefings, strategic plans, project reports and evaluations. This was followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with a total of 21 participants drawn from project and corporate teams. Interviews lasted an hour, and the sample included chief officers, project leads and frontline staff. Questions explored the competing rationales underpinning initiatives, everyday practices of implementation, and the barriers and opportunities for change. Interviews were then coded thematically, as we focused on exemplary statements pertaining to entrepreneurship, the articulation of demands, and the equivalences and differences between elements of the discourse.

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6 In analysing this archive, we focussed on the way actors interpreted their situations,
7 and the repetition of statements that constituted the specific goals, subjects, strategies,
8 and objects of the discourse of entrepreneurship. At each stage, we undertook repeated
9 readings of the texts, using 'manual processing' to isolate and describe the core
10 statements that emerged or disappeared in different contexts (Keller, 2013, p.97).
11 Through this to-and-fro movement between our empirical data and our research
12 puzzles, we engaged in a process of articulation. We did not 'find' the discourse of
13 municipal entrepreneurship 'hiding' in the text. Rather, we assembled and named its
14 logic, character, and value through our judgements and our situated knowledge of
15 local government, as we mediated and negotiated our research between our
16 theoretical assumptions and the four problematisations of entrepreneurship that we
17 identified at the outset of the study. It is to these problematisations that we now turn.
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30 **PROBLEMATISING COMMERCIALISM AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP** 31 **UNDER AUSTERITY GOVERNANCE**

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35 Having outlined our research strategy, we now turn to the problematisation of the
36 existing interpretations of commercialism and entrepreneurship under austerity
37 governance in the UK. Here we identify and analyse the four main problematisations
38 of entrepreneurial practices within existing accounts of these ideas and practices.
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44 **Municipal Financialisation**

45 The first problematisation emphasizes the way that practices of local
46 commercialisation have transformed urban infrastructures into financial assets and
47 revenue streams for local government. In the process, the local state has evolved from
48 that of a 'facilitator and enabler' of the private sector to that of an 'active executor' of
49 neoliberal financialisation (Beswick and Penny, 2018). This transformation of the
50 local state is a consequence of the logics of austerity governance and top-down cuts to
51 public funding, which do not 'enabl[e]' local actors 'to behave differently', if they are
52 to strengthen the fiscal and political capacities of the local state (Christophers, 2019,
53 p. 583; see also Penny, 2018). Subordinated to central government, they are left with
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4 little freedom of manoeuvre as to ‘where and how they can raise or generate funds’,
5 except through the financialisation of local assets (Beswick and Penny, 2018, p. 624).
6 This financialisation, however, arguably increases the contradictions facing the local
7 state, as it is caught between the demands of value-extraction, speculation, risk-taking
8 and those of public intervention, policy coordination, planning and regulatuion
9 (Beswick and Penny, 2018, p. 612; Pike *et al.*, 2019, p. 4; Raco and De Souza, 2018).
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16 In pessimistic renditions of this approach, local actors adopt entrepreneurial practices
17 as ‘much by dull compulsion as ideological zeal’, so that the actions of local actors
18 ultimately mask the implementation of an ‘aggressively commercial and speculative
19 mode of governance new to local government’ (Beswick and Penny, 2018, p. 625;
20 Penny, 2017, p. 1370). Such interpretations resonate with ‘austerial realist’ accounts
21 of local agency, where actors in local government deny their own agency, leading to
22 the consolidation of state power (Davies *et al.*, 2020, p.63).
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30 More optimistic interpretations privilege the uneven nature of processes of
31 financialisation, drawing attention to the agency of local actors, as well as the political
32 and economic contexts, which ultimately shape outcomes (O’Brien, O’ Neil and Pike,
33 2019). They thus characterise practices of local entrepreneurship as part of a
34 ‘financialisation-in-motion’ (Pike *et al.*, 2020, p.792), that is, a set of messy,
35 incomplete and recursive processes, which are marked by the continued interactions
36 of managerial, financialised and entrepreneurial logics (p. 793), where actors are
37 ‘actively financialising and being financialised’ (p. 792). In this view, the motivations
38 of local actors and the potential outcomes of commercialisation and entrepreneurship
39 are highly contingent and contextual, so that until the outcomes of programmes prove
40 otherwise, ‘there is no compelling reason not to give councils the benefit of the doubt’
41 (Christophers, 2019, p. 582).
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52 Progressive Interventionism

53 In arguing that the pro-active entrepreneurial strategies of the local state can drive
54 forward civic and collective provision of goods and services as an integral component
55 of a ‘more inclusive, holistic and integrated place-based economic strategy’, the
56 second problematisation goes further than merely giving councils the ‘benefit of the
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doubt' (Thompson *et al.*, 2020, p. 1191; Gardner and Lowndes, 2016). Typically, Thompson *et al.* (2020) mobilise a Polanyian understanding of the socially embedded economy to foreground the agency of the local state in developing 'accelerators' of economic growth in combination with 'stabilisers' of social welfare and protection. Characterising such practices as 'entrepreneurial municipalism', they argue that the local state goes beyond generating funds to fill the 'holes' in central grants, to invest 'directly in self-sustaining projects, which harness the value of (de-commodified) land, (cooperative) labour and (patient) capital to ground economic development in people and place' (p. 1188).

This approach thus suggests that interventions in the foundational economy represent an emergent and nuanced, yet distinct, strategy available to local state actors, who are duly assigned agency on route to the production of locally-embedded social value. Similar conclusions are drawn by Shearmur and Poirier (2017) and Aldag *et al.* (2019), who assert that the origins of municipal entrepreneurship are not necessarily intertwined with competition between cities and local authorities to attract inward investment. On the contrary, they argue that local government can exercise its agency to protect public services in a 'progressive push back' against central cuts. Indeed, Shearmur and Poirier (2017) suggest that municipal entrepreneurship can be driven and sanctioned by the demands of the local population, civil society and businesses.

Social Innovation

The claims of Shearmur and Poirier (2017) act as a bridge to our third problematisation. In this approach, entrepreneurship is tied to public value creation, thus privileging local officers and political leaders as the key agents of change in the response to austerity, as well as longer-term shifts in the policy environment, which have been caused by deregulation, privatisation, asset sales, and collaboration (Bello *et al.*, 2018). Local state actors are perceived to exercise innovative forms of agency within a 'relational' form of governance, which stands in marked contrast to a bureaucratic, 'traditional' top-down government (Liddle and McElwee, 2019). Local actors, it is claimed, are increasingly 'freed' within such relational modes of governance to facilitate and leverage public value, as they are encouraged to pursue forms of 'collective entrepreneurship [that have] the capacity to provide greater

options, and allow bottom up solutions to emerge' (Liddle and McElwee, 2019; Klein *et al.*, 2010). In such spaces, the local state assumes the role of an 'animateur', which in part acts as a catalyst for economic development by ensuring network leadership (Quinn and Courtney, 2016, p. 144). In this perspective, practices of entrepreneurship and innovation are thus framed as 'co-operative in nature, emphasising mutuality rather than voracious profit-making' (Johnson and Fenwick, 2018, p. 212).

Progressive Self-organisation

The fourth problematisation tends to eschew any explicit reference to the signifier 'entrepreneurship'. Practices of 'smart procurement' and interventions into the foundational cooperative economy, which might otherwise be characterised as the activity of the municipal 'entrepreneur', are understood in terms of 'community wealth building' and 'progressive new municipalism' (O'Neil and Howard, 2018; Russell, 2019). Rejecting urban entrepreneurialism or the regime of inter-urban competition over inward investment (Harvey, 1989), this problematisation promotes the democratisation of the economy, alternative forms of ownership and service delivery (Russell, 2019).

Importantly for our analysis the innovative forces of social change are thus situated 'outside' the local state in the prefigurative micro-settings of self-management and the spaces of informality created by the accelerated disaggregation of the local state under austerity (Beveridge and Koch, 2019, pp.11-12). The local state remains a flawed and somewhat damaged vehicle, hampered by weak powers, financial scarcity, and a lack of capabilities to address the issues and constraints generated by the global political economy (Blanco, Salazar and Bianchi, 2020). More pessimistically, it is replete with bureaucratic hierarchies, asymmetrical power relations and illegitimate forms of authority (see Russell, 2019). Proponents of progressive self-organisation thus advocate the further hybridisation of the local state so as to exploit its organisational resources to the advantage of community activists and to embed the local state in 'everyday urban politics' (Beveridge and Koch, 2019, pp.11-12).

THE EMERGING DISCOURSES OF MUNICIPAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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6 In order to evaluate these problematisations, we now set out the results of our
7 empirical research of municipal entrepreneurship. Our initial empirical mapping and
8 analysis of the emerging discourse of municipal entrepreneurship yields six
9 interconnected themes, which function as the quilting points that knit together the
10 overlapping strands and threads. Together they form a loose system of storylines,
11 often in contradiction with one another, which weave together the different strands of
12 the emerging discourse in a dispersed regularity. The internal unities and limits of this
13 'dispersed regularity' are in turn shaped by a series of subtle divisions and exclusions,
14 which mark the boundaries between this formation and others.
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23 Income-Generation and Local Agency

24 One core strand of the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship constructed
25 commercialisation and income-generation as 'necessary' strategic responses to the
26 'perfect storm' of rising demands on council services (Statement 1) and reduced
27 government funding (Statements 8). In this context, entrepreneurial narratives
28 portrayed local government as the 'triumphant underdog' winning out against the
29 odds (like the eponymous hero in the *Rocky* boxing films) in a challenge to the
30 'mentality of cuts' (Statement 7). Aspirations for greater local agency were clearly
31 emphasized in the naming of the initiatives, with repeated references to 'taking
32 control' (Statement 8), 'shaping the future' (Statement 6) and challenging the
33 'mentality of cuts' (Statement 12).
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48 For the Public Purpose

49 The narrow instrumental goal of income-generation was framed as a means for
50 generating public value or social benefit, be it tackling social care demands
51 (Statement 3), addressing fuel poverty (Statement 2) or mitigating climate change
52 (Statement 4). Entrepreneurship was thus firmly anchored in the public domain, while
53 a series of equivalences were drawn in the discourse between practices of
54 commercialisation, income-generation, and innovation and resilience in service
55 delivery. Manifesting itself in multiple forms in our case studies, the *leitmotif* of
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4 ‘entrepreneurship for the public purpose’ shaped diverse initiatives across different
5 local authority contexts from house building through to property investment,
6 promoting healthy lifestyles, and smart procurement. The East Riding Leisure
7 Services programme, for example, working in partnership with local GPs, referred
8 patients identified at risk of inactive lifestyles or poor diet to leisure services for
9 physical exercise and support via a bespoke on-line system, rather than
10 recommending costly clinical care. But, importantly, the programme was couched in
11 an entrepreneurial narrative, which connected support for patients to become long-
12 term participants in physical activity to the economic case for reducing demand on
13 over-stretched public services through the prioritisation of prevention and the
14 collaborative ‘buy-in’ of multiple partners. The initiative foregrounded savings of
15 some £800,000 per annum to the NHS, evident in reduced numbers of bariatric
16 surgery procedures and a £200,000 accrual to the local authority from increased take-
17 up of leisure services.
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30 Stewards of the Local Economy

31 A third theme of the discourse evoked images of the authority as the stewards of the
32 local economy, ‘nurturing the growth of local people and businesses’ (Statement 5).
33 When asked to explain their role in service delivery in Enterprising DG, the direct
34 service arm of Dumfries and Galloway council, one officer initially described it
35 narrowly as ‘basically making money for the council’, yet immediately countered that
36 their work also aimed to make the most of local authority assets within communities,
37 and building local supply chains. Such legitimising narratives ultimately resonated
38 with place-based appeals of the council as an ‘energiser’ authority, driving forward
39 local growth by supporting local companies to retain economic benefits within what
40 was deemed to be a peripheral locality poorly served by the market. Local
41 procurements of goods and services, which rose from £44 million in 2015/16 to £62.4
42 million in 2018/19, while developing a network of preferred supplier relationships
43 with over 300 local small and medium-sized companies (Dumfries and Galloway
44 Council, 2020), was regularly portrayed as a means of creating social value and
45 promoting social cohesion within local communities.
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4 Allusions to place-based stewardship were constructed in opposition to markets
5 through the rhetoric of negative externalities and market failures, prioritising
6 'stakeholder not shareholder' value (Statement 6). The mission of Birmingham
7 Municipal Housing Trust (BMHT) was thus legitimised by senior officers as a means
8 of countering the failure of private developers to provide an adequate quantity and
9 quality of new homes across the city. One outcome of this initiative, for example, was
10 the provision of housing in disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods with large
11 BAME communities, where it was wrongly assumed that there was low levels of
12 demand. For BMHT officers, this market failure stemmed from: the flawed business
13 model adopted by the national, private house building sector, which privileged
14 development on large sites in areas of 'demonstrable' demand (typically suburbs); the
15 primacy of shareholder value, requiring a high return on investment (typically 25 per
16 cent); and the provision of standardised house types, notwithstanding local context. In
17 this context, BMHT positioned itself as a distinctive niche as a bespoke, local
18 alternative to the 'budget and scarpers' blueprint of volume house builders (interview
19 with senior officer). It opposed its development model against those of its private
20 competitors, thus offsetting market failure by absorbing risks traditionally borne by
21 the private sector. The strategy involved the development of homes designed by
22 council architects, exclusively on council owned land (with planning consent pre-
23 secured), with construction, sales and marketing contracted to the private sector, with
24 whom surpluses were shared. In this process, BMHT has built to date more than 3,000
25 homes for sale or rent, becoming the largest house builder in the West Midlands.
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44 Importantly, this discursive strand also established divisions between local and
45 national/global companies and markets. In Dumfries and Galloway, such antagonisms
46 typically rested on demands to tackle the 'Klondike economy', whereby national
47 contractors and global companies 'come into our authority [...] take the money and
48 the benefits [...] and then disappear' (interview with senior officer). 'Othering' large
49 external providers in an emergent discourse of patriotic localism, the local was
50 privileged over the national and global, while autonomous strategies of local
51 development were prioritised over external interdependency. It followed that
52 networking with local suppliers and contractors was framed as a means of promoting
53 place-based inclusive economies, ensuring that the benefits of growth were retained
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4 locally, notably by using local authority procurement rules to generate demand for
5 goods and services from local suppliers. In short, working alongside local firms,
6 councils used their political powers to open up access to new markets, from which
7 previously, local businesses might have been excluded, because of their obligations to
8 bid for large contracts and compete against national contractors.
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13 14 15 Redefining Risk

16 The affirmations of local agency and market intervention were made possible by the
17 reframing of risk and risk-taking by local authorities, as they drew equivalences
18 between, on the one hand, the often conflicting institutional logics of budgetary
19 stewardship and, on the other hand, service improvement and innovation (Ferry and
20 Eckersley, 2020). In the first instance, municipal entrepreneurship was reframed as
21 ‘astute’ risk-taking with ‘a clear sense of purpose’ (Statement 11), implicitly drawing
22 boundaries with forms of allegedly ‘uncalculated’ risk-taking, while foregrounding
23 the capacity of councils to manage risk and contingencies. In our case studies,
24 commercial risks attached to the use of public funds were compared to the ‘horrific’
25 risks of inaction and the failure to defend services and local communities under
26 austerity. In this way, the property investment strategy of Sevenoaks District Council
27 weighed the risks of commercial investments against the generation of a revenue
28 stream (a minimum yield of 5 per cent per annum on investments), the value of
29 interventions in local markets to maintain employment property, and the aspiration of
30 the authority to become financially self-sufficient within ten years (from 2013). In
31 short, the meaning of stewardship was itself redescribed to incorporate budgetary
32 demands, the defence of public services, and the risks of inaction.
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47 But it is also noteworthy that in this discourse the notion of ‘risk’ is primarily
48 constructed as political risk, and is conceptualised in terms of negative electoral
49 outcomes for local councillors, including, for example, fears that the council would be
50 seen to be competing with local business. In Birmingham, one officer noted,
51 ‘commercialism has always been classified as a “dirty word”, for [it assumes] council
52 departments competing against anybody who is local [...]’. Such political risks were
53 negated by appeals to collaboration with local small and medium firms, and niche
54 market provision (Statement 9), which it was claimed met specifically local needs,
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4 while avoiding direct competition with established local businesses. The ventures thus
5 opened up opportunities to compete against national contractors in local and external
6 markets. For example, Oxford City Council rebranded itself as a ‘social enterprise
7 council’, as it explored different ways to trade and charge for its services within and,
8 crucially, beyond Oxford itself. It also recycled dividends produced for local benefit
9 via a municipal trading company - Oxford Direct Services - which generated in
10 2018/19, a £1.3m dividend for the Council, while employing over 600 employees and
11 supporting 1,251 jobs (Oxford Direct Services, 2020). In discursive terms, then,
12 collaborative and niche provision serves as a logic that can incorporate the defence of
13 local business into the basket of other aims and demands advocated by the appeals to
14 municipal entrepreneurship. It thus seeks to negate political risk surrounding market
15 interventions, while allaying the fears of elected members that competition with local
16 businesses might undermine local political support.
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28 Driving Forward Cultural Change

29 Appeals to commercialisation and entrepreneurship were frequently couched in the
30 rhetoric of ‘behavioral change’, ‘embedding a commercial culture’ and ‘working for
31 our citizens’ (Statement 10). In our case studies, municipal entrepreneurship was
32 defined in opposition to standard ‘checks and balances’, which were interpreted as a
33 barrier to exploiting new opportunities or as a competitive disadvantage. In response
34 to such demands, authorities introduced new managerial models and practices of
35 delegation that were deemed to fit with the different business demands and modes of
36 intervention of municipal entrepreneurship. Councils established practices for signing
37 off initiatives by key individuals - chief officers and portfolio holders - without
38 recourse to cabinet, full council, or relevant committees.
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49 Most importantly, however, practices of municipal entrepreneurship introduced new
50 financial and budgetary logics into the running of the council, triggering new conflicts
51 and antagonisms. In particular, these tensions concerned the reinvestment of
52 surpluses, when only part of the council was engaged in such entrepreneurial
53 practices. Indeed, the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship embeds a logic of
54 needs-led funding that establishes local needs and levels of service provision and then
55 seeks to generate funding to meet such outcomes. It redirects thinking away from
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4 standard budget-setting processes that assume 'fixed' levels of resources and
5 expenditure patterns, while privileging the generation of efficiencies to meet service
6 outcomes. In so doing, it challenges protectionist practices of silo funding. As such,
7 the City & County of Swansea inverted traditional budgetary mechanisms, adopting a
8 method of 'co-produced' budgeting that brought senior officers, policy officers and
9 frontline service staff into dialogue in outcome-focussed service reviews. These
10 reviews assumed zero-based budgets and explored service delivery as part of an 'end-
11 to-end, needs-based' process. Yet practices of income-generation also triggered
12 conflicts between departments about the use of 'additional incomes', and the absence
13 of incentives to generate income, if any such resources were not re-invested in the
14 department that generated them. Across authorities, such conflicts about the
15 'ownership' of commercial funding triggered the construction of rival discursive
16 projects which sought to name additional income as 'surpluses', 'savings' or 'profits'
17 - each term legitimising different uses of additional incomes.
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30 The Innovative Puzzler

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32 The emergent discourse also constructed novel subject-positions and voices for
33 officers. Practices of municipal entrepreneurship were not typically associated with
34 innovative ruptures or breaks with established ways of working. Practitioners spoke of
35 a 'long journey', which involved the morphing of services by building upon past
36 activities or by bringing existing assets together in new combinations to respond to
37 local needs. In Birmingham, such narratives resonated with appeals to 'start small and
38 have a plan B' (interview with senior officer). In fact, such practices privileged the
39 subject-position of the 'innovative puzzler', where the 'puzzle' to be solved was
40 represented not as some intellectual conundrum, but the contradictions between - and
41 the exclusions of - customary practices, organisational styles, and policy
42 commitments (see Spinosa, Flores, Dreyfus, 1997, pp. 22-9). Across all case studies,
43 many local officers thus criticized existing practices and organisational styles of
44 councils, using phrases and tropes that highlighted the inconsistencies between
45 traditional ways of working, the council stated aims, and the service-delivery
46 outcomes within communities. New fora and dialogues emerged across councils to
47 accommodate such 'voices'. Typically, one senior officer spoke of how it is vital that
48 all staff are 'not afraid to come up with a duff idea'. Another referred to the value of
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4 working in environments in which there is ‘permission to fail’ and a ‘no handcuffs
5 policy’, which gives frontline staff the confidence to work outside risk adverse
6 cultures which stifle innovation. To this end, Dumfries and Galloway council
7 established its own centre of excellence, which was a two-way learning space to
8 engage other council services, as well as to transfer ‘good practice’ lessons across the
9 authority and facilitate culture change. Its operational values typically sought to
10 enshrine ‘promoting a responsibility culture not a blame culture’ (DG First, undated,
11 p.15). Importantly for our analysis, such practices are intrinsically tied to perceptions
12 of local agency, for ‘puzzling’ opens up the perspective of making political choices,
13 re-politicising taken-for-granted ways of working, and imagining new visions.
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25 **RE-INTERPRETING MUNICIPAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND LOCAL** 26 **AGENCY UNDER AUSTERITY** 27

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30 In the light of our empirical evidence, and our mapping of the emergent discourse, we
31 now turn back to the critical evaluation of our findings. These are developed in
32 relation to the four rival problematisations that we identified at the start of this article.
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37 The Dangers of Municipal Financialisation

38 We began by noting that pessimistic interpretations of municipal financialisation
39 criticize the way that practices of commercialisation and entrepreneurship accelerate
40 the neoliberalization of the local state, transforming the local state from a facilitator of
41 private entrepreneurship into an active entrepreneur in its own right. However, our
42 interpretation of the empirical evidence suggests an alternative possibility, in which
43 the local state is a site and driver of progressive interventions in local markets. Indeed,
44 this strand of the emergent discourse of municipal entrepreneurship challenges the
45 long-held assumptions of the neoliberal model of the enabling council, which
46 advocated councils contracting out and divesting themselves of local services (Smith,
47 2000). In contrast, municipal entrepreneurship – whether in the form of house
48 building, smart procurement, promotion of active and healthy lifestyles, property
49 investment or social enterprise - leads authorities to adopt interventionist stewardship
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4 strategies that reconnect with the ‘big ticket’ policy issues facing local communities
5 (Stoker, 2011).
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10 At the same time, the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship also potentially moves
11 beyond the confines of optimistic accounts of municipal financialisation. Such
12 accounts argue that commercialisation generates additional funding to fill the gaps in
13 local authority budgets due to austerity. But we argue that in advancing the
14 progressive capabilities of the local state, municipal entrepreneurship for the public
15 purpose goes further, articulating demands for income-generation with market
16 intervention, stewardship, and the advancement of the public good. It thus severs the
17 enterprise narrative from connotations of neo-liberal, market-led growth and favours
18 thinking about commercialisation and entrepreneurship in ways in which ‘take back’
19 the local state from capital (Cumbers, 2015, p. 74). That is to say, the emerging
20 discourse recognises the contingency of the institutional configurations of the local
21 state and local economies, so that under certain conditions the state can reframe
22 commercialisation to advance the common interest and social well-being, notably
23 through the tackling of public problems (Sheamur and Poirier, 2017, pp. 721-4).
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35 The Agency of the Local State

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37 Seen in this way, the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship resonates with the
38 demands of the new municipalism of ‘self-organising progressives’, as well as with
39 the public value orientation of ‘social innovators.’ Indeed, in all our case studies, the
40 rhetoric of municipal entrepreneurship often endorses appeals to practices of:
41 community wealth building; local inclusive growth; the use of procurement policy to
42 support local businesses and social enterprises; and the facilitation and leverage of
43 public and private capabilities in the pursuit of public value. We argue that such
44 demands are advanced by both self-organising progressives and social innovators (see
45 Johnson and Fenwick, 2018; O’Neil and Howard, 2018).
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54 Yet, in contrast to these two problematisations, our research suggests that the
55 discourse of municipal entrepreneurship discloses an alternative reading of the agency
56 of the local state, opening up new avenues of inquiry for the transformative role of
57 local agency, and the formal arenas and practices of the local state. In fact, the
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4 discourse of municipal entrepreneurship for the public purpose, which we discern in
5 our findings, calls into question the risk of ‘state phobia’ and ‘the fear of the formal’
6 often associated with accounts of progressive self-organisation and social innovation
7 (Lopdrup-Hjorth and du Gay, 2019). Indeed, although the latter two problematisations
8 acknowledge the progressive potentials that are afforded by the control of the local
9 state, they still ultimately ground the origins of innovation and entrepreneurship in
10 civil society movements and the informal politics that operate *beyond* the local state,
11 and the local state remains dominated by the hierarchy of the centre and the ‘push’ for
12 formality.
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21 Progressive Pragmatism

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23 By contrast, our empirical analysis shows that the drive for innovation and
24 entrepreneurship cannot be disentangled from the agency of local state actors *within*
25 the formal arena of local authorities. The practices of local enterprise that
26 characterised our our case studies were driven by actors inside the formal apparatus
27 of the local state, working in and against established practices of local policymaking.
28 The logics of municipal entrepreneurship challenged established cultures and
29 budgetary practices, while redefining perceived risks and subject positions for
30 officers. Such logics went beyond the ‘tinkering’ and the ‘active politics of the
31 present’. Instead, they privileged the subject-position of the officer as the ‘innovative
32 puzzler’, who is generally intent on challenging the rupture between the declared
33 strategic aims of councils and everyday practices and outcomes. Our case study
34 participants thereby rearticulated the demands of commercialisation and income-
35 generation, as they rhetorically redescribed such demands as entrepreneurship for the
36 public purpose.
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49 Our analysis thus exposes the political work of local agents and the rhetorical
50 reframing of ‘commercialisation’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ in and through their
51 articulation with municipalism. We foreground how local actors within the local state
52 were able to move beyond the practices of ‘tinkering’ to generate an alternative
53 mobilising vision for local government in response to the demands of austerity
54 governance. Importantly, such evidence supports calls for a more actor-focussed
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4 orientation that trawls beneath the ‘surface appearances’ of financialisation (Pike *et*
5 *al.*, 2020, p. 794).
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9 Stewards of Place

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11 The upshot of our interpretation is that the discourse of municipal entrepreneurship
12 resonates with and supports the problematisation of progressive interventionism. This
13 problematisation recognises the capacity of the local state to act as a ‘counter-
14 movement’ to the predominant logics of competitive, market-led growth,
15 implementing entrepreneurial strategies, which disrupt local markets by investing in
16 foundational services and infrastructures, so as to address economic inequalities
17 across communities (Thompson *et al.*, 2020, pp. 1178-80). The interpretation of our
18 evidence suggests that markets can operate according to different logics, so that
19 municipal interventions in local economies can challenge logics of economic
20 necessity or technocracy to harness markets for the delivery of the public good (Hay
21 and Payne, 2015). Indeed, the analysis of our case studies adds weight to claims that
22 local state actors act as ‘activist-entrepreneurs’, who are able to intervene to address
23 market failure, sometimes through the logic of market disruption, as they seek to
24 ‘reshape’ or redesign the operations of local markets. At the same time, they can
25 mobilise and generate resources in the form of pragmatic public actions that challenge
26 economic injustices, rather than extending the harmfully competitive and exclusionary
27 logics of neoliberalism (Thompson *et al.*, 2020; Aldag *et al.*, 2019).
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42 Having said this, the evidence generated in our study also questions the ideological
43 grounding and temporal fixing of progressive interventionism, opening up a dialogue
44 about why such interventions ‘grip’ local officers and politicians. It will be recalled
45 that Thompson *et al* characterise progressive intervention as practices of
46 ‘entrepreneurial municipalism’, associating such practices with the project of
47 democratic socialism (2020, p. 1180). This definition rests on their aim of integrating
48 social justice into economic structures, identifying entrepreneurial municipalism as a
49 more or less progressive and left-leaning set of practices, which can be aligned with
50 the so-called ‘new municipalism’ and the fearless cities movement. However, it is
51 clear that in the local authorities that we have studied the patterns of political
52 leadership cannot be narrowly confined to the left of the political spectrum. The party
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4 affiliations of council leaders included the Labour Party and Scottish Labour, as well
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6 as the Conservative Party and the Scottish National Party (not to mention their
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8 different internal party positionings).
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11 Equally, officers within the local state also played a primary role in advancing the
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13 discourse of municipal entrepreneurship, so that the practical interventions cannot
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15 easily be defined as politically-led. We thus posit an alternative reading of
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17 entrepreneurship across local authorities, which foregrounds the potential resonance
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19 of practices of municipal entrepreneurship for the public purpose with the embedded
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21 discourse of stewardship of place. Our evidence suggests that innovative practices and
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23 visions of public entrepreneurship traverse party political allegiances, and that the
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25 'grip' of such practices rests less on the political alignment with progressive politics,
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27 and more on the sedimented discourse of place stewardship embedded within political
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29 and administrative leaderships in the different cultures and systems of local
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31 government.
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33 **CONCLUSION: MUNICIPAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, LOCAL** 34 **DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC PURPOSE** 35 36 37 38

39 In characterising and naming an emergent discourse of municipal entrepreneurship for
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41 the public purpose, this article has critically assessed the income-generation practices
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43 of local government authorities. Adding to our knowledge of how local actors
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45 interpret their practices and roles when they engage in entrepreneurship, the analysis
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47 also challenges the continued salience of 'hollow' accounts of local agency under
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49 austerity. Although it is tempting to show a clear complicity between these new
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51 discursive practices and other tendencies, including logics of neoliberalization, the
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53 rise of the 'new municipalism' or the constraints of 'austrian realism', our analysis
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55 discloses a more nuanced and richer set of processes, which have complex lines of
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57 descent.
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59 One upshot of our findings is to caution against a too rapid desire to overgeneralise,
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leading to the positing of universal forms that embody a clear essence and a fixed set

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4 of features. Instead, we argue that the discourses and practices of commercialisation
5 and entrepreneurship can take multiple forms. This is not to say that this discourse
6 cannot slip into logics of financialisation or forms of social innovation, which have
7 been identified in their problematisations we have evaluated. On the contrary, under
8 certain conditions, commercialisation and entrepreneurship may manifest itself as a
9 form of self-organising progression or social innovation. In equal fashion, the
10 discourse of municipal entrepreneurship for the public purpose is not without its
11 tensions and contradictions, as it is always open to contestation and re-articulation, as
12 well as to economic risk and market competition. Indeed, it remains open to counter-
13 accusations of providing ideological cover for growing inequalities and government
14 retreat, harbouring the real risks that the narrow income-generation concerns of
15 commercialisation come to dominate over the public purpose. Under such
16 circumstances, municipal entrepreneurship carries the danger of being rearticulated as
17 little more than a justificatory narrative for 'go-it-alone' competitive localism and
18 reductionist strategies of community betterment and divestment.
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32 Of course, the sustainability of such entrepreneurial practices has also been called into
33 question by COVID-19 and its impacts on commercialisation revenues. At the time of
34 writing, the Local Government Association (2020) has predicted that local authorities
35 in England will lose £2.8 billion in falling commercial income due to the pandemic.
36 Equally, the National Audit Office (2020) has raised concerns about the exposure of
37 local authorities to economic and market risk, particularly where they rely on rental
38 incomes to fund services. Yet, our study suggests that the stewardship gained by the
39 discourse of municipal entrepreneurship for the public purpose *could* offer local
40 government a privileged means of supporting local economies, particularly the pillars
41 of the foundational economy, in a post-COVID recovery.
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Table 1: Case Study Councils

Birmingham City	Municipal Housing Trust, local authority housing company
Dumfries and Galloway	Enterprising DG, in-house service delivery arm
East Riding of Yorkshire	Leisure services partnership with GPs
Oxford City	Oxford Direct Services, local authority social enterprise
Sevenoaks District	Property investment strategy
Swansea City and County	House building programme

Figure 1: Statements: Commercialisation and Entrepreneurship, APSE Nominees 2015-2019

1. 'Commercialising our services to meet the challenge of reduced Government funding.' (Nottingham City Council, *New DLO for Commercial Gas and Electrics*, 2015)
 2. 'To deliver free residential solar PV to residents in the city and deliver a community benefit fund and income to the Council whilst offering some of the City's residents an opportunity to address fuel poverty issues.' (Peterborough City Council, *Empower Peterborough*, 2015)
 3. 'Business reengineering project that has (...) already helped safeguard and enhance the lives of over 5,000 residents and has delivered cashable savings of over 70% to the public purse.' (North Hertfordshire District Council, *Hertfordshire Careline - Social Entrepreneurship in Practice*, 2016)
 4. 'Growth of 110% in external income, financial savings of £168k a year, reduction annually in 17,000 tons of emissions and an on target, projected additional income stream of over £2.9 million over the next five years.' (GS Plus Ltd – Royal Borough of Greenwich, *Creating a Prosperous Future!*, 2016)
 5. 'The company was created to nurture the growth of people, businesses and the region.' (Cheshire East Council, *The Skills and Growth Company*, 2017)
 6. 'Our USP as the only social caterer in town: 'Stakeholders NOT Shareholders' whilst maximising quality in delivery, income growth and penetration.' (Birmingham City Council, *Building on the Past - Shaping the Future*, 2017)
 7. 'The Rocky Balboa-style story that has taken KWL from being the underdog to a well-respected champion in its field.' (Kingstown Works Ltd, *Ten Years On and Trading Strong*, 2017)
 8. 'Commercialisation is a key enabler in tackling the perfect storm of austerity and rising demand on council services.' (Warrington Borough Council, *Taking Control of Our Future*, 2018)
 9. 'We were able to assist 200 new clients and deliver nearly £200K in surpluses back to our host authority in just one year.' One West, Bath and North East Somerset Council, *Delivering Good Governance Through Commercialisation*, 2019)
 10. 'To influence substantial behavioural change, positively impact upon trading imperatives and embed a commercial culture – changing the perception of every council employee from 'I work for the Council' to 'I work for our Citizens'.' (Birmingham City Council, *The Commercial Business Hub - Providing the Oxygen for Growth*, 2019)
 11. 'Astute commercial investments with a clear sense of purpose.' (Cheltenham Borough Council, *Calculated Risk Taking*, 2019)
 12. 'Being an effective commercial business managing its budget, generating income, reducing costs and expenditure, effectively commissioning and procuring and ensuring a focus on outcomes and value for money rather than 'the mentality of cuts'.' (Thurrock Council, *The Commercial Council*, 2019)
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