

# Serial adapters? Local government chief officers and the navigation of space and time

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## Abstract

This article analyses the everyday practices of ‘doing’ socio-spatial relations, drawing upon a series of in-depth interviews with local authority chief officers from across the UK. It argues that for chief officers ‘thinking spatially’ is played out in and through the practice of leadership on the move as they navigate the multiple spaces and temporalities that constitute the landscape of local government. Such leadership on the move resonates in part with predominant explanations of boundary spanning in studies of public governance. But importantly, boundary spanning suffers, our evidence suggests, from a temporal deficit, a ‘thin’ account of time which fails to address the constitutive function of boundaries and the complex politics of fluidity and fixity that follow. Articulating a ‘thicker’ approach to time, we argue that chief officers experience everyday socio-spatial relations less as boundary spanners and more as serial adapters, who persistently reproduce sedimented boundaries and perform different modes of governance as they move from one arena to another. Serial adaptation, we conclude, challenges the potential managerialist bias of boundary spanning, in which the quest for harmonisation and unity masks over the irreducible complex reality of fragmentation and political conflict within which chief officers move.

## Keywords

Local government, boundary spanning, movement, space, time, officers

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Studies of local governance in the UK are increasingly framed by the challenges of fragmentation, multiple geographies, overlapping scales and boundaries, and institutional hybridity (Gross, 2017; Papanastasiou, 2019). Contracting out and the hiving-off of services to non-elected arms-length bodies, financial delegation and managerial decentralisation, as well contractual ‘deals’ with the centre, have produced a polycentric landscape criss-crossed by a multitude of shifting and often contradictory boundaries and logics (Pike, 2023). Austerity, cutback management and the search for ‘efficiencies’ from new organisational forms and entrepreneurial activities have accelerated and embedded such multiplicities, with the ‘layering in’ of levelling up programmes, allegedly aimed at addressing persisting regional inequalities (Tomaney and Pike, 2020), triggering even more competitive re-organisations between scales of government.

Competing spatial imaginaries of the local thus abound, be it combined authorities, local enterprise partnerships, community planning partnerships, public service boards or pan-regional governance narratives such as the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ and ‘Midlands Engine’ (Barnett, 2020; Berry and Giovannini, 2017; Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017). These imaginaries have brought into question the traditional organisational dynamics of local services, departments and the council, as well as the traditional hierarchies of the ‘local’ and the ‘centre’ (Skelcher and Smith, 2015; Pill and Guarneros-Meza, 2018). Emergent spaces have, it is argued, brought together multiple governing rationalities acting as heterotopia that challenge existing norms and ways of doing by assembling “‘things” that are in some way incongruous or “out of place”” (Waring and Bishop, 2018: 667–8). By operating within these spaces, local government officers have consequently been repeatedly tasked with developing the ‘organisational ambidexterity’ (Burgess et al., 2015) to deal with the similarities, incongruences, and ambiguous demands of managing in and across organisations with differing agendas, interests, and cultures.

This article explores how local government officials experience or navigate this multiplicity of spaces and social imaginaries that construct the local, answering long-established calls to direct attention to the situated agency of local actors ‘doing’ socio-spatial relations (Leitner and Miller, 2007; Mayer, 2008; Paasi, 2008). Drawing on a review of extant literature and original qualitative data, it critically examines the everyday practices of local authority chief officers or heads of directorates. Chief officers are a relatively neglected corps of actors in local government, with their roles and how they are exercised, it is fair to say, subject to relatively little, and only sporadic, analysis. Yet, in practice, as senior managers responsible for key policy areas and relative service provision, they act as a significant pivot between the strategic apex of the local authority, supporting councillors in developing policy and strategic objectives, while overseeing the internal line-management of the authority and the frontline delivery of services to local communities. As such, chief officers are, as Jones et al. (2013: 192) recognise, ‘expressly required to think spatially as agents of a more “mainstream” state politics.’

This ‘thinking spatially’ has, we suggest, become predominantly associated in accounts of local public leadership with the concepts of boundary spanning (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018; Williams, 2002). Typically, these mainstream evaluations recognise the increasing complexity of the organisational and institutional tiers of the local. They require officers to act as ‘institutional infiltrators’ who span boundaries to bring together ‘different fields of action by creating institutional, informational and relational linkages and ties’ (Sørensen et al., 2020: 535). Officers are thereby deemed to ‘overcome’ the organisational boundaries hampering public action, stitching together differing scales and spatial configurations, while recognising and managing both personal and organisational conflicts to translate and ‘span’ difference. The success of such tasks, it is argued, rests on the generation of new ‘soft power’ skills and dispositions, including networking, diplomacy, and ‘steering’ or the strategic capacity to facilitate and shape collaborative arrangements for the public good, in a fashion resonant with new managerialist discourses (Williams, 2019).

Against this background, we make three contributions to ongoing debates over how public managers navigate the spaces of the local, while evaluating the critical constraints on the capacities of local authority officers to boundary span. First, we analyse the everyday practices of chief officers. Here we demonstrate that, for chief officers, ‘thinking spatially’ is played out in and through the practice of ‘leadership on the move’ as they navigate across the multiple spaces and temporalities that constitute the landscape of local government. Second, we critically engage with predominant understandings of boundary spanning which foreground how local officers reproduce and exploit fluidity as they stitch together different scales of governance and translate between different organisations (Williams, 2002). We argue that existing accounts of boundary spanning suffer from a temporal deficit, which comes from their failure to address the constitutive function of the drawing of boundaries and the complex politics of fluidity and fixity that follow. Third, setting out a ‘thick’ approach to time, we contend that officers often encounter limited opportunities to boundary span. Rather, as they move across the multiple spaces and temporalities of the local, they are more likely to encounter and reproduce sedimented boundaries, performing different forms of governance, learning alternative scripts and finding their way on and off multiple stages. In other words, we conclude that chief officers experience the multiple spaces and temporalities of local government as serial adaptors. Such serial adaptation, we suggest, challenges the managerialist bias of standard accounts of boundary spanning, in which the quest for harmonisation and unity masks over the irreducible complex reality of fragmentation and political conflict, as well as the constitutive function of boundaries.

The article is organised as follows. We start by outlining our approach to capturing the spatial thinking of chief officers. To this end, we first critically evaluate existing accounts of the work of local officers and boundary spanning before establishing our focus on the movement of local officers in and across different spaces. We then examine how such practices of movement are experienced by agents in the everyday before evaluating the potential for flows and fixities in how officers think spatially. In conclusion we draw out implications for practice, arguing that officers do not always join-up spaces or hold them together, but may well generate strategies to address working in disassociated spaces and temporalities.

## Thinking spatially: Boundary spanning through space and time

Narratives of boundary spanning are rife with spatial imagery, reproducing, as they do, metaphors of networks, horizontal working, fluidity, and relational influence (Griffin, 2012). Indeed, spatially, ‘boundary-spanning’ privileges the coming into being of increasingly networked and relatively unbounded arenas of decision-making that crossover traditional administrative scales and geographical boundaries (Jonas, 2013; Larsson, 2013). Pragmatic strategic policy entrepreneurs thus work across localities to ‘link their organisations’ respective programmes and resources into more integrated and synchronised initiatives’ (Conteh and Harding, 2023: 4). As they perform such tasks, they bring into being new spatial relations, seeking to ‘fix’ space through opening, closing or negotiating boundaries that stabilise meaning (Sullivan, 2022; Van Duijn et al., 2022: 1). Public servants are thus implored to exploit the ‘hands on’ collaborative skills of fixers and brokers and the ‘hands off’ functions of bridgers and innovators (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018, 2019; see Sørensen et al., 2020: 535). Indeed, Williams (2002: 105) encourages boundary spanners to adopt a ‘language that reflects relationships, interconnections and interdependencies’, while noting that ‘new capacities are needed to manage conflict, inter-personal behaviour and fragmented and contested power relations’ alongside ‘decision-making models [that] reflect consensus formation and trust building’.

Such accounts resonate with relational deconstructions of the ‘container geographies’ of local government that have challenged the fixity of its boundaries and boundedness. These latter accounts

also foreground the likes of flows, networks, horizontality and open-mindedness, focusing on topological reach and intensity of relations at the expense of proximity and territoriality (Amin, 2004; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Malpass, 2012). Notably, Clarke and Cochrane's work on the political re-imagining of localism portrays localities as produced through distanced relations, as nodes in networks and meeting places for mobilities. The local is thus 'untied' from the narrow constraints of organisational boundaries and tiers of government, becoming a contingent flexible space that is constantly reproduced in practice. Actors, it is argued, 'reach' across spatial distances and scales to take the local into regional and cross-sector institutional networks (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Cochrane, 2020), bringing to the fore what Papanastasiou (2019) calls the politics and practices of 'scalecraft' (see also Pemberton, 2016).

However, such relational perspectives of space and the fluidity of boundaries have increasingly bumped up against the demands of fixity, not least the challenges of moving across entrenched demarcations of institutions and their histories (Malpass, 2012). Spaces of collaboration are layered with embedded institutional rules and norms, path dependencies, organisational ideologies, collective and individual identities and memories (Clifford and Morphet, 2015; Mackinnon and Shaw, 2010; Nicholson and Orr, 2016). As such, whilst recognising the 'tangle' of assemblages of more or less proximate and distanced spatial relationships that constitute the local, there is inevitably a persistence, in lived experience, of place-based interpretations in more or less recognisable spatial forms; openness is not always the perceived everyday experience of those operating within such spaces. Indeed, Jones et al. (2013) foreground the 'grip' on local government officers in Wales of the 'patch', a spatial imaginary that re-presents their perceived 'space' of working and responsibility. Following Jones (2009) space is thus not without its 'geographic anchors' which provide the 'glue' or 'gel' of particular institutional practices. Ways of working and different practices can be 'sticky', becoming rooted in particular contexts and temporalities (Jones, 2022: 53–54).

This acknowledgement of the place-assemblages that bring practice into being arguably inserts a temporal dimension into accounts of boundary spanning. It does so through its recognition of the situated agency of 'front-line' or 'middle ranking' practitioners in negotiating the contested meanings of new spaces of delivery (Pill and Guarneros-Meza, 2018). Time here is understood as context, characterised typically as the legacies of path dependencies, organisational ideologies, and the particular economic, political and social conditions in place in a moment of time. Indeed, the extent to which subject positions, personal histories and emotional dispositions influence or determine responses from practitioners facing role conflicts or challenges to established ways of working have served to temper elements of 'relational' boundary spanning narratives by 'bringing back in' agency. Dickenson and Sullivan (2014) thus underline how actors engaged in collaboration are in constant negotiation over meanings and demands, with elements of 'fixity' being asserted and re-interpreted amidst demands for relational 'fluidity' and flow, in a process which importantly may or may not lead to the 'embedding' of practices.

However, we argue that the recognition of time as context and situated agency only partly addresses the temporal deficit in standard explanations of boundary spanning. It grasps the rigidity of boundaries that are tightly anchored in space and time, bringing out the contingency of efforts to boundary span. But importantly, it ultimately continues to assume that such fixity of boundaries can be overcome or 'managed out' by the skills and capabilities of officers such that fluidity prevails. In our view, such predominant assessments thereby fail to engage fully with the constitutive function of boundaries and the complexities of recognising them as part of the reproduction of the very spaces and regimes of practices across which local actors move; in other words, standard accounts of boundary-spanning lack a 'thick' account of temporality.

Boundaries, it goes without saying, bring 'things', objects, identities or organisations together. But in keeping with a 'thick' account of temporality, they also separate 'things' from others, masking over difference by drawing lines between 'what is and what is not' or 'who is and who is

not.' Unity, or appeals to unity, do not therefore emerge out of the shared recognition of some common 'essence'. Rather, they are constructed and reproduced in opposition to an 'other', a constitutive outside that represents that which a 'thing' is not (Howarth, 2000, 2013). Organisations, partnerships, and collaborations are thus marked by relational and more or less closed boundaries, such that saying that a 'set of closed boundaries exists is logically equivalent to saying that a social thing exists' (Abbott, 1995: 860). Such boundaries will always be exclusionary, open to challenge and opposition from those forces or 'outsiders' excluded from particular spaces or regimes. The drawing of boundaries is a political act which installs particular regimes of practices or brings 'things' into being (Howarth, 2000, 2013). Sedimenting and reproducing such boundaries is thus central to the 'endurance' of entities, and the legitimacy of the relationships that they bring into being' (Abbott, 1995: 873–4; see Quick and Feldman, 2014). In other words, remaking boundaries demands the political re-articulation of the categories and practices at the origins of regimes of governance. Failing to recognise this constitutive function risks, we suggest, reproducing a temporal deficit, while downplaying the complexities of chief officers' experiences of space and time in their everyday practices, as well as the potential limits on their efforts to boundary span. It is to such complexities that we now turn, focusing our attention on movement as a lens through which to problematise how chief officers 'think spatially'.

## Analysing movement

Capturing how chief officers 'think spatially' is not without its challenges. Privileging any specific spatial lens, be it the 'local', the 'patch', the 'neighbourhood' or the 'ward', inevitably delivers a narrow or incomplete grasp of the work of chief officers in the complex relational landscape that constitutes local government. Indeed, we resisted such temptations. Rather, our study starts with movement, which we suggest offers a novel way of seeing or capturing the spatial and temporal dynamics between 'flow' and 'fixity' and how they are experienced. On the one hand, it embodies flow as it draws our attention to the displacement of actors, ideas, policies and objects from one temporal-spatial arena to another. But, on the other hand, it also underlines the significance of fixity, for as Adey (2006: 86) argues, movement is always contextualised in that 'there has to be some kind of holding, some friction for things to happen'. Actors leave or flow from one contextualised space to another, drawing up their anchors in one arena only to drop anchor as they arrive and embed themselves or 'settle' in a new context, before they are on the move once again. In other words, movement necessitates the detachment or 'deterritorialisation' of actors from one space or temporality and their attachment and 'reterritorialisation' to another (Schiller and Urry, 2006). 'Thinking spatially' is, we thus suggest, pivotal to such politics.

In what follows, we examine how such movement is experienced by agents, paying attention to the 'concrete' practices of chief officers as they move across different spaces and temporalities (Mayer, 2008). We draw upon a series of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of chief officers across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that were conducted by the authors. These interviews were complemented with two workshops which were organised by the Association of Directors of the Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport and attended by 46 chief officers. These workshops, as we explain below, were used as a way to test more broadly the emerging themes from our in-depth interviews. Finally, a desk-based literature review of academic articles, policy briefings and position papers was undertaken to surface and map current thinking on the role of public managers, skills and competences of local government officers and the broader public sector workforce. The fieldwork was conducted before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were designed to capture the perceptions of officers of their everyday work, generating an arena in which officers could voice, and reflect critically on, their daily working practices

and routines in the context of austerity. We focused on teasing out how officers have experienced (or not) change in their work, questioning the relevance of established ways of working and how far new demands are challenging the established craft of local leadership and stewardship. Put alternatively, through the interview schedule we interrogated the demands of the multiple arenas and governance logics that populate the local government landscape, investigating the skills and capabilities required by officers to move across these arenas and harness different logics. We did not specifically ask questions on movement, rather this focus emerged inductively from the interviews and our coding of the data generated.

All interviews used a standardised topic guide and were audio recorded. They were coded according to a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies. In the first instance, a set of deductive codes breaking down the everyday work of officers was deployed to manually process the interview data (namely skills and capabilities; forms of labor; relational management; personal identity; and activities and challenges). Emerging themes and exemplary transcribed statements were then shared across the research team. In order to tease out differences of interpretation and allow for critical reflection across the team, themes and statements were discussed collectively in face-to-face meetings. A second round of coding was then undertaken, applying a set of inductive codes (namely, space; time; and narrative). Finally, to test emerging findings, members of the research team subsequently ran two workshops for chief officers, where participants were presented with the emerging findings and asked to comment on how they reflected (or not) their own working practices. These practitioner comments informed a further round of critical reflection by the team on its own interpretation of the data.

Before turning to our analysis of such working practices, let us say a few words about our conceptualisation of ‘chief officers’. Over the years, titles and job descriptions change, as do the status and authority given to such titles, morphing and evolving across political and organisational contexts. This has significant implications for how we talk about ‘chief officers’. On the one hand, when we refer to earlier studies and debates, we have to be aware the title ‘chief officer’ carried with it a whole set of assumptions at the time and take these into account in our analysis. On the other hand, we need to be transparent about what we mean by ‘chief officers’ in our own study. This is perhaps easier said than done. The title of ‘chief officers’ can sometimes be used to refer to ‘chief executives’, while that of ‘senior managers’ might refer to chief officers and chief executives at one and the same time. For clarification, in this study, we use the term of ‘chief officers’ to denote the second tier of officers who sit ‘below’ the office of the chief executive.

Typically, we are referring to directors, members of the senior management or leadership team, who sit at the head of cross-cutting directorates or departments such as ‘place and regeneration’ or ‘community services’. These officers, we suggest, sit firmly within the strategic apex of the authority, with outward-looking responsibilities to make sense of the shifting context, threats and opportunities facing the authorities. They are often the privileged interface for elected members. Yet, at the same time, they anchor and steer such strategies within departments, with responsibilities to co-produce and translate strategies into practice across ‘their’ directorates. In short, chief officers are the lynchpin between the strategic apex or the ‘joint executive’ of elected members and senior officers, and the middle-line management in local authorities. We thus focus more on function than on title in the analysis that follows.

## **Movement and the everyday worlds of chief officers**

### *Across spaces of governance*

In their everyday experiences, chief officers, as our study underlines, move from one interaction to another, crossing into and out of what they characterise as clearly delineated spaces of governance.

As one chief officer explained, ‘on a typical day I have leadership roles across the council, corporate meetings; I chair various bodies within and outside the council; I have to carve out time to do ward walks [...], then governance related meetings [...] for example with the combined authority, but also meetings with partners we deliver services with.’ Indeed, the demands of such mobility led one officer to consider one of the primary challenges of everyday practice to be determining ‘which guise are you speaking in.’ Similarly, another officer pointed to the demands of adapting ‘into’ multiple spaces and different logics, underlining the tensions he experienced in leaving partnership meetings and the ‘talk’ of collaboration only to enter a competitive funding meeting with the very same partners. In such conditions, chief officers were required, it was widely acknowledged, to recognise strategically that ‘it is ok to be in different teams. It is not monogamy. [...] You have to think about that, about how you are engaging’, while ‘at the same time still remembering what you’ve got on at the ranch agenda.’

In fact, chief officers repeatedly drew attention to the perceived informality and ambiguity of the new collaborative arenas in and out of which they were increasingly moving. Typically, one officer pointed to the fluid demands and relational skills of such collaborative spaces, foregrounding the pressures to move in different contexts from performing ‘leadership’ through to ‘diplomacy’ and on to ‘helping others to take the lead’. Another who defined himself as ‘quite risk-orientated’ declared that traditional formal practices of accountability and delegation did not match the demands of these new emergent cross-boundary structures. Given his attitude to risk, he admitted that he was ‘happy to drive things forward’ if decisions matched the general direction of travel of the authority and to seek post hoc informal endorsement by the leaders of his council. He continued that ‘you can do a lot in collaboration without making a formal decision.’ In fact, moving across such collaborative spaces, officers argued, was best understood as working with loosely defined ‘fragments’ rather than stable organisational arenas. Officers, it was argued, ‘need [in such contexts] to think a bit differently: how do we deal with fragments? Wherever there is a ragged edge, focusing on that [...] to position [ourselves] wherever there is a noise and a gap.’

The challenges of moving at the ‘edge’ of institutional practices were amplified, and indeed constituted, by the fragmentation of the strategy apex of local councils. Traditionally, the strategic apex of the authority acts as the decision-making arena of councils where chief executives, political leaders and chief officers make sense of the shifting policy environment and the current and future demands facing the authority. Yet, for a number of chief officers, this strategic apex was no longer situated narrowly ‘within’ local authorities. Rather, it existed across different arenas as a hybrid construct of multiple spaces encompassing a wide range of different forums from city-region and local enterprise partnership boards to newly created combined authorities, city and devolution deals, service boards, and partnerships with other private and public actors. As one officer elaborated: ‘we have had to create structures within the council to bring people together to assist them to understand the shifting landscape, so we are developing policy, strategies, initiatives...[while] checking in that it aligns with what others are doing.’

Seen through the lens of movement, such claims foreground how as officers moved across governance spaces, other actors, policies and projects moved around them. Indeed, such dynamics foregrounded their capacities to provide coordination or perform as a nodal actor across the authority. For a start, they increasingly sat at the head of what we might call ‘super-directorates’, hybrid organisational spaces that amalgamate to greater and lesser extents an array of services and functions across a wide breadth of portfolios and policies: one officer declared that ‘everything that isn’t adult and children’s services falls into my directorate’ whilst another stressed that ‘if you take away adults, children and financial resources, I am responsible for everything else.’ In fact, the very job titles of chief officers typically reflect this widening of responsibilities and remits, occupying, as they do, posts entitled ‘director of place’, ‘director of resources’, or ‘director of service delivery’. As such, one of the key tasks for officers was moving across these competing professions and cultures

while reproducing the boundaries that hold them together in the so-called super-directorates that increasingly populate local government.

### *Across the strategic and the operational*

The cuts to senior management under austerity have increasingly led chief officers into what they saw as ‘firefighting’, called upon to resolve everyday operational issues of frontline service delivery. One chief officer neatly summed up the tensions in everyday firefighting, arguing that ‘because of cuts to senior management [...] because there is less capacity and more agendas, then you get drawn into more things (...) you often deviate from your normal job [...] so yes, there’s probably more firefighting than there should be.’ Typically, officers spoke of increasing demands to be ‘available’, or ready to respond to ‘emergency calls’ and ‘critical issues’ that could pop up at any time. Such firefighting has arguably narrowed the distance between operational and strategic issues, heightening the need to act strategically, and to foreground the strategic vision of the authority in everyday decision-making. For one chief officer, ‘lack of resources means that you can do less but actually it also pushes you to focus on what will have a real impact.’ In other words, in everyday practice, the responsibility of the chief officer to tie together the delivery of outcomes and the strategic vision of the authority has heightened, requiring chief officers to be ‘resolute... holding steady to values’ in their everyday decision-making. Indeed, one director remarked how on driving into work and spotting a fallen tree, she immediately telephoned the ground maintenance manager to report the incidence. But she added that ‘once upon a time, I would just have walked in the door and told somebody somewhere in the system that I’d noticed that a tree had been brought down. So, we are also doing the operational and technical stuff when we are also doing the strategic direction of the local authority.’

This compression of the boundaries between the strategic and the operational, a consequence of the demands of governing under austerity, has effectively ‘shrunk’ how chief officers conceptualise the temporal divides between what they perceive as the short, medium, and long-term. As with other professions, chief officers have indeed experienced the ‘shrinkage’ of time, due to expanding roles, duties and networks, as well as technological change which has accelerated the communication process. But, importantly, the immediacy of everyday decision-making has dissolved into the long-term, producing practices of what officers characterised as ‘strategic salami-slicing’. Part of the role of the chief officers has thus become ‘build[ing] confidence that focusing on the immediate is actually a way of building towards strategic outcomes... [so you have to] keep the focus on what you’re setting out to do while you sometimes deviate.’ But, this task, it was recognised, is hampered by the uncertainty produced by the very conditions of austerity that demand the folding of the strategic into the operational and so on. As one other officer put it, delivering the ‘here and now [at the same time as] the 20-year strategy’ poses a set of ‘intellectual challenges’. Importantly for our analysis, chief officers were thus moving across time, articulating novel temporal trajectories as they made sense of the demands of austerity, and traversed the strategic and the operational.

### *Moving across identities*

Chief officers repeatedly made sense of their work through a logic of periodisation, a logic which cannot be divorced from the reproduction of individual identities, roles and responsibilities. They drew boundaries between the ‘stages’ of their own careers or experiences, with 2010 and the imposition of austerity serving as a key line of demarcation in their careers. Indeed, austerity governance was repeatedly invoked by research participants as part of ‘what is in practice the new normal’. Typically, one chief officer thus drew attention to the provision of ‘completely different solutions, things that would have been unthinkable 8 years ago’, emphasising that ‘there are



alternative delivery models emerging in local government that you would have not seen or even imagined in the past.’ For this chief officer, local government has ‘been pushed so much to the edge [by austerity] that it has become a very dynamic business’, arguing that ‘when you’re close to extinction you’re at your most creative and innovative.’ Reproducing such claims, another argued that ‘austerity is here to stay. Over the years, it has pushed us [chief officers] to think differently focusing on a commercial perspective to compensate for government cuts.’ In fact, even one officer who foregrounded the continual change and policy churn throughout his career acknowledged the intensity of the demands of austerity, reflecting that he had experienced austerity as a set of ‘huge pressures, managing the delivery of cuts...adaptation in role of chief officers...yes, but it’s always been like that...no change, but [austerity means that it is] more intense.’

Importantly, chief officers consistently recognised the increasing public scrutiny of their role, arguing that ‘senior officers [are] under much more public scrutiny than in the past – from the media and through social media, from communities and from councillors.’ Cutbacks to local services, it was argued, demanded that officers invest more in communication and relationship building with local communities, perceived by officers as a need to make themselves more visible on the ground. In the words of one officer, given that ‘people in the community do not like the change brought in by austerity [...] it is even more important now that we [officers] are seen in the wards, I have to find the time for that, you have to be seen...to be out there.’ Yet, moving in and out of these arenas served to generate and increase the emotional labour of performing different ‘display rules’ of the multiple arenas into and out of which officers moved (Needham et al., 2017). Officers referred for example to being ‘stretched mentally’ by the ‘intellectual challenge’ to ‘balance out competing demands’, not least the ‘schizophrenic’ pressures resulting from working within ‘fuzzy’ networks and public meetings where officers can well end up ‘speaking against [their] own role’ in the interests of the collaborative good. As one officer typically underlined, there is ‘no time to work on the niceties’, or put alternatively, ‘there’s less time for small talk, so you have a range of partnerships, but time for actual relationships is limited and you have to make the most out of each meeting, getting on with business mainly because of other commitments...so many commitments, and the pressure of our diary.’

In short, reconciling contradictory rules and roles required officers to engage increasingly in ‘identity work’ as they tried to manage for themselves the contradictions between commitments to public services and the imposition of cutback management. One officer spoke of a ‘sustained onslaught’ which meant that in practice they were having constantly to ‘demonstrate their worth’, while others declared that ‘it’s not a job for the faint-hearted’ or reported that ‘those still standing know how to adapt and adjust.’ Under austerity, therefore, many of the everyday interventions of chief officers have been targeted at the ‘hard emotional labour’ of balancing the potential tensions between the public and private self. As one officer commented on his discussions with councillors: ‘it is just degrees of unpalatableness [telling councillors] you can have unpalatable, really unpalatable, or impossibly unpalatable.’ In recognising such dilemmas, we have to remember that chief officers enter different settings with their own identities, formed through their biographies, backgrounds and personal histories. The identities, both public and private, that officers bring with them into different arenas are thus in practice contingent elements of fixity which constrain the ease with which officers can adapt to ‘hybrid’ and contradictory roles and how these roles are enacted. As such, everyday practices of commercialisation and entrepreneurship were frequently re-articulated through appeals to the past municipalism socialism of authorities like Birmingham, with one officer describing the experience of austerity and the emergent discourse of the ‘new municipalism’ as a ‘rediscovery of self-belief’ that councils ‘still have muscle’. Indeed, such fixities of identity are arguably amplified by the compression of time under conditions of austerity and the need to build relationships and trust, while exercising leadership on the move.

## Discussion: Leadership on the move

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the work of chief officers is the multiplicity of spatial and temporal ‘worlds’ across which they move as they ply their craft. Chief officers exercise leadership on the move (Merriman, 2012). They are constantly crossing in and out of different geographies as they navigate the increasingly hybrid landscapes and temporalities that constitute what counts for local government. Such movement places significant demands on chief officers, requiring, as Ferguson (2008: 562) underlined in his study of social workers, the ‘intimate engagement by the (mobile) body with time and space, public and private.’ Even when residing in what might be seen as a particular ‘static’ workplace of council offices, chief officers do so in and through mobility, reaching out to other spaces through such mundane acts as sending an email to colleagues in other organisations.

Such findings of mobile agency arguably resonate with the fluidity of accounts of boundary-spanning. However, intertwined with patterns of movement across different spaces, our evidence underlines how officers experienced or moved across different temporalities. Chief officers lived the everyday in and through different tempos or rhythms (Jupp, 2020). On the one hand, they experienced multiple assemblages of time at play across different arenas, be it combinations of administrative time, political time, or activist time (Raco et al., 2008: 2655; Jupp, 2020: 5; Pollitt, 2008). On the other hand, the temporality of their everyday work was punctuated by accelerations, generated in part by the demands of austerity and the capacity of information technologies to ‘speed up’ the processes of decision-making and communication. Such accelerations were particularly experienced through the collapse of the boundary between strategic futurising and reactionary presentism. Officers were repeatedly experiencing the quickening pace of ‘leaping in’ to what we best characterise as the immediate and the present. In a logic of substitution, they intervened in, and at times took control of, a situation in the ‘now’ (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). Indeed, such interventions were widely characterised by officers as episodes of ‘firefighting’, which either backgrounded the strategic and the future or dissolved it into the present.

But, equally, our evidence surfaces how chief officers articulated temporal trajectories that reproduced the present in ways that re-assembled and connected it to the past and future (Jupp, 2020: 5). Nascent imaginaries of a new municipalism moved across time, serving as a temporal trajectory that connected practices of commercialisation and public entrepreneurship in the present to the alleged ‘golden age’ of Victorian municipalism while projecting a future vision of local government beyond austerity. Such temporal trajectories constitute (in part) the organisation of social, political, and economic life. As such, they were not dissociated from the feelings and emotions, identities and imaginaries connected to particular spaces or places (Jupp, 2020: 982). The articulation of such trajectories required chief officers to move from ‘leaping in’ to ‘leaping ahead’ whereby they ‘move’ into the future, opening and facilitating imminent possibilities and alternatives (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). As officers move across the multiple spaces of local government, they were thereby crossing in and out of different temporalities, experiencing different rhythms and tempos of work.

However, in experiencing such fluidity of movement across space and time, our findings also brought out elements of fixity in officers’ everyday experience of mobility. Officers repeatedly spoke of the constraints or fixities of moving into and out of highly sedimented spaces. Council meetings or cabinet committees were thereby experienced as being heavily staged and scripted, reproducing well-established ‘lead’ actors, players and audiences, as well as persistently offering ‘cues’ for particular forms of behaviour and ways of seeing (Hajer, 2005). In such instances, local officers arguably navigated such arenas by reproducing relatively settled or fixed identifications with objects, connections, and collectives. In contrast, in new locality partnerships or funding consortiums, staging and scripts were, as we have underlined, more fluid or emergent, highly political in that the rules of decision-making, and roles and membership of the arena, were in the process of being defined and remained more open to question and challenge. Indeed, as we have noted, chief officers repeatedly drew attention to the perceived

informality and ambiguity of the new collaborative spaces in which they increasingly operated. As such, 'being an officer' took on different demands and called for different performances all in a single day as chief officers navigated across multiple meetings and encounters, be it a 'ward walk', a chance conversation in the corridor of the town hall, the stylised performance of a full council meeting or the informality of an emergent collaboration.

In other words, 'thinking spatially' thus challenged officers to constantly situate themselves within different contexts, or to reflect on where they were speaking from as they moved in and out of arenas with sedimented or emergent rules, across more bonded or bridging networks of actors, and through different temporalities of the past, present and future. In the words of Jones (2009), 'occupied' or 'occupying' forces were mobilised in different political strategies and projects, such that the spaces and times of the world(s) of chief officers were experienced as a series of more or less compartmentalised micro-conjunctures of the bounded and unbounded. The navigation of such micro-conjunctures thus often rested on the individual agency of officers to identify opportunities for aligning and organising demands both within and between organisations (Jones, 2009; Van Duijn et al., 2022). But importantly, such political strategies were often 'superimposed over existing relationships and activities' (Jones, 2009: 500). Even as officers moved across the landscape of local government, they brought with them their own baggage of personal identities and commitments, which acted as anchors or fixities on the 'fluidity' of their worlds.

In fact, movement in and out of alternative conjunctures demanded a particular form of emotional labour as officers performed different rules and norms and calculated the strategic responses of other actors, while reconciling the potential contradictions between their public and private selves. At the same time, the political context of each arena militated against the expression or acting out of certain identities, whether it is through the fixities of acting as an 'officer' reporting to elected members or channelling actions as a 'spokesperson' for councillors and the authority in pluralistic collaborations. In such situations, the fluidity of space and time came up against the legacies or fixities of previous decisions and the interventions of other actors. Similarly, as they moved across different temporalities, embedded policy narratives of municipalism shaped their determination of the present and the future, while 'firefighting' drew them narrowly into the confines of the 'present'. And, finally, as continued evocations of the pressures of public spending cuts and top-down austere regimes betrayed, the movement and work of chief officers was often constrained or anchored in practice by the interventions of central actors (Van Duijn et al., 2022).

Against such fluidity and fixity, our evidence suggests that officers experience space and time in ways that resonate with understandings of 'phase space' (Jones, 2009). On the one hand, their worlds are the relational and emergent 'space[s] of the possible', but on the other, they are constrained by contextual and inherited practices of 'what is already occupying and occupied in spacetime in the present' (Jones, 2009: 489). Such configurations of 'occupying and occupied' forces were typically perceived by officers through the demarcation of boundaries, for it is the boundaries between spaces and temporalities that brings movement into being. Boundaries, be it cultural, temporal, or relational divided different governance spaces from what they were not, reproducing for officer lines of inclusion and exclusion that were a condition of the coming into being of their 'worlds' (Howarth, 2000, 2006, 2013).

What do such findings mean for accounts of boundary-spanning? And how we might begin to address what we have called its temporal deficit? To recap, we first underline the multiple temporalities that are to be spanned as actors move in and out of different micro-conjunctures. Each micro-conjuncture of the local is marked by a different 'now', a particular assemblage of the past, the present and the future (Jones, 2022). As such, officers do not simply have to contend with spanning spatial or organisational boundaries, they also have to traverse multiple temporalities. Second, we draw attention to the constitutive function of boundaries or the political work of boundaries. Boundaries demarcate in part an 'other', or a constitutive outside, drawing lines

between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Boundaries are thus always open to challenge from excluded forces. But, importantly for us, the constitutive function of boundaries also brings ‘things’ such as policy regimes and partnerships into being, masking over the differences between actors while forging identities in opposition to a shared ‘outside’. Such boundaries then become intrinsic to the very reproduction over time of the categories, identities and practice that characterise a regime of governance. They carry the past forward, such that ‘if a material space exists in a particular form, it is irrefutable that this has to have been constituted at some point in time, and that this time must have some bearing upon our present experience of it’ (Jones, 2022: 54); and we would add some bearing on the capacity of practitioners to shape and mould such boundaries.

In explicating this ‘thicker’ conceptualisation of time, we call into question predominant accounts of public managers as boundary-spanners, exposing the complexity and constraints upon their capacity to act as ‘orchestrators’ or ‘weavers’ of the multiple interests and identities at play across the multiple spaces of the local (see Mangan and Needham, 2014). We recognize that the movement of officers through space and time disrupts boundaries, for as officers move, they can bring different spaces, temporalities and indeed objects into novel relationships, mobilisations and assemblages (Merriman, 2019). Practices are never ‘static’ in the sense that each production of a practice is in some ways a re-production or reiteration of that very practice; it is never enacted in the same way twice such that boundary spanning always entails boundary making. But, importantly for our analysis, our recognition of the constitutive function of boundaries leads us to underline the political challenges of remaking boundaries, particularly where this requires the redundancy of those forces ‘occupying’ existing spatial and temporal realities. Such ‘remaking’ requires, we thus suggest, a moment of dislocation or the failure of ‘normal politics’ in which the fixity of the sedimented practices of micro-conjunctures and the boundaries that help to reproduce them can no longer accommodate the demands and identities of actors (Howarth, 2006). At such dislocatory points in time, it is the ‘crisis’ or the ‘bump, the accident’ that enables ‘explosive re-articulations’ of governance regimes and spaces (Jones, 2022: 52). In other words, the incremental progressive reworking of boundaries might well be a condition of ‘normal’ politics, but it is the failure or dislocation of ‘normal politics’ that is the necessary condition for the transformational remaking of boundaries.

In fact, given such temporal constraints on the capacities or opportunities to boundary span, we conclude that chief officers move through space and time as serial adaptors. They do not as much span boundaries as *adapt* to the multiple governance regimes constructed through boundaries, reproducing sedimented performances of governance and re-utilising existing sets of tools as they move from one micro-conjuncture to another. As they move and adapt, they are reproducing ‘worlds’ and with it generating incremental variations on the boundaries that constitute such worlds. But, the re-making of worlds or the redrawing of boundaries rests, as we suggest, on moments of dislocation; moments more closely associated by research participants with what officers termed to be the dislocatory ‘fragments’ and ‘noises’ at the edge of existing practices or the bringing into being of new spaces or new ways of working often in the legacy of failure. Like policy entrepreneurs, boundary-spanners spend much of their time waiting for ‘windows of opportunity’ to come along and open up the possibility to politically realign the boundaries of dominant regimes of practices across different micro-conjunctures (Kingdon, 1984).

Building on such characterisations and drawing further upon Howarth’s (2006, 2013) reworking of the insights of Ernesto Laclau, we can begin to re-interpret the agency of chief officers in navigating across the landscape of local government and boundary spanning. Indeed, we reposition experiences of the interplay between fixity and fluidity as that between order and dislocation, or between space and time. Space, our evidence suggests, is best characterised by regularity or the repetition of sedimented social practices that fixes or orders the identities and relations between actors and objects. Temporality is the opposite of regularity, conceptualised as the dislocation or

rupture that exposes the contingency of all spatial orders (Howarth, 2006). Such dislocation or the ‘failure of normal politics’ occurs when events cannot be accommodated or symbolised by an existing discursive order. At this moment, new ways of seeing can come into being as actors engage in the political practices of spatialization, seeking to suture over the disorder of ruptures (Howarth, 2000, 2006, 2013). Such understandings align spatial practices with repetition and the reproduction of boundaries, and political practices with dislocation, spatialisation and the drawing of boundaries. In ‘acting spatially’, officers are thus capturing rules and norms and reading the scripts of particular spaces or arenas, while reproducing boundaries. In ‘acting politically’, during moments of dislocation or the failure of ‘normal politics’, they are (potentially) remaking or transforming boundaries.

## Conclusions: The politics of serial adaptation

At the beginning of her novel, *Piranesi*, Susanna Clarke creates the world of the House, in which endless halls stretch out across the three floored building in which the tides of the ground floor rush into the middle floor, the domain of birds and the protagonists of the novel, a floor which is bathed in the mist and clouds of the upper floor. Each hall contains a different mixture of statues, physical challenges and environmental needs and risks. Travelling to one hall, requires moving through and to another, in a particular sequence, which has to be learnt, noted and remembered, for as Piranesi informs us in the closing pages of the novel, ‘in my mind are all the tides, their seasons, their ebbs and their flows [...] all the halls, the endless processions of them, the intricate pathways [...] I close my eyes and I name a particular vestibule to myself; then I name a hall [...] I note with precision the doors I must pass through, the rights and lefts that I must take, the statues on the walls that I must pass.’ (Clarke, 2021: 7).

In this study, we have in many ways underlined how the work of chief officers moving across the landscape of local government increasingly resembles Piranesi’s navigation of the labyrinth of the House. Tiers of governance or floors intersect, and wash into each other, multiple arenas or halls abound. Much of the everyday work of chief officers, rests on grasping the complex context(s) of local governance, knowing for example the sequencing of different arenas, and predicting movements of policies and the interventions of other actors. Indeed, like Piranesi, the officers in this study spend their day on the move, encountering the challenges of different halls or arenas, projecting past legacies of tides and statutes into the present and future, and engaging and calculating the actions of the Other who intermittently shares their space. In other words, officers move through spaces of possibility that are constrained and reproduced by contextual realities, although as Piranesi’s conversations with the Other reveal, these are realities that can be assembled in different ways and can at times be ruptured.

As such, this article has critically identified and evaluated a temporal deficit within standard accounts of boundary-spanning. Examining the movement of officers across the local landscape, our evidence demonstrates the need to further accommodate movement across multiple temporalities into explanations of boundary-spanning. More importantly, where the temporal dimension of boundary-spanning is considered, it is often reduced to context and situated agency. Rather, we call for a ‘thicker’ account of time which we associate with the constitutive function of boundaries. In making such claims, we do not deny the work of officers as boundary spanners but rather we seek to counter the current over-investment in visions of senior public managers as weavers of different narratives, metagovernors, or holders of different geographies (Mangan and Needham, 2014). Such narratives arguably reproduce a managerialist quest to impose a form of consensual singularity or overarching coordination on the hybrid landscape of local government (see e.g. Kickert et al., 1997). But, in so doing, they downplay an alternative set of everyday practices, in which local officers operate as serial adapters, with limited opportunity to remake boundaries. On the contrary, they might not join-up spaces or bring them together; officers may well live with the everyday rupture

and disassociation of the different spaces and temporalities reproduced and brought into being by boundaries. In fact, predominant claims for officers to develop the ‘organisational ambidexterity’ (Burgess et al., 2015) to act as ‘weavers’ or ‘orchestrators’ of the public purpose may well put increasing pressures and expectations on local government officers; expectations which require them to act in ways that for a lot of the time, they simply cannot.

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