Researching City Government Innovation Capacity through Qualitative Deep Dives: Conceptual and Methodological Foundations

City Government Innovation (CGI) Capacity Deep Dives
Scoping Paper (Version 2.0), March 2026

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Abstract. This paper lays the conceptual and methodological foundations for the CGI Capacity Deep Dives, a four-year qualitative research programme aimed at understanding and strengthening the innovative capacity of European city governments. The paper makes three main contributions. First, it develops a preliminary conceptual framework that distinguishes between individual-level competencies, organisational-level capabilities, and system-level conditions as interrelated but analytically distinct dimensions of city government innovation (CGI) capacity. Second, it reviews and synthesises literature on case study methodology, organisational ethnography, and peer research, arguing that immersive, participatory qualitative methods can uncover the tacit, cultural, and relational dimensions of innovation capacity that conventional approaches struggle to reach. It makes the case for a multi-sited ethnographic approach that traces the circulation of CGI ideas, practices, and frameworks across different urban contexts, and addresses the ethical challenges and practical risks inherent to these methods. Third, it sets out a research programme structure centred on a pilot year in which these methodological approaches are being tested with three European cities, using varying configurations of ethnographic and peer-led research. A summary of early pilot-year activity is provided in the appendices.

Acknowledgements. This paper was prepared under the umbrella of the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative, based at LSE Cities and funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Harvard Urban Research Conference: 2025 Evidence for Problem Solving, 13-14 November 2025. This paper has been revised considering feedback from the conference and with a greater focus on our proposed research methodologies and structure. The authors would like to thank the following colleagues for their support during the first phase of the deep dive research: Savvas Verdis, Philipp Rode, Sudeep Bhargava, Estelle Broyer, and Matt Reynolds, along with interlocutors at the Harvard conference.

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1 Introduction

Contemporary cities face highly complex, urgent and ever-changing challenges that demand that city governments adapt and innovate, developing and deploying new skills, technologies, structures, partnerships and methods of communication and engagement.

Yet adaptation and innovation do not tend to come easily to modern city governments, which, like other public sector organisations, are also expected to obey bureaucratic norms and diligently follow rules, manage risks, control expenditure, circumscribe responsibilities, and minimise space for discretionary action.

It follows that city governments "must not only be innovative; they must also create the right conditions for innovation within and across systems" (OECD 2017). They need to build up their capacity to try out and develop new ways of doing things (Mayne et al., 2020). At the same time, while public innovation, particularly at the national level, is now a well-developed field of study (OECD 2015), research on city government innovation (CGI) and particularly CGI capacity is less developed.

The CGI Capacity Deep Dives programme aims to answer the question of how city government innovation capacity is developed, activated and sustained in European cities, while generating practical insights that can help city governments and their partners strengthen this capacity. The ambition is to uncover how European city governments understand, build, and deploy their innovation capacity and how this evolves over time and across multiple sites within and beyond city halls. This will include identifying key enablers and barriers to the development of CGI capacity and gaining a more nuanced understanding of how individual competencies, organisational capabilities and systemic cultural and political factors interact to shape CGI capacity.

This work will also explore how CGI capacity is diffused across the city government sector - including through inter-city learning networks, capacity-building programmes, and shared frameworks. By pioneering novel research methods, it also aims to advance methodological knowledge about how qualitative, participatory, and ethnographic approaches can be combined and adapted for studying complex organisational phenomena in public sector settings.

Against that background, this paper develops a conceptual framework for CGI capacity in terms of competencies (individual-level factors), capabilities (organisational-level factors), and other systemic factors, and their relation to each other and to actual innovation.

It then sets out our methodological foundations and proposes a plan for an ambitious four-year programme of CGI Capacity Deep Dives based on multi-sited ethnographic and participatory case study research. The paper will be divided into three parts and aims to answer the following conceptual, methodological and research design questions.

Conceptual framing

- How should we understand CGI capacity, what shapes it and who has influence over it?
- How does it relate to city government innovation and to neighbouring concepts, e.g. public sector innovation capacity, dynamic capabilities?

Research methodology

- What can immersive qualitative research, especially ethnographic and peer research, contribute to the study of CGI capacity and what is the current state of literature around the use of these methods?
- What can we learn from earlier qualitative research in this field, both in terms of methodologies and more substantive insights?
- How can our immersive and participatory methodologies navigate the challenges of multi-sited and comparative qualitative research?
- What are the risks in the research methods we are proposing and how can we manage them?

Research structure

- What are the benefits of a pilot year and how should it be designed to allow us to test the viability of these novel methods while still generating valuable empirical insights?
- What should be the overall structure and design principles of a multi-year research programme based on these methods?

All qualitative research must navigate tensions between theoretical framing and empirical work in the field, and this study is no exception. Conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives can be invaluable for orienting and structuring fieldwork. Yet researchers also need the flexibility to respond to empirical material that might not neatly fit those frameworks. More than this, empirical material can fuel abductive analysis that shapes the formation of new theory or re-constructs (rather than confirms) initial theoretical propositions (Tavory and Timmermans, 2012; Burawoy, 1998). The conceptual analysis presented in the first section of this paper is not offered as definitive, then, but as a provisional guide or heuristic framework for our fieldwork.

2 Conceptualising city government innovation capacity

Rather than proposing an entirely new definition of CGI, we seek to extract the core components of existing frameworks, examining their points of convergence and divergence. Our goal is a conceptual framework that is capable of operating across multiple scales – from individual officers through the city administration as a whole, to the broader institutional environment – while remaining sufficiently flexible to incorporate insights from the ethnographic fieldwork and peer-research we will conduct with participating cities.

2.1 Working definitions of CGI and CGI capacity

Our understanding of CGI follows that set out in Rode and Anheier (2025).

They in turn follow (OECD/Eurostat 2018) in identifying three key characteristics of city government innovation: (1) novelty: "innovations introduce new approaches, in the context where they are introduced", (2) implementation: "innovations must be implemented, not just an idea", and (3) impact: "innovations aim at better public results, including efficiency, effectiveness, and user or employee satisfaction" (p14).

Rode and Anheier define CGI as:

> *the intentional creation, development and implementation of novel ideas, processes, policies, services, technologies or governance models by city and urban governments that aim to improve urban value and where possible lead to efficiency and effectiveness gains. In this context, novelty refers to what has not been done before in a given context (geography, policy domain or otherwise) or is something that is perceived as such by people in the city.*

Effective and sustainable CGI is generally understood to involve progression through a series of stages, e.g., problem identification, ideation, testing, implementation and diffusion, each of which demands its own more or less distinct expertise (*The Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle* 2020).

Likewise, scholars have distinguished various types of city government innovation. Rode and Anheier (2025) identify six CGI 'action types': 1) democratic and civic innovation 2) administrative and organisational innovation 3) finance and procurement innovation 4) digital and data innovation 5) policy and regulatory innovation 6) service innovation.

Based on the above, we understand *CGI capacity* as the capacity to generate and sustain CGI. While city government innovation refers to the creation and reconfiguration of city government activity, CGI capacity refers to the resources, structures, capabilities and expertise that city governments can mobilise to generate innovation. A city government committed to increasing its innovation capacity might typically consider creating an innovation strategy, establishing the position of a Chief Innovation Officer, setting up or investing in an innovation team, introducing staff innovation or challenge prizes, introducing training in innovation methodologies or promoting an organisational culture that supports creativity and experimentation. LSE Cities' 2024 report *Public Innovation: Building capacity in Europe's city governments* offered a snapshot, based on surveys and short case studies, of how European cities are seeking to build up and apply their innovation capacities (da Cruz et al. 2024).

As Rode and Anheier set out (2025), CGI capacity can be understood as a part of a larger logic model of city government innovation. This capacity is shaped by an array of upstream antecedents, such as the powers and resources available to city government (a function of national, international and regional legal and fiscal regimes), population size, socio-economic and cultural characteristics, and the size, wealth, constitutional design, electoral rules and leadership model of the city government – factors over which city governments have no or very limited control. City government innovation capacity in turn shapes city government actions which in turn shape city government outputs, outcomes and impacts.

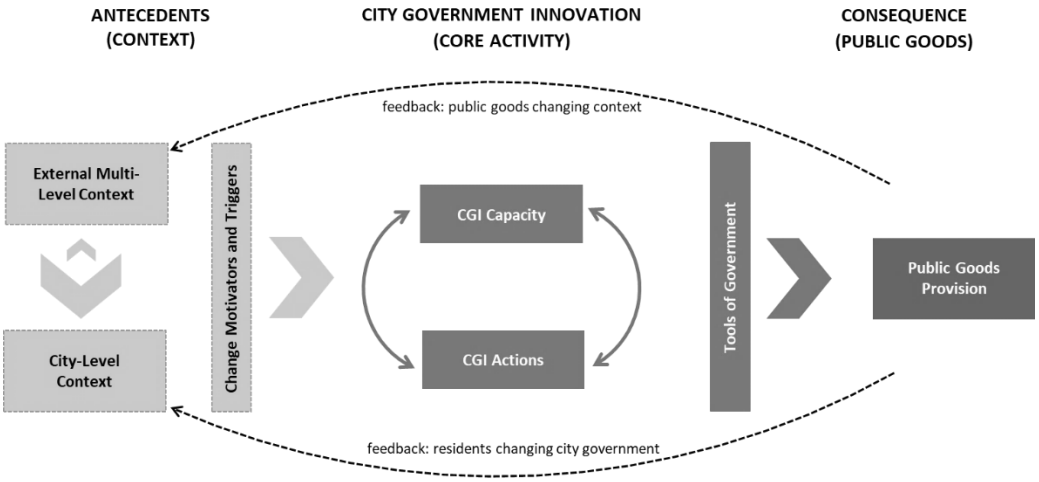

Figure 1: Innovation capacity in overall logic chain
Source: Rode and Anheier 2025

We can also situate CGI capacity in relation to other public sector or city government capacities, such as leadership, strategic foresight, data, partnership, or delivery capacity, raising questions about relations and trade-offs between these.

2.2 Towards a conceptual framework of CGI capacity

As we have pointed out, CGI involves a city government intentionally developing new approaches to help achieve its objectives and improve things. But what enables this ability? Why are some city governments able to innovate more easily than others?

We see CGI capacity as working at three different scales: that of **competencies**, **capabilities** and **soft power** and **resource capacities.**

We define CGI competencies as characteristics such as the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and mindsets that **individuals** need to perform innovative tasks. These characteristics are reminiscent of Weberian style "bureaucratic quality" focused on civil servants and their "professionalism", "merit and competence', "bureaucratic talents and skills" (Mayne et al., 2020) as well as of the extensive literature on "public service motivation" (LeGrand, 2010; Ali et al., 2021). Most competencies (like data literacy, design thinking or foresight techniques), can be developed and sustained through education and training, tested through exams and certified through the awarding of certificates, degrees and other qualifications, though some, such as commitment and probity, cannot be taught so easily

CGI capabilities refer to **organisational-level** characteristics: the capacity of a city government to mobilise internal and external competencies and resources through repeatable action patterns that support innovation. They draw on state capacity literature and traditional bureaucratic qualities, particularly the "structures" and "recruitment and promotion processes" (Mayne et al., 2020) that enable governments to hire and retain critical competencies. But they also encompass the organisational routines, processes, and physical and digital infrastructures that allow governments to deploy these competencies effectively (Kattel et al., 2025a). Strong CGI competencies are necessary but not sufficient for strong capabilities. For example, a city's ability to co-produce services with citizens depends not only on staff skills but also on conducive cultures, structures, rules, roles, meeting places, technologies, processes and incentives.

Finally, **systemic conditions** refer to the financial and other resources and soft and hard powers that a city administration can reasonably direct toward innovation. These **systemic conditions** are connected to factors of authority, scale, and context that are often discussed in the literature on public sector innovation (Wegrich, 2023). Strong CGI competencies and capabilities are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a city to have strong CGI capacity (da Cruz et al., 2024). For example, a small municipality can have competent staff (with the right knowledge and skills) and the capabilities (the right organisational structures processes and support systems) for participatory budgeting but may lack the capacity to run a participatory budgeting process effectively (e.g., not enough staff time or financial space given other demands, not legally allowed to do it, or not enough critical mass of committed residents). City governments have limited control over system-level power and resources, many of which are under the command of higher tier regional and national authorities. The powers and resources that a city can direct to innovation are also affected by other demands being made on it. Nevertheless, cities do have some powers – particularly tax powers and "soft powers" - that they can use to support innovation. A city can choose for instance to direct more or less of its budget, or more or less mayoral attention, to building innovation capacity.

The overarching conceptual framework is summarised in Table 1. For a more detailed discussion of the analytical dimensions of CGI capacity see Appendix A.

Table 1. Conceptual framework: CGI competencies, capabilities and system-level conditions. Source: authors.

Concept	Level	What it consists of	What it enables	Example
CGI competencies	Individual	The skills, knowledge, and dispositions that allow leaders and public servants to perform innovative work (e.g., problem-framing, collaboration, adaptive learning, experimentation)	Enable individuals to conceptualise problems, generate and test ideas , and work across boundaries	A planner trained in design thinking who reframes mobility issues from a user perspective
CGI capabilities	Organisational / collective	The routines, processes, structures, collaborative arrangements, and resource configurations (e.g., dedicated funds, specialised teams, protected time) that mobilise internal competencies and external expertise for innovation	Enable systematic development, testing, and scaling of new solutions	An innovation programme with a ring-fenced budget and cross-departmental routines for experimentation and co-production
CGI systemic powers and resources	Systemic	The sustained powers and resources that a city administration can direct toward novel solutions (given its legal powers, resource base, political support, reputation, and competing demands)	Enables prioritisation, continuity and scaling of innovation over time, even amidst shocks and pressures	A city able to keep running innovation pilots despite new budget constraints and political turnover

3 Advancing qualitative research into CGI capacity

A growing body of research uses qualitative research methods to illuminate the workings of CGI. As scholars of urban governance, policy and politics have long recognised, qualitative methodologies have a range of advantages:

- Enable researchers to investigate complex phenomena in-depth and in their real-life context.
- Go beyond identifying statistical patterns or correlations to answer explanatory, “why” and “how” questions about behaviours, experiences and social processes.
- Permit flexibility in research focus and methods: qualitative researchers adjust their theories, methods, questions and thematic focus over time, making them well-suited for exploratory work or understudied topics.
- Help to generate new theories and hypotheses grounded in real-world data, which can then inform future quantitative testing or policy development.
- Allow for triangulation by combining insights from multiple sources of data (e.g. interviews, surveys documents, archival records, observations)
- Fill in research gaps, where quantitative data is unavailable (e.g. not collected, not sound or gone missing)

Whilst many of these strengths have been evidenced in the recent wave of qualitative case studies of CGI, we argue that immersive and participatory qualitative methodologies have as yet been underexplored. The CGI Capacity Deep Dives programme proposes to study city government innovation capacity through in-depth qualitative case studies, using a combination of organisational ethnography and peer research. These two methodologies stand out from less immersive qualitative

approaches given their foundational commitment to participatory, reflexive and open-ended research practice.

Our approach is informed both by longstanding methodological traditions of case study research and by ethnographic and participatory methodologies that are only recently gaining traction in research on public administration and urban governance. While distinct, ethnographic and participatory methods share a commitment to understanding complex organisational phenomena from the inside and in context. Indeed, as Eisenhart (2019) has argued, the boundaries between these approaches are increasingly "entangled", with shared ambitions of learning from lived experience, prioritising participants' perspectives, and co-producing knowledge**.**

Below we examine the relevant literatures underpinning case study methodologies, ethnography and peer research, identify their respective strengths and limitations for the study of city government innovation, and highlight methodological gaps and tensions that the Deep Dives programme is positioned to address.

3.1 Introduction to case study research

The case study has a long and well-established history as a method for studying complex, context-dependent phenomena in the social sciences. Yin (2017) defines it as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are never clear. This definition is apt for the study of city government innovation, where the capacity to innovate is shaped by an interplay of organisational, political, institutional, and cultural factors that cannot easily be separated from the contexts in which they operate.

Methodological approaches to case studies are diverse and motivated by contrasting epistemological stances. Yin's (2017) approach, rooted in a more positivist tradition, stresses systematic research design, construct validity, and the use of multiple sources of evidence to establish rigorous, replicable findings. However, case studies have also been approached via more constructivist and interpretivist orientations. Stake (1995) argues that the value of a case study lies not in its generalisability but in its capacity to illuminate the particular in ways that resonate with other contexts. He emphasises the researcher's interpretive role in constructing meaning, viewing knowledge as co-produced through the interaction between researcher and context rather than extracted from an external reality. This constructivist turn draws on Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description," the dense, layered interpretation of social action that attends not merely to behaviour but to the webs of meaning within which it is embedded.

Stake (1995) distinguishes between intrinsic case studies, undertaken because the case itself is of interest, and instrumental case studies, in which a case is examined to provide insight into a broader issue or refine a theoretical proposition. The Deep Dives programme embodies both orientations: each city is of intrinsic interest as a unique governance context, but the comparative theoretical and practical ambitions of the programme (elaborated in Section 4) ensures that each case also serves an instrumental purpose in building theory and policy insight about CGI capacity more broadly.

Flyvbjerg (2006) mounted an influential defence of case study research, arguing that strategic selection of cases can yield insights that are both theoretically generative and practically relevant. He also argued that case studies are particularly valuable in fields where theory is underdeveloped, precisely because they allow researchers to attend to complexity and nuance that more deductive methods must abstract away. This resonates with Edmondson and McManus's (2007) concept of "methodological fit", which holds that nascent fields with under-theorised variables are best served

by qualitative, exploratory methods that allow theory to emerge from close engagement with empirical phenomena.

3.2 Use of case studies in the public sector innovation literature

Within the specific domain of public sector innovation, the case study has been a well-established approach for some time. De Vries, Bekkers, and Tummers (2016) conducted a systematic review and found that while case studies were the most common method, they were often descriptive rather than analytical, and rarely cumulative, with each study tending to develop its own framework rather than building on previous work. They called for greater methodological rigour and conceptual consistency, a call that the Deep Dives programme's shared conceptual framework (distinguishing competencies, capabilities, resources, and power) is designed to answer. Notably, their review does not mention the use of either ethnography or participatory research approaches. A more recent systematic review by Criado et al (2025), examining 169 articles about public sector innovation between 2001–2021, found that just 6% used “field studies” as a data collection method (e.g. direct observations or ethnographic techniques).

Public sector innovation scholars have deployed diverse methods in their case studies, sometimes combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to triangulate findings (Rule 2024). However, they have often relied primarily on interviews and document analysis. For example, Borins (2014) uses these to examine patterns of innovation across multiple jurisdictions, developing typologies of innovation types and drivers. His work demonstrated the value of studying multiple cases (see Section 4) but also the limitations of less immersive methods: case studies based primarily on interviews and documents tend to capture the official narrative of innovation more readily than the informal, contested, and often messy processes through which innovation unfolds or fails to unfold.

While many short case studies of CGI have been produced to support teaching (e.g. Case Centre ND), illustrate policy reports (e.g. OECD 2019; da Cruz et al. 2024) and highlight emerging practice (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, ND), the use of immersive qualitative methods remains much less developed. A recent scoping review conducted by LSE Cities as part of the CGI Observatory analysed 240 articles about CGI and found that 63% used qualitative methods (33.8% applied to single case studies and 29.2% to comparative/multiple case studies). Yet more immersive approaches are rare: only four paper abstracts mention ethnography or related terms, and none mention participatory or peer research methods.

In response, we propose a more open-ended, whole-of-government approach, which moves beyond the “best practice” case to methods that illuminate in depth the conditions under which CGI capacity emerges, and is subsequently developed, diffused, and sustained across city halls.

3.3 Introduction to organisational ethnography

Ethnography can be described as a social practice dedicated to the study and representation of culture involving immersion in the life situations of others to understand their everyday interactions and experiences (Wacquant, 2003). Organisational ethnography applies this immersive approach to organisational settings, seeking to "capture the complexity of organisational life" through sustained engagement with the people, routines, culture and environments that constitute an organisation (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera, 2018, p. 219). Rather than studying organisations primarily by assessing formal structures, processes and policies, it attends to how they are enacted through everyday practice, informal norms, and cultural meanings.

Ethnography is a broad discipline, but certain features mark it out, especially in contrast with more positivistic traditions of social science. Ethnographic research tends to focus on everyday lives, on the point of view of the insider, and on the symbols, narratives and culture which help make sense of social structures and practices. Ethnographers generally seek to develop a close, empathetic view of their research participants and, increasingly, engage them as co-producers of their research.

Ethnography is often assumed to involve deep, long-term immersion in a community far removed from that of the ethnographer. Yet practice has evolved considerably, particularly in response to globalisation and shifting ethical and epistemological expectations of research (Faubion and Marcus 2009). Rhodes (2014) notes that ethnographic practice had become increasingly varied, encompassing team-based research, shorter-term immersion, mixed methods, and fieldsites close to home. He makes a case, in light of this, for "genre blurring" between ethnography and public administration, arguing that ethnographic attention to everyday practice, insider meaning-making, and narrative could enrich a field dominated by positivist and managerialist traditions. Schatz (2009), in his edited volume *Political Ethnography*, demonstrated the value of immersive methods for understanding how power operates in political institutions, arguing that ethnographic immersion reveals dimensions of political life (informal norms, emotional dynamics, performative behaviours) that surveys and interviews alone cannot access. Aronoff and Kubik (2012) argued for a "convergent approach" between anthropology and political science, suggesting that the methodological boundaries between ethnographic and case study research had become increasingly artificial.

McGranahan (2018) has influentially reframed ethnography less as a set of specific methods (participant observation, field notes) and more as a cultivated "ethnographic sensibility": an orientation toward attentiveness, reflexivity, and openness to emergent phenomena – an orientation helpful for the study of city government, where deep long-term immersion may not always be feasible.

3.4 The case for ethnographic research into CGI capacity

We identify three notable advantages of ethnographic research into CGI capacity.

First, ethnographic immersion uncovers tacit knowledge and situated practices that shape city government innovation (Cappellaro, 2016; Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2019; Huby et al, 2011). It is particularly suited to exploring phenomena that are supressed, ‘awkward’ or ‘difficult to talk about’, such as capacity weaknesses and innovation failure or the role of power dynamics, hierarchies of status and power, emotions (Stempel 2025) and ‘performative governance’ (Ding 2020) in enabling or hindering innovation. Innovation strategies, plans and initiatives are issued from the top of city government and are expected to cascade down whereas ethnography is traditionally written from the bottom up. This also means that ethnography is well positioned to understand the vital and under-researched question of why innovation capacity sometimes fails to translate into improved outcomes - including the role of perceived barriers, competing commitments, and bureaucratic defensive routines (Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Argyris, 1990).

Second, it allows the research to be responsive to the evolving needs of city government, increasing its relevance to and potential impact on the practice of city government innovation.

Third, ethnography is rooted in ongoing critical reflexiveness, which means that researchers aim to constantly evaluate their positionality in relation to the field site, assessing how it influences the research, and engaging research participants in frank discussions of methodological expectations, limitations and progress (Ruess & Müller, 2024; Wigren-Kristoferson & Aggestam, 2021).

Ethnographic studies of CGI could thus foster strong relationships between researchers and city government officials that are critically engaged, ethically sensitive, and open space for participants to actively engage in the research process and learn from it.

3.5 Organisational ethnography and CGI in practice

A small but growing body of studies has begun to apply ethnographic or ethnographically informed methods to city government settings, employing diverse approaches from rapid ethnography in a single municipality (Sonnier & Grit, 2022) to multi-city comparative work across five international cities (Wetzstein, 2021), and from mapping an entire city's public arena (Andion, 2023) to focusing on a single team's innovation processes (Turner, 2022). Below we set out some of the key themes emerging from this literature to illustrate the kinds of insights that ethnography can generate.

At the level of administrative capacity and bureaucratic practice, Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2019) emphasised the importance of attending to informal rules, workarounds, and everyday "practical norms" that shape how officials actually behave, as distinct from official procedures. Cappellaro (2016), in a systematic review, found that while ethnography was gaining traction in public management research, relatively few studies focused on local government specifically. Huby, Harries, and Grant (2011) argued that ethnography is particularly well-suited to uncovering the messy realities of service delivery that quantitative approaches tend to smooth over.

Turning to innovation strategies and organisational change, Sonnier and Grit (2022) demonstrated that meaningful ethnographic insight can be generated within compressed timeframes through their study of a circular economy mission in a Dutch municipality. Kvartborg Vestergaard and Schmid (2026) conducted a nine-month ethnography of two CGI initiatives in Amsterdam's Sustainability Department, tracing forms of "institutional activism" that politicised institutional work by exposing action and inaction as deliberate choices, fostering new subjectivities among civil servants, and generating effects beyond Amsterdam. Brorström and Norbäck (2022) studied the City of Gothenburg, revealing how innovation-oriented language can be adopted performatively without transforming underlying practices, a finding resonating with Ding's (2020) concept of performative governance. This raises a deeper question about whether innovation capacity can be said to exist if it has not produced observable outcomes (Mayne et al., 2020).

On hierarchy, culture, and everyday practice, Van Dorp (2017) showed how the craft of Dutch city management involves constant negotiation between political imperatives, administrative norms, and professional judgement, with tensions bearing directly on the capacity for innovation. Wigren-Kristoferson and Aggestam (2021) explored how gender dynamics within a Swedish municipality shape who is recognised as innovative and whose ideas gain traction.

Ethnographic research has also illuminated the emotional and psychological barriers to innovation. Some constraints are structural and tangible (legal restrictions, fiscal limitations, political opposition), but others are perceived, exaggerated, or constructed. Kegan and Lahey (2009) theorised "competing commitments," whereby individuals hold sincere commitments to change while simultaneously maintaining hidden commitments to the status quo. Ethnographic methods are well-suited to detecting these dynamics because they involve sustained observation of what people actually do rather than what they report doing. Stempel (2025) argued that affective dimensions (frustration, enthusiasm, fear of failure) play a significant but under-acknowledged role in shaping policy processes.

Finally, several studies (Van Dorp, 2017; Brorström & Norbäck, 2022; Huby et al., 2011) point to a fundamental tension between innovation, which requires risk-taking and tolerance for failure, and bureaucratic norms of accountability, consistency, and risk minimisation. Whether city governments can create durable structures that support inherently non-routine activity without those structures becoming bureaucratic fixtures that stifle the creativity they were designed to enable is a question that existing ethnographic research has begun to surface but not yet systematically addressed. The literature on innovation labs and similar forms (Tonurist, Kattel & Lember, 2017; McGann, Blomkamp & Lewis, 2020) documents their proliferation but offers limited ethnographic evidence on how they function once initial enthusiasm subsides.

3.6 Introduction to peer research

Peer research can be understood as a variant of participatory action research (PAR) (Wadsworth, 1998; Stoecker and Falcón, 2023) that involves the communities affected by research in the design and delivery of it (Lushey, 2019). In peer research, a group of research participants take on formal role as co-researchers. These peer researchers can be actively involved in all stages of a research process, from co-designing research questions and methods, to carrying out research and collaborative analysis and co-producing research outputs. This process is usually guided by core ethical principles such as power sharing and mutual respect, maximum involvement of peer researchers at every stage, and informed decision-making (Hamilton-Jones et al., 2025). To ensure this last principle, build the skills of peer researchers, and assure the quality of the research, peer research projects usually include training on research design and methods.

The roots of participatory action research can be traced back several generations to scholars like Kurt Lewin (1946), Paulo Freire (1970), and Orlando Fals Borda (1987), all of whom argued that knowledge production should be a collaborative process that simultaneously generates understanding and builds the capacity of those involved. Lewin's dictum that ‘if you want to understand a system, you must try to change it, captures the PAR tradition's conviction that research and action are inseparable, and that the people closest to a phenomenon are indispensable partners in understanding it. PAR supports social learning through interactive and group dynamics (Armitage, Marschke and Plummer, 2008), a quality that makes it particularly well-suited to settings where capacity building is an explicit goal alongside knowledge production.

Roche, Guta, and Flicker (2010) identified two common models of peer research in practice: the "advisory model," where peers offer guidance to academic researchers, and the "employment model," where peers are hired as researchers within academic-led projects. They also identified a third, more ambitious "partner model" in which peer researchers collaborate as equal partners or co-leads across all stages of the research process. These models exist on a continuum and decisions about where to position a peer research project on that continuum are context-dependent and have significant implications for the depth of engagement, the quality of data, and the degree to which the research genuinely redistributes epistemic power.

3.7 The case for peer research into CGI capacity

Drawing on this literature and on emerging practice, three principal contributions of peer research to the study of CGI capacity can be identified.

First, peer research prioritises the knowledge, experience, and needs of city hall staff, recognising the expertise of city government officials themselves in understanding the daily workings of CGI (Baum, MacDougall and Smith, 2006). Peer researchers within a city government can draw upon

their own direct experience when deciding which research questions, methods, and analytical framings resonate best, strengthening the contextual embeddedness of the research design and generating insights that less tailored approaches might miss (Billups, 2021). Many will already possess considerable research expertise, acquired through formal academic training and practical experience in their roles, enabling them to be contribute as equal partners or co-leads across all stages of the research process (the "partner model" identified by Roche et al., 2010). This is not only an ethically principled approach, reducing the power imbalances that can characterise relationships between academic researchers and their subjects, but also a practically feasible one given the research competencies many city officials already possess.

Second, peer research generates unique insights from the "insider" perspectives of peer researchers, attuned to the nuance of local city government cultures and worldviews. Peer researchers benefit from direct access to data, formal and informal meetings, and the trust of colleagues, access that is often restricted for external researchers. This insider position enables them to observe and interrogate dynamics that an outsider might not recognise as significant: unspoken hierarchies, informal networks of influence, and the gap between what is said in official meetings and what is discussed in corridors. City officials may be more open with colleagues than with outside observers (Buffel, 2018), and this access advantage is particularly important for research concerned with the tacit, relational, and cultural dimensions of innovation capacity.

Third, peer research helps peer researchers develop new skills and understanding, both of research methodologies and of CGI capacity itself. Trowbridge (2025) found the investment in training municipal teams to be especially valuable; Campos et al. (2015) found that participatory approaches had a lasting impact on the planners and policymakers involved. In this way, peer research can contribute to capacity-building programmes like those supported through Bloomberg Philanthropies' city leadership initiatives. Having peer researchers embedded in city halls not only helps sustain the impact of findings beyond the research's formal conclusion (something Buffel (2018) found in peer research with elderly people) but also ensures that skills in research and critical reflection live on in the administration. The research process, in this sense, is itself a form of capacity building.

3.8 Peer research and CGI in practice

In its contemporary form, peer research has been most extensively developed and applied in health, social care, and community development contexts, where it typically involves training members of marginalised or under-represented communities to conduct research with their peers (Lushey, 2019; Buffel, 2018; Roche, Guta and Flicker, 2010).

City governments, and governments in general already ‘study themselves’ by conducting or commissioning research to reflect on and evaluate the performance of policy programmes or new institutional arrangements. However, the application of peer research to city government settings - where the "peers" are municipal officers rather than marginalised community members - represents a relatively novel approach.

Several recent studies have engaged city governments through PAR methodologies aligned with peer research - Trowbridge (2025) invested significant time in training municipality teams to deliver participatory futures activities and found this to be especially valuable, while Campos et al. (2015) found that a participatory approach had a tangible impact on the spatial planners and policymakers involved, who expressed the intention to replicate it within their own institutions. However, the only recent example of peer research with city government officers conducted

explicitly as part of a peer research process appears to be our own work on youth engagement around the green transition with Islington Council in London (Hamilton-Jones et al., 2025).

3.9 The relationship between ethnography and peer research

Textbooks on social science methodologies will typically present ethnography and peer research as two distinct approaches. But although they have emerged from different traditions and have contrasting priorities, they have much in common (Eisenhart, 2019). Both are inherently participatory in ethos: many ethnographers see their work as co-produced with their research participants, some even referring to them as "co-researchers." Both aim to learn from lived experience and prioritise the perspectives and interests of participants. Both are committed to reflexivity - to ongoing critical examination of the relationship between researcher and researched - and both resist the positivist assumption that the researcher can or should occupy a position of detached objectivity.

These shared commitments mean that ethnographic and peer research approaches can be productively combined in a single research programme, with ethnographic sensibility informing the way peer research is conducted and peer research's commitment to co-production enriching the ethnographic process. The Deep Dives programme's ambition to conduct peer research "in an ethnographic spirit" reflects this convergence, seeking to combine the access and insider knowledge that peer researchers bring with the analytical depth and critical reflexivity that characterise ethnographic inquiry.

4 From comparative case studies to multi-sited ethnography

A core ambition of the CGI Capacity Deep Dives programme is to study multiple cases, analysing the evolution of CGI concepts and practices across diverse European contexts and over time. Rather than adopting the comparative case study methodology often privileged in studies of CGI across multiple cities, we engage principles of open-ended, collaborative comparison inspired by multi-sited ethnography.

4.1 The case for multi-sited ethnography

The field of CGI has been largely shaped by single case studies of cities, policies, and governance innovations. Where comparison has been pursued, scholars have often drawn on comparative case study methodology as theorised by George and Bennett (2005), founded on structured, focused comparison in which the same set of questions is asked of each case. However, as Ragin (1987) noted, the logic of comparative analysis sits in tension with the interpretive depth that makes individual case studies valuable: the more tightly structured the comparison, the more the researcher must impose pre-specified categories on the data. This tension is a recurring theme in multi-site qualitative research (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014), and scholars of urban governance have similarly argued that formal quasi-scientific comparative methods drastically restrict the scope of comparing, and that comparative concepts should remain open to revision as they emerge through the research process itself (Robinson, 2016).

In light of this, we take inspiration from multi-sited ethnography, theorised most influentially by George Marcus (1995). Where comparative case study research (associated with scholars such as Yin (2017) and Lijphart (1971)) treats sites as discrete units to be held up against one another, multi-sited ethnography moves across multiple sites of observation, allowing researchers to follow connections, conflicts, and circulating ideas, letting the terms of comparison emerge through sustained engagement. Marcus (1995) argued that this allows researchers to trace the circulation of

meaning, power, and practice in ways that case-comparison forecloses. Holmes and Marcus (2008) went further, arguing that ethnographic comparison should be reflexive and collaborative, with analytical categories shaped by the comparative work that informants themselves perform, responding to longstanding critiques of comparative urban studies lacking reflexivity (Dembski et al., 2020; Nijman, 2007).

An especially productive development has been the convergence of multi-sited ethnography with Shore and Wright's (1997) concept of "studying through," which follows a policy as it passes through multiple institutional layers, attending to how meaning transforms at each juncture. Wedel et al. (2005) elaborated this into an "anthropology of public policy," while Shore, Wright, and Però (2011) further developed the framework, showing how policies construct subjects and normalise particular rationalities across sites. Multi-sited ethnography has also been brought into dialogue with the "policy mobilities" literature in human geography (McCann and Ward, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2010), which examines how urban policies travel between cities, carried by consultants and policy experts. McCann and Ward argued that such circulation is never mere diffusion; policies are actively reassembled in new contexts. Ethnographic work in this tradition has examined the global spread of Business Improvement Districts (Ward, 2006), participatory budgeting (Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012), and New Public Management reforms, tracking not just where a policy travels but how it is narrated, translated, contested, and selectively adopted.

4.2 Approaches to the pre-selection of case studies

While Marcus's framework presents pre-selected sites as incompatible with multi-sited ethnographic work, more recent scholars have taken a different direction. Falzon (2009) acknowledged that many researchers identify sites in advance on theoretical grounds, even if connections between sites are not fully known at the outset. The key distinction is between the *logic of selection* and the *logic of analysis*: sites may be chosen in advance, but the ethnographic commitment is to remaining open to unexpected connections.

In research on public administration specifically, multi-sited ethnography often involves sites selected in advance (a ministry, a regional office, a front-line service) because the institutional architecture is known before fieldwork begins. What makes it multi-sited and ethnographic rather than comparative is the commitment to tracing how meaning and practice transform across these these sites as the researcher follows them. Shore's (2000) fieldwork on European Union institutions exemplifies this: he moved between Brussels bureaucracies and national contexts in a way partly pre-structured by the institutional landscape yet remained ethnographically attentive to informal practices that policy documents alone could not reveal.

Ethnographic case study selection takes diverse forms, from Flyvbjerg's (2006) widely adopted concept of the "critical case" to Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, which, although ethnographic and attentive to connections between local sites and broader social forces, involves theoretical pre-structuring closer to the case study tradition. Alternatively, Candea (2007) argued that bounded fieldsites should be approached as partial and incomplete windows onto complexity, and that case study selection can therefore be an explicitly "arbitrary" starting point for ethnographic inquiry.

Our own approach to case study selection in the first year of the programme is guided by a combination of theoretical propositions and practical factors (see 6.3 for a full discussion). While we focus in this first year on cases that allow us to test the viability of our research methods with city governments that we know and which have a reputation for innovation, we will review the approach to selection for subsequent years, aiming to build a multi-year multi-sited ethnographic engagement that follows evolving concepts and practices of CGI across diverse European cities.

4.3 Challenges, risks and ethical considerations

Conducting ethnographic and peer research in city governments raises important methodological, ethical, and practical challenges that the Deep Dives programme must navigate carefully. Both ethnography and peer research were originally developed to study or empower marginalised communities, and their application to city government settings inverts the usual power dynamics: research participants are not individuals gaining voice through research but professionals who already exercise considerable, though varying, authority and whose accounts carry institutional weight (Nader, 1972). This "studying up" context gives rise to a distinctive set of risks.

For ethnographic research, these include the difficulty of gaining and sustaining access to the back-stage spaces where decisions are actually made (Rhodes, 2011; Gains, 2011); the risk of co-optation, whereby the researcher becomes an instrument of the institution's self-presentation (Yanow, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1997); the management of politically sensitive data (Smyth and Holian, 2008; Waddington, 2004); the challenge of distinguishing institutional performance from everyday practice (Goffman, 1959; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013); and the "repatriation problem" of returning critical findings to institutions that extended trust and access (Van Hulst, 2008).

These risks are compounded in applied settings where the imperative to produce actionable outputs must be balanced with ethnography's commitment to open-ended, critically reflexive inquiry (Chambers, 1985; Hammersley, 1992; Hansen, Holmes and Lindemann, 2013). For peer research, additional challenges arise around assuring that peer researchers are adequately trained (often over a short period of time) to carry out ethical and high quality research (Lushey, 2019), as well as role conflicts (Roche et al., 2010), the risk that practitioners conflate research with evaluation (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014), and the "familiarity problem" of critically examining dynamics one is embedded in (Mercer, 2007). For a full discussion of these challenges and our strategies for mitigating them, see Appendix F.

5 Research programme structure

Having developed conceptual starting points and made the case for the value that ethnographic and peer research bring to the study of CGI, the final part of this paper describes how we propose to apply these in a multi-year research programme exploring city government innovation capacity in European cities.

Our plan is to undertake three deep-dive case studies a year, giving us 12 cases over the current four-year research cycle. There will be an element of aggregation each year as we select and research three new case studies, but also evolution as we build on findings from one year to another, refining our theory, questions and hypotheses and developing multi-case insights. Though each case study will begin with a year of intensive research, we propose to track developments in case study cities over following years to explore how innovation efforts evolve, dissipate, strengthen or diffuse over a longer time period and in relation to efforts in other cities.

The relatively large number of cases, combined with continuous higher-level tracking of activity, will enable us to draw broader conclusions about the sector-wide evolution of CGI capacity. This will allow us to build a richer understanding of how changes within individual cities influence CGI capacity across European and other urban contexts, particularly in terms of how learning from the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Programme and similar programmes is shared and taken up. In this respect, the multi-sited ethnography we are proposing will generate insights into macro-level patterns of inter-city connections, translations and learning.

Figure 3 illustrates the proposed structure of the programme, with dotted lines denoting the interplay between theoretical framing, research design, and fieldwork. Given our commitment to multi-sited ethnographic practice, this interplay will unfold as a constant iterative process of refining theory and research design in light of cumulative findings across the 12 cases (Figure 2). The programme will generate a range of outputs, including methodological and empirical academic publications aimed at strengthening the scientific foundations of city government innovation, as well as policy outputs tailored to city governments and their supporters. For a full list of planned outputs for 2026, see Appendix B.

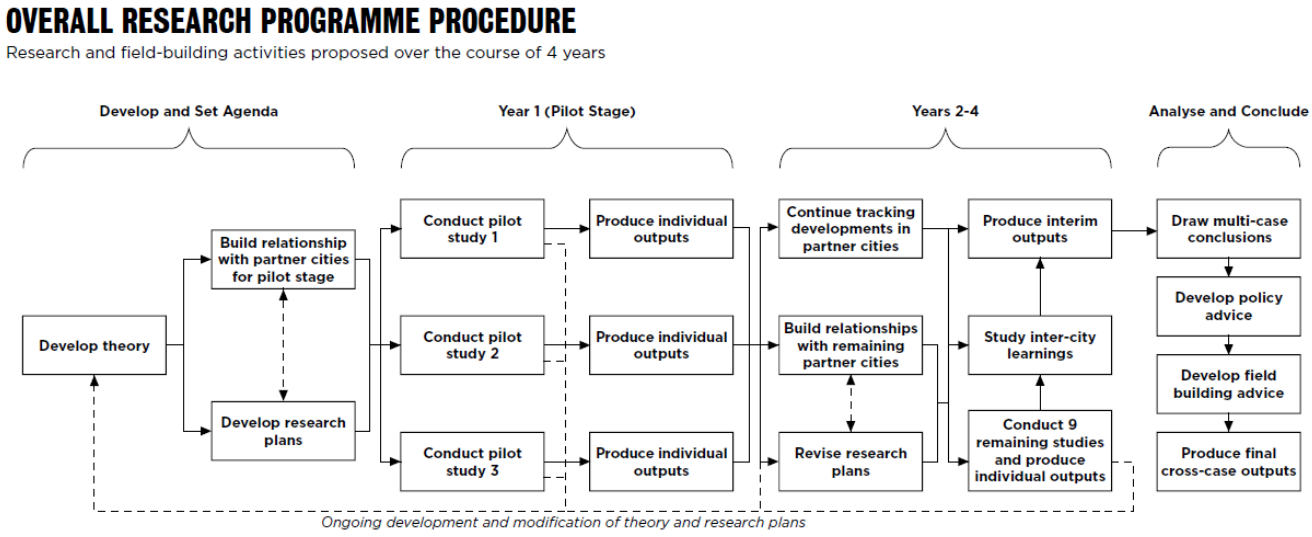

Figure 2: Overall Research Programme Procedure, adapted from (Yin 2017)

5.1 Guiding research questions

Our work is guided by an overarching research question: *How is city government innovation being developed, activated and sustained in European city halls?*

The case studies will explore a range of more specific research questions. In the ethnographic and participatory spirit of this project, these will be adjusted and refined continuously throughout. In cities where we are employing peer research approaches, questions will also emerge through collaborative work with the peer research team. For an illustrative overview, see Appendix C.

5.2 Year 1 – Piloting new methods

We propose to treat our first year (running to autumn 2026) as a pilot or exploratory year, allowing us to refine our theories and frameworks and test the viability of three related but distinct research approaches (described further in Section 6.4).

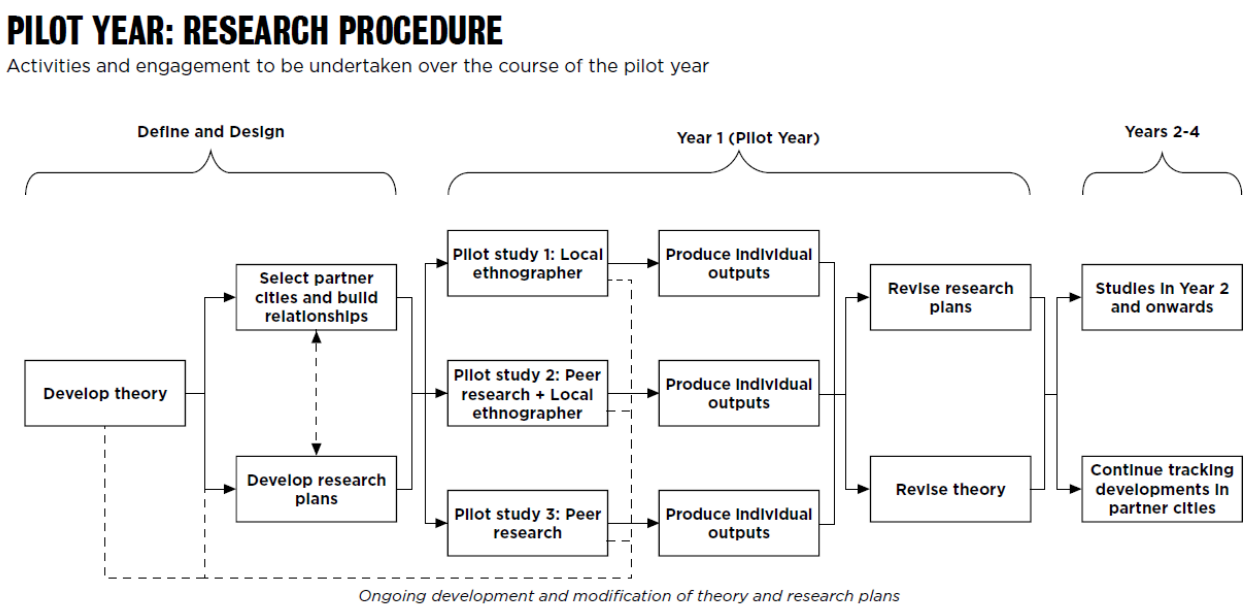

Figure 3: Pilot Year Research Procedure, adapted from Yin (2017

5.3 Case study selection during the pilot year

The primary purpose of a pilot is to test and refine the feasibility of novel research methods before applying them to a wider and more diverse set of cases (Yin, 2017). During this pilot year, we have therefore selected cases based on criteria that may differ from those used in future years. See Appendix D for an overview of the selection process and cities chosen.

Our selection was guided by two central principles: feasibility and conceptual coherence.

First, our priority was to ensure that it would be feasible to pilot our proposed research activities. . Both peer research and ethnography depend critically on sustained access, trust, and the active cooperation of participants (Rhodes, 2014; Buffel, 2018). In light of this, we selected cities where the research team has established relationships and which possess the organisational capacity and senior-level commitment to support intensive collaborative research. We also introduced a competitive application process in which potential cities submitted an Expression of Interest to ensure significant appetite and capacity from the outset. While the pilot year privileges feasibility, subsequent years may adopt a more emergent approach to selection that is prompted by the questions that arise during our initial year of research or follows the circulation of CGI ideas and practices across sites.

Second, we aimed to select cities with prior exposure to CGI as conceptualised in the first part of this paper. Any multi-sited ethnographic exploration requires an entry point, and we identified our theoretical propositions about CGI (outlined in the first part of this paper) as this. By selecting three cities that have all engaged with established capacity-building programmes related to CGI (such as the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative or the Bloomberg Innovation Challenge), we ensured that a similar conceptualisation of CGI had been encountered in all three. This conceptualisation and the practices it inspires serve as our entry point and a promising object of analysis to "follow" as it evolves through diverse contexts and over time. Moreover, studying cities that have engaged in similar programmes allows us to begin exploring the longer-term effects of capacity-building on CGI competencies, capabilities and resources.

Beyond these criteria, and our desire to include cities from diverse regions of Europe, our selection was somewhat "arbitrary" (Candea, 2016). We will review the approach to case selection for subsequent years as part of our evaluation of the pilot year, retaining elements that prove successful but also remaining open to a different approach to case selection. For example, we could continue to follow cities which have had exposure to CGI capacity building programmes (e.g. engaging alumni cities from the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Programme). Alternatively, we could base our selection of the next three cities on the findings and questions which emerge over the course of this pilot year. Apart from retaining a necessary degree of focus on feasibility, we are committed to not pre-determining our approach to pre-selection as we develop our multi-year multi-sited ethnographic engagement across Europe.

5.4 Methodological approaches during the pilot year

As outlined in the table below, all three pilot cases will adopt a broadly ethnographic approach. However, each will be led by a different researcher or research team: one by a local ethnographer external to the municipality; and two that will test different approaches to peer research: one relying exclusively on peer researchers from within the municipality and one where we will trial a mixed approach of combining peer-research supported by a local ethnographer. Piloting these differing combinations will allow us to assess the strengths and limitations of ethnography and peer research, so that we can incorporate learnings into years 2-4 of the programme.

Table 2: Proposed pilot year research methodologies

	City 1: Local ethnographer	**City 2: Peer research**	**City 3 Peer research + local ethnographer**
Research lead	Ethnographic research led by local researcher	Peer research led by a team of researchers assembled from across the city government	Ethnographic peer research led by team of researchers assembled from across the city government and supported by local ethnographer
Role of LSE	Supporting a local ethnographer	Training and guiding peer researchers	Training and guiding peer researchers and supporting local ethnographer
Strengths and opportunities	- Professional and academic expertise - 'In confidence' access to senior leaders and others who might be less willing to speak openly to peer researchers	- Insight into the everyday experience of building and sustaining CGI from within city government - Building capacity and networks among innovation officers	- Combination of strengths and opportunities of City 1 and City 2 - Local ethnographer available to support the peer research process on the ground
Challenges and limitations	- Difficulty in external researcher accessing personnel, meetings, data, etc. - Limited capacity- building impact	- Peer researchers unable to focus on research due to conflicting demands. - Limited access to senior personnel	- Combination of challenges and limitations of City 1 and City 2 - Risk of confusion about who is leading the research, and divergence between the ethnographic and peer research focus

- Risk of exploitation of time and expertise of city government officers

We take the risks and ethical considerations inherent to this work very seriously and have received comprehensive sign-off for our proposed methods and overall research design for the pilot year from the LSE Research Ethics Review Board, which we will continually review as the programme progresses. See Appendix E for an overview of how we propose to address specific risks related to this pilot year.

6 Conclusions

This paper has established a conceptual and methodological basis for studying city government capacity and laid out a high-level research plan for the next four years. This kind of preparatory work is important in orienting our proposed research and clarifying its aims. But we are keenly aware that the most demanding, interesting and illuminating work lies ahead, in the field.

The study of city government innovation capacity through immersive qualitative methods remains a young and fragmented field. The case study, organisational ethnography, and peer research literatures each offer valuable resources for this inquiry, but they have rarely been brought into dialogue with one another in the specific context of municipal governance, either in Europe or elsewhere. Although qualitative case studies are a widely used tool for studying CGI, the existing literature demonstrates the value of more participatory and context-sensitive methods for uncovering the tacit, cultural, and relational dimensions of innovation capacity that both quantitative and survey-based methods as well as more traditional case study methods (e.g. interviews in isolation) struggle to reach.

As with any innovation, this research approach is not without its risks, with the literature identifying challenges related to comparability, access, reflexivity, and the management of competing epistemological commitments. The Deep Dives programme's pilot-year will be critical to ensuring that the proposed approaches are feasible and scalable over the four-year programme, and that they can generate insights that are considerably richer than more traditional methods.

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8 Appendices

Appendix A: Analytical dimensions of CGI capacity

Below we examine the three components of CGI capacity in more depth.

Competencies

Table A1 offers a breakdown of competencies and higher order innovation skills as well as their analytical dimensions.

Table A1. Breakdown of CGI competencies and higher order innovation skills. Source: Rode and Anheier (2026)

CGI competencies	Description	Analytical dimensions
01 Leadership and strategic competencies	Enable translating ideas into viable and impactful actions.	1.1 Urban value thinking – knowledge and mindset that enables prioritising the creation of urban value 1.2 Opportunity recognition – ability to spot unmet needs, pressure points and emerging trends 1.3 Resource mobilisation – ability to identify resources and knowledge of resourcing opportunities 1.4 Risk assessment and decision-making – knowledge of decision-making approaches that consider innovation potential, risks and feasibility 1.5 Change leadership – ability to motivate and guide others through innovation processes
02 Collaborative and co-creation competencies	Enable integrated governance and policy coherence.	2.1 Multilevel and vertical coordination – knowledge and skill to connect across levels and tiers of governance 2.2 Boundary spanning and horizontal coordination – knowledge and skill to connect across policy domains, disciplines and cultures 2.3 Co-creation and facilitation – ability to guide group ideation and decision-making 2.4 Conflict resolution – ability to manage tension constructively 2.5 Design thinking – ability to understand user and stakeholder needs
03 Communicative and media competencies	Enable clear messaging and the right choice of narratives and channels.	3.1 Political communication – ability to craft and deliver messages that effectively navigate political contexts 3.2 Strategic communication – ability to design and deliver communication that aligns innovation goals with policy priorities and clearly explains the purpose, value, and direction 3.3 Change communication – skill in crafting messages that support organizational culture change, reduce resistance, and build buy-in for new approaches, tools, and mindsets. 3.4 Storytelling & narrative development – competence to tell value-focussed, compelling human-centred stories that clarify benefits and inspire support. 3.5 Risk & crisis communication – skill in communicating uncertainty, addressing concerns, and managing sensitive or high-risk issues related to innovative policies, technologies, or experiments. 3.6 Digital and data-informed communication – ability to use digital channels, platforms, visualisations and analytics to communicate innovation work in accessible, transparent, and user-friendly ways.
04 Technical and methodological competencies	Support analysis, experimentation, agile management, digital and data literacy	4.1 Research literacy – knowledge and skills required for designing and interpreting qualitative and quantitative studies 4.2 Prototyping and testing – knowledge, skills and mindset enabling rapid development and evaluation of ideas 4.3 Digital literacy – knowledge and skills required for using digital tools to design, simulate, or collaborate 4.4 Data analysis and evidence use – knowledge and skills required for interpreting data to guide innovation 4.5 Project design and agile methods – ability to structure iterative, learning-based projects

Higher order innovation skills	Description	Analytical dimensions
A Cognitive dimension	Supports ideation, problem-solving, and original thinking	A1. Deep domain knowledge or domain-relevant skills (expertise) - domain-relevant skills are the person's repertoire of knowledge, technical skills, and special talents in the focal domain that enable high-quality work and constrain what is feasible/appropriate. A2. Divergent thinking (idea generation / alternatives) - ability to generate multiple possibilities (idea fluency/originality) by exploring information in varied directions. A3. Convergent thinking evaluation (selection/refinement) - ability to evaluate the alternatives/ideas generated and refine them against feasibility and appropriateness criteria (selection/retention). A4. Cognitive flexibility - ability to shift representations, explore multiple perspectives, and reorganize associations A5. Executive control for creative thought - creative thinking recruits interactions among memory, attention, and cognitive control systems
B Intrapersonal dimension	Shapes motivational, affective, and dispositional capacities enabling individuals to initiate, sustain, and recover creative work across its stages.	B1. Intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement - the ability to initiate and sustain creative work. Essential in stages requiring exploration and novelty (problem finding and idea generation B2. Persistence - capacity to persist through ambiguity, iterate, and complete work B3. Affect regulation - ability to maintain or shift affective states that support (a) exploration and idea generation (e.g., curiosity/interest, approach-oriented positive affect) and (b) evaluation and implementation (e.g., tolerating frustration, managing anxiety during scrutiny), thereby sustaining engagement across stages. B4. Resilience - ability to persist, bounce back, and flourish when faced with stressors/the capacity to recover quickly from negative events, extract learning, and re-engage in problem solving, protecting the continuity from idea generation through championing and implementation B5. Tolerance for ambiguity - ability to maintain engagement and make reasoned decisions when information is incomplete, goals are contested, and outcomes are uncertain B6. Risk taking independence - the capacity to act autonomously and challenge prevailing assumptions by testing novel approaches, with a balanced willingness to take responsible risks and learn from setbacks
C Interpersonal dimension	Governs an individual's capacity to operate within and across social and organisational contexts to develop and champion ideas.	C1. Psychological safety (interpersonal risk taking) - the sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career C2. Boundary spanning (mobilising external ties/resources) - ability to establish and leverage external relationships to obtain information, resources, and support for idea development and implementation C3. Political skill - capacity to read social situations, tailor communication, and influence stakeholders to secure buy-in and coordinated action for an idea C4. Collaboration skills - ability to coordinate interdependent work through information sharing, mutual adjustment, and constructive conflict management to sustain joint problem solving C5. Shared problem framing - ability to align interpretations of the problem (goals, constraints, success criteria) so that collective work proceeds from a common representation

Capabilities

Capabilities in the public sector usually means the routinised ability to do something reliably: repeatable practices that deliver services or implement policy under certain rules and conditions

(e.g., processing permits, running procurement, collecting municipal waste). Mayne et al. (2020) explain that 'problem-oriented governance' capabilities are different to 'traditional' (or Weberian) capabilities. They state that "[w]hile Weberian administrative qualities are crucial for realizing an accountable and responsive public sector, they are insufficient for addressing complex public problems" (p. 41) – that is, they are not what city governments need if they want to go beyond what has always been done. Kattel et al. (2025b) define their dynamic capabilities similarly. According to these authors, they are different to – or at least a special set of – regular 'organisational routines', which are focused on the day-to-day business of running a city government (e.g., dealing with 'tame' problems). While not exclusively focused on innovation, the ability to adapt and find new solutions to complex urban challenges is a central objective of dynamic capabilities (Kattel and Mazzucato, 2018; Kattel et al., 2025a).

For this reason and given the substantive overlap with other CGI capabilities frameworks (Mayne et al., 2020; da Cruz et al., 2024), we adopt the dynamic capabilities framework developed by IIPP to explore the organisational-level determinants of CGI capacity. As shown in Table A2, the five dynamic capabilities can be achieved through diverse means, some of which require very specific competencies as well as changes to organisational routines.

Table A2. Breakdown of CGI capabilities (organisational level). Source: Kattel et al. (2025b)

CGI capabilities	Description	Analytical dimensions
Strategic awareness	Ability to use service data and insights to spot, understand and organise around potential threats, challenges and opportunities.	• Strategic foresight and futures • Stakeholder and community participation • Translating national and global goals into city-level actions • Benchmarking and learning from others
Adjusting priorities	Ability to reevaluate areas of focus in response to shifting needs or contexts, and if required, make choices about what to stop, start, or reshape.	• Agile decision-making • Reframing priorities • Discretionary spending • Tactical resource reallocation • Flexible teams • Adaptive strategic planning
Building coalitions	Ability to bring together diverse actors – across departments, sectors, and communities – to align shared goals and unlock new sources of energy, insight, and resources.	• Dedicated engagement mechanisms • Structures for cross-departmental collaboration • Multi-stakeholder partnerships • Co-creation and participation
Learning and experimentation	Ability to establish creative and repeatable ways to test ideas and learn what works to guide better decisions and improve services over time.	• Sensing and research • Experimental culture • Innovation labs and design teams • Open calls • Regulatory sandboxes • Piloting and prototyping • Scaling successes and transferring learning
Reconfiguring delivery	Ability to build teams with the required competencies[1] and culture and give them the space to try new approaches, move quickly, and adjust as they go.	• Redeploying resources • Creating teams • Recruiting and retaining talent • Engaging external experts

[1] The original wording in Kattel et al. (2025b) refers to 'skills'.

Our distinction between capability and capacity also echoes the one made by others. For example, Kattel et al. (2025b) state that "capacity refers to the city's resources or regulatory conditions, whereas capability refers to the particular abilities and practices deployed to effect positive change" (p. 15). They place their dynamic capabilities within the broader "structural capacity" of cities, which is established by a complex interaction between context-specific enabling and constraining *forces*.

System-level conditions

Table A3 analyses the factors that make up a city's systemic CGI soft power and resources

Table A3. Breakdown of system-level conditions of CGI capacity. Source: authors.

System-level conditions	Description	Analytical dimensions
Hard power	What the city administration is legally allowed to do (powers, jurisdiction and discretion).	City government has no influence
Soft power	Power to take risks, absorb failure, leverage partnerships and push change – related to satisfaction with city government and its leaders, legitimacy, political majorities, and leadership cycles.	• Political capital • Political legitimacy • Executive majority • Election cycles • Institutional credibility/reputation • Trust in government
Resource base	Financial, infrastructural and human resources available and usable for innovation.	• Total budget available for innovation • Innovation-related staff • Innovation infrastructure
External ecosystem	Presence of innovation-relevant actors and institutions (e.g., universities, civic initiatives, private partners) that can be leveraged to support innovation.	City government has no/little agency
Demand load	How much bandwidth is available (competing pressures, crises, and operational demands that crowd out innovation).	City government has no/little agency

Although city administrations must work within the constraints imposed by the hard fiscal and legal powers assigned to this level of governance, the level of external support available, and the operational demands they face, there is a lot they can do to shape the realities around their soft power and the resources available for innovation work. And effective political leadership can open up possibilities for extra resources, be it from central government, philanthropic, private or civic partners. And even if a city administration lacks the (hard) statutory authority to introduce innovative planning, transport or policing policy, it may have the (soft) ability to persuade a health authority, school board or university to adopt an innovative measure or collaborate with the city government in adopting such a measure.

In short, systemic conditions shape how far CGI competencies and capabilities can go to enable CGI capacity. But these conditions can also be actively shaped by resources and the soft power of city administrations. As shown in Figure 2, CGI capacity can be strengthened through investment in

its internal foundations (competencies and capabilities) and in the system-level factors that city administrations can influence to sustain and scale innovation (soft power and resources).[2]

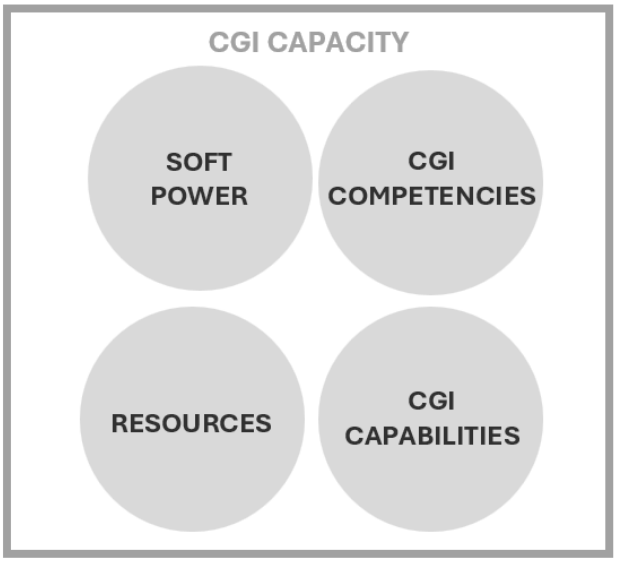

Figure A1. Factors that allow city governments to build and sustain their innovation capacity. Source: authors.

The crucial role of leadership for CGI, as made evident in the paragraphs above, has also been pointed out by municipal innovation officers in recent research (da Cruz et al., 2024). As such, it is important to ensure that **innovation leadership** is not diluted or obscured in the multi-scalar framework (Mayne et al., 2020 expressed a similar concern in their work). Innovation leadership refers to the willingness and the ability of a city government's political leaders and senior officers to secure and direct competencies, capabilities, resources and (soft) powers and to innovate. This emphasis on individuals' 'willingness' and 'ability' suggests that innovation leadership should be viewed in the context of CGI competencies (and, in fact, leadership is referenced as a competency in Table 3). Kattel et al. (2025b) also seem to position it at this level when they state that "[a]ll five dynamic capabilities rely on effective leadership – political, managerial, and networked (…)". But innovation leadership could also be viewed as being partly a matter of CGI capabilities, in so far as it depends on structures, roles and routines that support the activation of leadership competencies and its dissemination and adoption across the whole administration. Indeed, the crucial role of leadership across most items in Table 4 is evident.

[2] It is notable that programmes like Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative and Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative can be understood as contributing to all four components of CGI capacity. They have a strong focus on CGI competencies, including leadership competencies but they also help leaders to direct powers and resources to innovation. Bloomberg Philanthropies also contribute their own philanthropic resources, and they support the development of city hall CGI capabilities through their Innovation, Data and Partnership 'Track' work, I-Teams, and Mayors' Challenge programme etc.

Appendix B: Timeline and overview of planned outputs for 2026

Table B1: High-level timeline for research during pilot year.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Research phase	Initial calls, MoUs, ethics review	Set up peer research teams, hire local consultants	Research design, peer research team training	Data collection			Data analysis and writeup			Sharing findings		
Key Events			Visit 1 - training and fieldwork kick-off		Visit 2 - data analysis training (peer research)	Visit 3 - workshop (prelim. findings to wider city hall audience)	Roundtable to discuss findings with CGI experts			Partner cities to meet in London, findings and lessons learned		
Outputs				Blog post	Conceptual academic paper	Blog post		Blog post		Policy output for each city	Pilot year report	Methodological and empirical academic papers

We plan to deliver the following key events and outputs over the course of 2026, listed below in chronological order:

Events

- **Research seminar series on participatory methods** (March – May): 23/03 with Laura Lane and Eleanor Benton from LSE Housing and Communities; 22/04 with Anna Pagani from King's College London; Two more in planning
- **Peer-researcher training and in-person city visits:** We will visit each of our peer-research cities a minimum of three times, delivering tailored training activities over multiple days to the peer research teams in person. This will be complemented by additional online training sessions between the site visits to ensure the peer research team. The third visit will include a workshop with senior city officials to share preliminary findings. We will explore the option of creating a dedicated Learnworlds platform hosting the peer researcher materials to be used with Year 2 partner cities.
- **Expert roundtable:** We will host a roundtable to share our findings and reflect on learnings from the pilot year (July)
- **Conference presentation:** We will present findings at the RGS-IBG (Royal Geographical Society) Annual International Conference 2026 in London, entitled "Peer-Researching Up: co-producing research with city governments on innovations tackling urban inequalities" as part of a session organised by RGS-IBG Urban Geography Research Group (September)
- **Partner cities meetup:** We plan to bring the cities together at a convening in London to discuss lessons and share findings (October)

Outputs

- **Blogs** (April, July, September): Three blog posts reflecting on methodological and empirical elements of the work with our pilot cities
- **Policy oriented outputs:** We will deliver 3 individual policy outputs to each of our partner cities, co-produced with the peer-researchers/consultant ethnographers with actionable insights for cities. Exact formats to be decided with the cities but could involve short policy brief or some more creative or multimedia outputs (October)
- **Academic paper 1:** A standalone conceptual academic paper (based on Harvard paper) further developing our thinking around the interplay between capacity, capabilities and competencies (Journal submission target May).
- **Pilot year report:** We will develop a multi-case report with key lessons emerging from the pilot year. We will share both topline emerging findings about CGI capacity in the three cases and methodological insights which will help build the field of CGI research (November)
- **Academic paper 2:** Methods paper likely focusing on peer research with municipal officers (Journal submission target December)
- **Academic paper 3:** Empirical paper either reflecting on individual cases (e.g. ethnography in Amsterdam) or drawing on findings emerging from multiple cities (Likely early 2027)

Appendix C: Preliminary research questions

Overarching RQ:

How is city government innovation capacity developed, activated and sustained in European city halls?

The development of CGI capacity

- How do European city governments understand CGI and CGI capacity? How has this changed over time? What has shaped and influenced this understanding?
- How have approaches to building innovation capacity and supporting innovation developed? What factors have shaped this?
- How is support for innovation structured and promoted in city government? Who and what has shaped this?
- Where are city governments focusing their innovation efforts – on which action types? What is shaping this?

Strengths and weaknesses

- Where are city governments strongest and weakest, in terms of innovation capacities, capabilities and competencies and how are they interacting?
- What effect are structured capacity building programmes having on CGI capacity? How and to what extent are those participating in these programmes able to mobilise or activate new competencies, capabilities and resources? To what extend are these competencies and capabilities being mainstreamed and sustained over time?

Enablers and barriers

- What is enabling or preventing the development and activation of CGI capacity? How important are softer factors, like 'cultures', hierarchies, workplace power dynamics, as against competencies, structures, processes, roles and resources, in shaping CGI capacities?

Diffusion of CGI capacity between cities

- How are CGI discourses, competencies, capabilities and resources diffused among cities? What effect do initiatives aimed at strengthening CGI capacity in individual cities have on the city government sector as a whole?

Strengthening capacity

- What are the most effective moves city governments can make to strengthen their CGI capacity?
- How can city partners – the EU, national and regional governments, philanthropic funders, universities, city networks – best support the development of CGI capacity within and across cities?

Research methods

- What can in-depth, ethnographic case study research, developed in partnership with peer researchers, contribute to the study of CGI capacity? What research methods are most effective?

Appendix D: City Selection Process for the Pilot Year

We identified a longlist of potential partner cities in September 2025, initially using the data we have gathered on our 'universe' of +700 cities but then quickly narrowing it down based on our knowledge and existing relationships with cities. This resulted in a longlist of 58 cities (Table D1)

Key criteria used to identify a longlist of potential cities:

- Capacity to engage (e.g. availability of staff to participate in research)
- Commitment to engage (e.g. enthusiasm of senior leadership)
- Novelty and interest of CGI entry point
- Diversity in profile: Types of CGI capacity, geographic location, size, etc.
- Feasibility: Language, travel distance, existing relationship [unique to the pilot year]

In addition, we wanted to ensure that the longlist adequately captured the following categories of cities:

- Cities within Bloomberg ecosystem (European i-teams, IIPP work, mayors challenge, BH alumni)
- Cities LSE Cities has existing strong relationships with
- Cities that were not eligible for Cohort 1 of the Initiative but otherwise would have been strong contenders (e.g. Bratislava, Lyon)

As discussed above, while we initially considered working with cities that are part of Cohort 1 of the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative and these therefore featured centrally in the longlist, a decision was later made to exclude these cities from participation in the pilot year due to capacity concerns. All Cohort 1 cities are potentially eligible to participate in the Deep Dives from Year 2 onwards.

Following a further iterative process of refining the selection criteria, we shortlisted 11 cities (Table D2) and scheduled initial exploratory conversations with these potential partner cities. One city (Lyon) opted not to pursue the opportunity due to upcoming elections in 2026 and was removed from the shortlist.

We spoke to senior leaders in each of the shortlisted cities from October – November 2025, presenting the opportunity and scheduling follow up calls with other city representatives where needed. We invited all ten cities to submit an Expression of Interest to be considered for the pilot year using a simple word template at the end of November (Deadline 15 December). Our rationale for introducing an application process was that it would demonstrate commitment and help ensure buy-in from the potential partner cities.

We received nine EOIs with only Camden not submitting on time. We used a scoring rubric to structure the selection process, considering their EOIs, notes from previous conversations, and other background info on the cities (e.g. i-teams applications, previous survey responses). This was followed by two team meetings to discuss and agree our top choices. The three successful cities were notified in January 2026.

Table D1: Longlist of 58 cities considered for deep dives

City	Country	City	Country	City	Country	City	Country	City	Country
Durres	Albania	Paris	France	Dublin	Ireland	Krakow	Poland	Edinburgh	UK
Vienna	Austria	Berlin	Germany	Limerick	Ireland	Rzeszow	Poland	Glasgow	UK
Brussels	Belgium	Freiburg	Germany	Bologna	Italy	Cluj-Napoca	Romania	Greater London	UK
Ghent	Belgium	Halle	Germany	Milan	Italy	Timisoara	Romania	Greater Manchester	UK
Leuven	Belgium	Karlsruhe	Germany	Naples	Italy	Bratislava	Slovak Republic	Liverpool City Region	UK
Sarajevo	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Kassel	Germany	Turin	Italy	Madrid	Spain	Newport	UK
Zagreb	Croatia	Leipzig	Germany	Vicenza	Italy	Valencia	Spain	North East	UK
Nicosia	Cyprus	Mannheim	Germany	Amsterdam	Netherlands	Zaragoza	Spain	South Yorkshire	UK
Helsinki	Finland	Ulm	Germany	Enschede	Netherlands	Stockholm	Sweden	West Midlands	UK
Turku	Finland	Thessaloniki	Greece	Maastricht	Netherlands	Istanbul	Türkiye	West Yorkshire	UK
Vantaa	Finland	Budapest	Hungary	Oslo	Norway	Izmir	Türkiye		
Lyon	France	Reykjavik	Iceland	Gdynia	Poland	Blackpool	UK		

Table D2: Overview of shortlisted cities with selection rationale for pilot year partner cities

City	Country	Selection	Preferred methodology	Selection rationale
Amsterdam	Netherlands	Selected	Ethnography	Strong EOI; high levels of capacity, strong research expertise within the team, Interesting record on CGI with particular focus on financial innovations around climate that have not been tried by many other European cities (lighthouse case). We have good existing relationship, high-level political buy-in via Chief Science Officer. Mayor is alumnus of Bloomberg Harvard.
Bologna	Italy	Selected	Peer research	Strong EoI; very enthusiastic and impressive track record on CGI with many interesting innovations, including recent establishment of innovation unit within gov and cutting-edge work on housing. Less capacity than other cities and potential language barriers but we have excellent existing relationships and clear senior political buy-in to help mitigate this. Will provide helpful learning in terms of language barriers and combining peer research with local research support. Mayor is alumnus of Bloomberg Harvard.
Glasgow	UK	Selected	Peer research	Strong EOI; very enthusiastic and strong track record on CGI and ambitious vision for change, strong application, enthusiastic on multiple phone calls, strong existing relationship with LSE Cities and good previous exposure to BP programmes allowing us to study impact on capacity over time. Mayor is alumnus of Bloomberg Harvard.
Karlsruhe	Germany	Special case *(and backup for Bologna)*	Either peer research or ethnography	Enthusiastic and seem to have capacity to take on peer research, clear senior political buy in, nice focus on cultural change for CGI, interesting to have example of small- medium sized city that has not previously had exposure to any CGI capacity building programmes. We don't have strong prior relationship so some uncertainty there.
Greater Manchester	UK	Not selected *(backup for Glasgow)*	Ethnography	Despite a very strong submission, not selected due to their i-teams not being in place yet, and also being engaged through new MSA programme. Strong candidate for future years of the programme.
Stockholm	Sweden	Not selected *(backup for Amsterdam)*	Peer research, but open to external ethnographer	Not selected due to uncertainty around 2026 elections, limited existing relationship with the city and similarities with Amsterdam on innovation maturity and capacity level. Strong candidate for future years.

Bratislava	Slovakia	Not selected	Ethnography	Wide range of interesting innovation projects but they were frank about 2026 not being the right year for them because it is the Mayor's final year in office and staff will have limited capacity to participate.
Belfast	UK	Not selected	Either peer research or Ethnography	Not selected due to vagueness in relation to capacity, commitment and constraints, in addition to challenges of ongoing political deadlock.
Valencia	Spain	Not selected	Peer research, but open to ethnographer	Not selected due to lack of research officers with research experience, focus on tech innovation over other kinds of CGI, and lack of existing relationship further reducing feasibility despite enthusiasm from local team.
Camden	UK	No EOI received	N/A	Phone call with the team but did not submit an EOI by the deadline
Lyon	France	No EOI received	N/A	Opted not to pursue opportunity due to clash with municipal elections in spring 2026.

Appendix E: Challenges, risks and how we plan to mitigate them

Below is a discussion of the most common risks to ethnography and peer research as identified in the literature, as well as a brief overview of how we intend to address any of the specific risks relevant to our programme during the pilot year.

Ethnography, peer research and "studying up"

Conducting ethnographic and peer research in city governments raises longstanding methodological debates around positionality and power dynamics. These originate with Nader's (1972) call for anthropologists to "study up," turning ethnographic attention toward institutions and elites rather than only toward the powerless. Her contention was that anthropology's traditional focus on marginalised communities rendered invisible the mechanisms through which powerful institutions shape social life. This reorientation subsequently gave rise to "elite ethnography," which applies ethnographic principles to the study of powerful actors while attending to the particular challenges posed by powerful subjects.

Similarly, peer research methodologies have overwhelmingly been developed in contexts where "peers" occupy positions of relative social disadvantage and where the rationale for involvement is partly about redistributing the power to define and narrate social reality. When applied in city government settings, the power dynamics of both approaches shift substantially. Research participants are not marginalised individuals gaining voice through research, but professionals who already exercise considerable authority and whose accounts carry institutional weight.

Studying up requires researchers (whether external ethnographers or peer researchers engaging colleagues) to be attentive to the ways in which powerful informants may seek to shape the research agenda, control the narrative, or use the research for institutional purposes. City government staff are well placed to explore and reflect upon the enablers and barriers to innovation in their own administration. But they may also, consciously or unconsciously, present accounts that serve institutional interests rather than advancing critical understanding.

The peer research model especially, by giving city officials a co-researcher role, simultaneously creates the conditions for richer insider access and increases the risk of institutional capture. Navigating this tension productively, ensuring that peer research with city governments remains both critically engaged and genuinely empowering, is one of the most distinctive methodological challenges of the Deep Dives programme and an area where its contribution to methodological knowledge may prove as significant as its substantive findings.

Mitigating the risks of ethnographic research on CGI

Informed by the dynamics of studying up, ethnographic research inside public administrations presents distinctive methodological risks. For details of how we will respond to each of these in the pilot year, please see Section 6.5.

Access is perhaps the most fundamental challenge. Public administrations are formally accountable yet often highly guarded about internal processes and failures. Rhodes (2011) describes the difficulty of gaining sustained access to senior officials, noting that researchers are frequently offered formal interviews as a substitute for prolonged observation. At the local level, this is compounded by political exposure: elected officials are acutely aware that an ethnographer's

account could become publicly embarrassing. Gains (2011) notes that researchers studying UK local authorities are frequently steered toward communications teams rather than the back-stage spaces where decisions are made. Recommended mitigations include building long-term relationships before seeking formal access, negotiating entry through multiple gatekeepers, and being transparent about research aims (Rhodes, 2011).

A related risk is co-optation, the researcher becoming an instrument of the institution's self-presentation through selective access and managed encounters. Yanow (2000) warns that overly embedded researchers risk losing the critical distance necessary to read organisational artifacts encoding assumptions about power. Shore and Wright (1997) similarly argue that the researcher must resist becoming a policy consultant. Mitigations include keeping a reflexive fieldwork journal, maintaining external relationships, and subjecting emerging interpretations to peer scrutiny. It will be vital for city governments to appreciate the critical role of ethnography and the ways in which it can illuminate failures and mistakes to be learnt from (this has been emphasised throughout the selection and onboarding process, including in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by partner cities, see Section 6).

Sensitive data management presents a third cluster of risks. Local government ethnography generates politically sensitive, personally identifying, or legally protected material that standard ethics frameworks handle imperfectly. Smyth and Holian (2008) discuss the difficulties of insider positions where boundaries between research data and professional knowledge blur. Mitigations include bespoke data management protocols agreed at the point of access negotiation and systematic anonymisation, though Waddington (2004) notes that individual anonymisation may be insufficient if the organisation itself remains identifiable.

The fourth risk is the "performance problem": distinguishing between what administrations do and what they say they do. Building on Goffman's (1959) front-stage/back-stage distinction, Rhodes (2011) shows how civil servants' institutional narratives simultaneously reveal and conceal how power operates. Lowndes and Roberts (2013) demonstrate how formal rules and informal norms frequently diverge at the local level. Mitigation lies in sustained presence and in triangulating observational data against documents and accounts from multiple organisational vantage points.

Finally, the "repatriation problem" deserves attention: what happens after fieldwork ends. Van Hulst (2008) reflects on the discomfort of returning critical findings to an institution that extended trust and access. Responses include negotiating publication rights early, sharing draft findings with institutional interlocutors, and attending to institutional power without exposing individuals who facilitated access (Shore and Wright, 1997).

Learning from applied ethnography

These risks speak to tensions that run deep in the field of applied ethnography, where ethnographic methods are used to address practical, real-world problems (Chambers, 1985). The challenge of keeping research open-ended and critically reflexive while producing actionable recommendations is one of the core difficulties of applied work (Hammersley, 2006). City governments will typically want clearly bounded problems and discrete recommendations, while ethnographic inquiry tends to reveal complexity and ambiguity. It will be crucial to ensure that partner cities recognise the value of ethnography as a theory-building endeavour (Shore and Wright, 1997). Applied ethnographers have argued that ethnographic research can convert the "noise" of implementation processes into information with instructive power (Pope et al., 2016, cited in Gertner et al., 2021), but doing so

requires careful negotiation between the researcher's analytical commitments and the institution's appetite for clear answers.

Most fundamentally, ethnography is a mode of attentiveness and openness to being taken off course (Hansen, Holmes and Lindemann, 2013), meaning the most valuable insights may challenge the assumptions underlying a policy initiative rather than offering solutions within its existing framing (Dubois, 2009; Shore and Wright, 1997). This imperative must always be balanced with the need to produce actionable outputs that feed into the city government's ongoing work. Please see Section 6 for more details on how we will respond to these challenges, for instance by sharing findings across diverse formats such as a policy paper distilling actionable lessons alongside a more elaborate critical discussion in an academic paper.

Mitigating the risks of peer research on CGI

Many of the risks set out above are also relevant to peer research. Below we highlight several additional concerns.

Training peer researchers to a standard where they can collect and analyse empirical material rigorously is resource-intensive, often requiring months of ongoing mentorship rather than one-off workshops (Lushey, 2019). Peer researchers may face role conflicts when they are simultaneously insiders in their organisation and representatives of a research project with its own objectives (Roche et al., 2010). There are ethical questions about power dynamics: peer researchers may feel pressure to produce findings aligned with the expectations of the academic team or funding body, or conversely may use their position to advance particular agendas. Studies suggest that with adequate training and support, peer-collected data can be of comparable quality to that collected by professional researchers (Buffel, 2018).

Trialling peer research in city governments raises concerns that the existing literature addresses only partially. City officials face intense time pressures and competing demands, and the peer research literature, drawn primarily from contexts where peer researchers are recruited specifically for the role, offers limited guidance on integrating co-research into the schedules of full-time professionals. Fellowship programmes supporting municipal innovation practitioners have found that even with dedicated time and multi-year horizons, the results of practitioner upskilling in research are not always as strong as hoped.

There is also a risk that practitioners may conflate the research process with evaluation or audit, perceiving it as an assessment of their performance rather than an inquiry into systemic conditions. This perception (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014) can lead to defensive responses: sanitised accounts, performative cooperation, and official narratives rather than the candid engagement that peer research aspires to generate. Managing this dynamic requires careful framing and sustained trust-building, and is an area where the Deep Dives programme's integration within a broader capacity-building initiative (where cities are partners and beneficiaries rather than subjects of scrutiny) may offer a structural advantage.

Finally, the question of analytical distance is significant. Peer researchers embedded in the organisations they study may find it difficult to critically examine dynamics they are part of, particularly involving power relations or cultural assumptions taken for granted within the organisation. The insider research literature (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014; Mercer, 2007) has extensively discussed this "familiarity problem," arguing that it can be mitigated but not eliminated through reflexive practices, critical dialogue, and structured analytical frameworks. The partnership

between academic researchers and practitioner co-researchers envisaged by the Deep Dives programme may provide a productive space for this reflexive dialogue, but its effectiveness will depend on the quality of the relationship and the willingness of both parties to challenge each other's assumptions.

Below we set out how we propose to mitigate the risks we identified as most significant in our literature review:

Table F1: Key risks and mitigation strategies during the pilot year

Risk	**Mitigation strategy**
Access	Our city selection process was designed to ensure that the three case study cities all have high capacity to engage with this research, already have strong relationships with the LSE team, and are willing to provide access (to an external ethnographer or to a team of peer researchers, or to both). A Memorandum of Understanding signed by a senior representative of the city government and LSE in each case formalises this commitment to provide access. We will also communicate with each city's wider team both digitally (via an all staff email and/or webinar) and in-person, by presenting at their offices. These communications will cover the same topics as the Memorandum of Understanding, with a greater focus on how we (and our peer researchers) will be researching their workplace. Because of the greater responsibilities given to the peer researchers we have recruited in Bologna and Glasgow, we have asked them to sign a consent form, making it clear that the research is voluntary, that they can withdraw, and that they can redact or anonymise any data they capture and pass onto us
Power dynamics and co-optation	Continual reflexive work from the ethnographer will help navigate the inevitably complex power dynamics of 'studying up', building trust and cooperation whilst mitigating the risk of the research being co-opted. Throughout the selection and on-boarding process and in the Memorandum of Understanding, we have emphasised the critical role of ethnography and peer research and the value of insights on failures, weaknesses and mistakes to be learnt from. In the case of peer research, the power dynamics can be diverse depending on the context and individuals involved (the peer researchers may feel pressure to perform certain narratives for academic researchers, or may wish to co-opt the research for their own ends, or become defensive as if they are under scrutiny). We respond to this with rigorous attention to questions of positionality, power and research ethics as part of the peer research training, and to sustained efforts of trust-building.
Anonymity / confidentiality	Given the ethnographic nature of this research, the initial interview/observation notes will not generally be anonymised at the point of collection. However, we will communicate to city government staff that they can ask our core research team, external ethnographers or peer researchers to either not record, or later redact (up to the point of

	publication), anything that we have seen or heard from our data. If anyone (participants and/or peer researchers) does request non-recording and/or redaction, we will not communicate who they are, or their reasons why, to any other staff, including their line managers. By default, we will anonymise the names of all participants. However, while this may effectively protect the identities of more junior colleagues, we will also warn more senior colleagues (e.g. mayors, heads of departments) that they may be clearly identifiable from their role title and city location. As a result, for these senior figures, we will give them the option to be named in publicly disseminated outputs. Attributed quotes such as these will be sent to these senior figures for their approval before publication.
Sensitive data management	All of our research team's digital data will be stored on the LSE Cities filing system within the LSE One Drive. Raw data, prior to redaction / anonymisation, will be stored in folders which can only be accessed by the core research team named. Our research team may also take handwritten notes during ethnographic observations; after these have been transcribed, these notes will be securely shredded on the LSE campus. Data collected by peer researchers and our external ethnographers will be sent to the LSE Cities research team digitally using the secure LSE Filedrop. Any handwritten/printed data held by peer researchers and/or external ethnographers will be collected by the core research team at the conclusion of the data collection stage, taken back to the UK, and securely shredded on the LSE campus.
Post-fieldwork considerations	We will work with each city to determine the appropriate level of anonymisation in every publicly disseminated output. We foresee this working on a traffic-light system: - 'Red' findings are only to be shared in outputs sent directly to the cities and not included in any publicly disseminated policy outputs in any form; - 'Amber' findings can be included in publicly disseminated policy outputs, but only in later stages of the projet, when they wil analysed along with data from a cohort of 12 cities, so allowing anonymization; - 'Green' findings can name the city and be included in any publicly disseminated outputs. We will, however, remain flexible to navigate sensitive issues case-by-case. For example, in cases where there are particularly sensitive findings emerging from the research (identified as 'red' by the city government), we will decide, in discussion with the peer research team and senior representatives at the city government, whether it would be appropriate to only include these findings in internally facing policy outputs. In some cases, it might be that a finding is also too sensitive for internally facing policy outputs (e.g. if we judge that a finding might harm or set back

	(rather than only constructively criticise) particular departments, individuals or interpersonal relationships). To strengthen the academic freedom of our research, we would retain the right to include any material in academic journal outputs and we will make this clear to the participating cities throughout. For 'red' and 'amber' findings, we would take steps to anonymise politically sensitive findings in our academic outputs. This would involve waiting to share these findings until later in the research programme (when we have data from all 12 cities) and writing about them in relation to a 'composite city' which combines findings from across multiple cities.