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# Urban growth strategies in rural regions: building The North Wales Growth Deal

David Beel<sup>a</sup> , Martin Jones<sup>b</sup>  and Alex Plows<sup>c</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creation of a growth deal for North Wales (The North Wales Growth Deal – NWGD). North Wales is primarily a rural region within the UK, without a core-city or large metropolitan centre. The paper examines how this urban dynamic, fostered around a pushing of the agglomerative growth model out of the city-region, is being transferred largely across rural space and place in terms of how growth is envisioned and how policy is implemented. It contributes to regional studies knowledge by raising the importance of the non-metropolitan city-regional alternatives in the context of the (academic and policy) city-regional debate.

## KEYWORDS

economic governance; devolution; Wales

JEL G38

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper questions where rural regions are being placed within the context of neoliberal growth strategies that posit agglomerative accumulation, that is, policies to nurture value growth (primarily measured by gross value added (GVA) uplift), which is mainly aimed at the urban and more recently city-region spatial scale (Brenner & Schmid, 2011; Woods & Heley, 2017). The rural development question (Pemberton, 2019; Ward, 2006) is an enduring puzzle, which has eluded policy-makers globally (Bock, 2016), whilst being consistently undermined by an urban bias (Hoggart, 2005). The global focus on the development of city-regions and their implicit scalar, geopolitical and geoeconomic framing (Calzada, 2017; Jonas & Moisis, 2018), continues to reinforce this dynamic. Focusing on urban growth strategies, the paper considers what this means for rural regions as they attempt to articulate growth strategies of their own, whilst being entangled within broader multilevel and metagovernance processes surrounding economic development (Jessop, 2016; Nelles, 2012; Winter, 2006). We highlight how rural regions struggle to create


effective economic policy when they are cast as peripheral, or in the orbit, of major urban conurbations (Harrison & Heley, 2015), as such disparities have the potential to exacerbate the problems of combined and uneven development (Hudson, 2016).

The UK is witnessing important ‘state spatial restructuring’ (Brenner, 2004, 2019) developments through the creation of ‘city-region building state projects’ (Jones, 2019). Since the election of the coalition government in 2010, UK policy on economic growth has shifted towards a ‘city-first’ approach (Deas, 2014). This can be seen in a multitude of city and devolution deals to UK city-regions (O’Brien & Pike, 2015). This has somewhat left non-core city (second-tier) and rural areas behind in policy terms, but attempts are being made to address this in more rural areas such as North Wales (Harrison & Heley, 2015). With the development of two city-regions in South Wales (the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) and Swansea Bay City Region (SBCR)) this has left the rest of Wales somewhat lacking with regards to the future of economic development outside its metropolitan areas. This has partly led to a process of ‘region-making’ within the rest of Wales as the remaining eight of 22 local


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authorities (LAs) have sought to find ways to collaboratively work together (Jones, Orford, & Macfarlane, 2016).

Alongside this has been an ongoing reform process of LAs in Wales that has sought to find ways for LAs to work together more 'collaboratively' (Welsh Government, 2015, 2017a). The North Wales region is advancing both agendas by imminently signing a growth deal (The North Wales Growth Deal – NWGD) with the UK government. This, though, raises several questions that need to be addressed if such a deal is to be compatible with the region's existing economic footprint and its continuing struggle to address issues of uneven development. The paper highlights how policy discourses have been transferred from a primarily city-region – metrocentric – approach to a rural, regional, approach that combines North Wales's LAs into a growth deal. This raises a series of tensions and challenges around how policy is transferred and transformed when it moves geographically. More critically, the paper questions the mode of growth implied in such policy for North Wales as not addressing the spatial constraints already being placed upon this region. Further, the 'tangled governance' (Jessop, 2016) of the deal-making process itself, due to the often-misaligned policy intentions of the UK, Welsh governments and the LAs themselves, raises a series of questions with regards to what policy options are viable. In turn, this reflects the significant tension with regards to what each stakeholder seeks from the growth deal process itself (Economy, Infrastructure, and Skills Committee, 2017).

North Wales consists of six LAs<sup>1</sup> along the A55 coastal corridor, from the island of Anglesey (Ynys Mon) in the north-west to Flintshire in the north-east. The region could be described as a 'tale of two halves'; or alternatively, 'East, West and the bit in the middle' (Mann & Plows, 2016). The labour market of north-east Wales is very different to north-west Wales; essentially the north-east is more industrial, with a strong manufacturing base, and greater existing connectivity to North West England; north-west Wales is more rural, peripheral and de-industrialized, with a much higher percentage of its workforce in sectors such as tourism and agriculture; sectors of the labour market which are traditionally lower paid and precarious; namely often seasonal and/or short term. Collectively, across the region, there is no main metropolitan centre, with the largest town being Wrexham (about 60,000 people) in the north-east.

It is within this majorly rural spatial context that the paper considers the development of a growth deal for North Wales (the NWGD) and the problems it has faced in attempting to transfer (urban) economic policy into the region.<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of the paper critically analyses growth deal dynamics in predominately non-urban areas and is divided into three main sections. The paper first, conceptually and in terms of policy interventions, considers what this means with regards to the transfer of policy from urban areas to rural ones – in particular, the transference of economic policy that is focused upon creating

agglomerative growth in a region with only small and dispersed centres of population. This places rural regions within the context of city-region-building and due to a city-first approach. Not only are rural areas often left behind but also there is a lack of policy imagination being deployed to serve the economic needs of rural regions. Second, the paper unpacks the specifics of the NWGD and focuses on how this is seeking to generate economic growth and how this more broadly sits within the devolved nation of Wales as a whole. Wales is a devolved nation within the UK (alongside Scotland and Northern Ireland) and has its own policy trajectory within certain parameters, economic development being one such area (Heley, 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Pemberton, 2016). This is important to comprehend, because with the development of two city-regions across South Wales, this has left a policy vacuum on economic development across the rest of Wales, which the paper highlights within the devolved subnational context of Wales. Third, the paper looks at how actors in North Wales are seeking to influence and shape a growth deal, replete with inbuilt tensions and challenges around this urban model for growth, set against the ground realities of the North Wales rural economy. Conclusions and directions for future enquiry, conceptually and for state policy interventions, follow.

## MAKING NON-METROPOLITAN SPACES IN A CITY-REGION WORLD

In this neoliberal period, and post the Global Financial Crisis (Porta, 2017), there has been a return to the dominance of the 'city' as the scale at which economic development is most harnessed. This has advanced more recently to the role city-regions (i.e., the city and their surrounding hinterland) play in developing economic growth. The city-region has been identified as the de facto scale for urban governance in contemporary urban policy (Rodriguez-Pose, 2008). It has been vaunted by a number of commentators (Brenner, 2019; Florida, 2014; Glaeser, 2012; Scott, 2001; Storper, 2013) as the functional scale upon which economic development can take place, as city-regions are seen to exist at a scale that can respond to opportunities in the global economy as they arise in ways that nation-states cannot (Calzada, 2015). In the UK's devolved context, this has reflected the failure to deliver economic growth in Wales and has seen a shift from the 'soft spaces and the fuzzy boundaries' of the Wales Spatial Plan (Heley, 2013) to a more territorialized city-regional approach for fixing this (Waite, 2015; Waite, MacLennan, & O'Sullivan, 2013). This, of course, has paralleled similar territorial shifts in England and Scotland (Beel, Jones, & Jones, 2018), reflecting a dominant and triumphalist city-first approach (Glaeser, 2012) towards developing governance frameworks for economic development – one that, as Moisio (2018) states, concerns advancing the urbanization of the nation-state. This has, therefore, seen a consensus develop both in certain strands of urban studies research and in policy delivery itself (Beel, Jones, & Jones, 2016).

The focus of this policy emphasis on city-regions has developed from a variety of differing positions that have developed in parallel to reinforce the emphasis upon city-region-building. The combining of these strands has meant that the city-region has become the geopolitical scale (Jonas & Moisiso, 2018; Moisiso, 2018) on which economic development policy has been based. This is based upon a neoliberal approach to economic growth informed by the 'New Economic Geography' (Krugman, 1998) and the 'New Regionalism' approaches (Breathnach, 2014; Harrison, 2018). In turn, this has prompted within the UK, a city-region-building process that has cemented the city-region scale as the geo-economic and geo-democratic scale for UK statecraft (Calzada, 2018). Calzada (2017, 2018) develops this to suggest a process of 'metropolitanisation' has developed through a 'techno-political conceptual assemblage' (Calzada, 2018, p. 267) that seeks to rescale the state to the city-region in geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-democratic terms. Waite and Morgan (2018) refer to this as 'metrophilia', whereby it is seen as fashionable to embrace uncritically such city-first approaches. Both the concepts of metropolitanization and metrophilia are useful as they get to the crux about why the UK broadly and Wales specifically have focused so heavily on devolving various competencies to different city-regions. As Waite and Morgan suggest:

cities are the quintessential spaces where knowledge is generated and valorised because cities are the chief beneficiaries of agglomeration economies. ... Although exhibiting national variations, Metrophilia has international currency as we see governments, supported by think tanks and travelling bands of consultants, championing the metropolitan narrative regardless of spatial context.

(p. 2)

This has meant that policy has been driven to develop city-regions as the latest fix in UK sub-state restructuring. This, as the above quotation suggests, means such processes move across (devolved) state boundaries as their application becomes scaled on the perceived problem in economic performance they are trying to fix (Blackaby, Drinkwater, Murphy, Leary, & Staneva, 2018; Harrison, 2007; Waite & Bristow, 2019; Waite & Morgan, 2018).

In deploying the city-region, we witness what Peck and Theodore (2015) term 'fast policy transfer', whereby within neoliberal economic development, 'successful' policy moves around the globe at high speed between and within nations. With such policy movements, there is only often a circumstantial evidence base to such 'successes' and the literature often has a habit of only picking the 'winners' to such strategies (Jonas & Ward, 2007). It is within this context that the city-region has become vaunted as the policy fix for 'lagging' cities and regions (Deas, 2014). Within this city-first approach, which builds upon a 'new regionalist' orthodoxy, are several assumptions with regards to how economic growth will be secured. The central tenant of this is theories of agglomeration (Overman, 2012). The city-region is, therefore, a crucible for creating economic growth, whereby

through creating an agglomerating critical mass of economic activity in central urban areas, harnessed around public-private partnerships and involving civil society actors, economic development can be ubiquitously secured (William, Ellison, & Glaeser, 2007). This in turn helps to construct a specific 'spatial imaginary' (Jessop & Sum, 2001) for north Wales in relation to economic development, which attempts to construct a narrative or cultural hegemony for the North Wales region, in part reflecting on historic geographical differences to the rest of Wales and England, whilst at the same time ignoring differences that exist at the subregional level. As MacLeod (1998) has argued in the case of Scotland, 'historically contingent' specific administrative boundaries and regional spaces were created and imposed onto communities for whom these boundaries were perhaps less meaningful. Here growth deals can be seen to be a new type of region-shaping, whereby North Wales and its subregional geographies are policy-squeezed into a hegemonic construct for the purposes of economic development, where there is perhaps minimal consideration to the specificity of place or differences between rural and urban areas (Harrison & Heley, 2015).

All this raises several questions for predominantly rural areas and regions (such as North Wales) due to the type, nature and geographical focus of growth being aimed for, which is also problematic to cities in a variety of ways (Jonas, 2012). Rural areas in this model of growth are either presented as the periphery to the city-regions urban centre (Pain, 2008) or are faced with finding ways to map onto their existing economic strategy more agglomerative strategies which may further increase uneven development (Etherington & Jones, 2009). Harrison and Heley (2015) highlight the normative nature in which this casts the relationships between urban and rural via city-regional policy. They suggest that this places the 'rural development problem' within the 'new territorial politics' of the city-region, whereby the urban-rural divide can be overcome by 'functionally networked, not territorially-embedded administrative, geographies' (pp. 1114-1115). For Harrison and Heley, alongside Ward (2006), this represents a regressive policy framework for rural areas:

The city region approach reproduces a rural development problem. It establishes and reinforces out-of-date notions of geographical centrality and hierarchies, and it actively marginalises places, consigning them to the periphery, dividing and polarising. City regions are taking root in regional economic development and spatial planning across the UK, and they are raising profound challenges for those involved in the economic development of rural areas.

(Ward, 2006, p. 52)

The city-region agenda, therefore, applies a geographical concentration upon urban areas whilst attempting to network rural areas relationally. The question then becomes does this approach lead to an even spreading of economic gains? As highlighted above and by others, such an approach potentially marginalizes the rural due to the dominance of metropolitan centres, creating further uneven

growth for rural areas (Shucksmith, 2008). It also fails to consider the ways in which areas external to the city-region are capable of creating different models of economic growth which do not rely on urban agglomeration (Harrison & Heley, 2015; Haughton, Deas, Hincks, & Ward, 2016). The city-region agenda, therefore, shapes geo-economic policy with a specific geopolitical focus and therefore, as Harrison and Heley (2015) suggest, this needs to be unpacked when looking at the building of rural regions, where a city-region-building approach is dominant:

This is due in large part to their different geo-political constructions of city-regionalism. In this way it also provides a revealing context from which to unpack how and why city-regionalism continues to be constructed geo-politically to the detriment of rural spaces and rural development needs, and to begin considering how to build these interstitial spaces between metropolitan areas into our theories of city-regionalism.

(p. 1116)

In the context of this paper and developments within North Wales, we take several points of departure from the above discussion on rural development and city-region-building. These include: a need to think through what rationales are underpinning government(s) policy towards delivering economic growth in North Wales; the ways in which policies reflect the on-the-ground economic reality of North Wales, this includes existing successful economic growth in the region alongside problems of continuing combined and uneven development; and how policies for economic growth are transferred and shaped in different geographical settings. These points, therefore, allow for broader discussion to consider how policy should address *interstitial spaces* in a city-region world. By interstitial spaces, we mean considering spatial formations that sit outside of the dominant city-region discourse and how they form their own approaches to delivering economic development. Currently and what the following critique will suggest is that such interstitial spaces, such as developing rural regions, still sit within an economic policy focus that is too heavily skewed towards and driven by a city-region approach. This fits with what Midmore (2018) comprehends as the economic 'myths' embedded in conventional economic thinking for rural regions, whereby the process of regionalization gives credence to a discrete rural economy that in reality does not exist. In the case of Wales, the process of delivering city-deals for the CCR and SBCR has partly driven the need to address how to regionalize the regions to the north in the pursuit of economic growth (Blackaby et al., 2018). The present paper argues for the need to consider a new economic paradigm for rural regions, one that steps outside of the city-region approach.

## MAKING INTERSTITIAL SPACES: THE GROWTH DEAL APPROACH

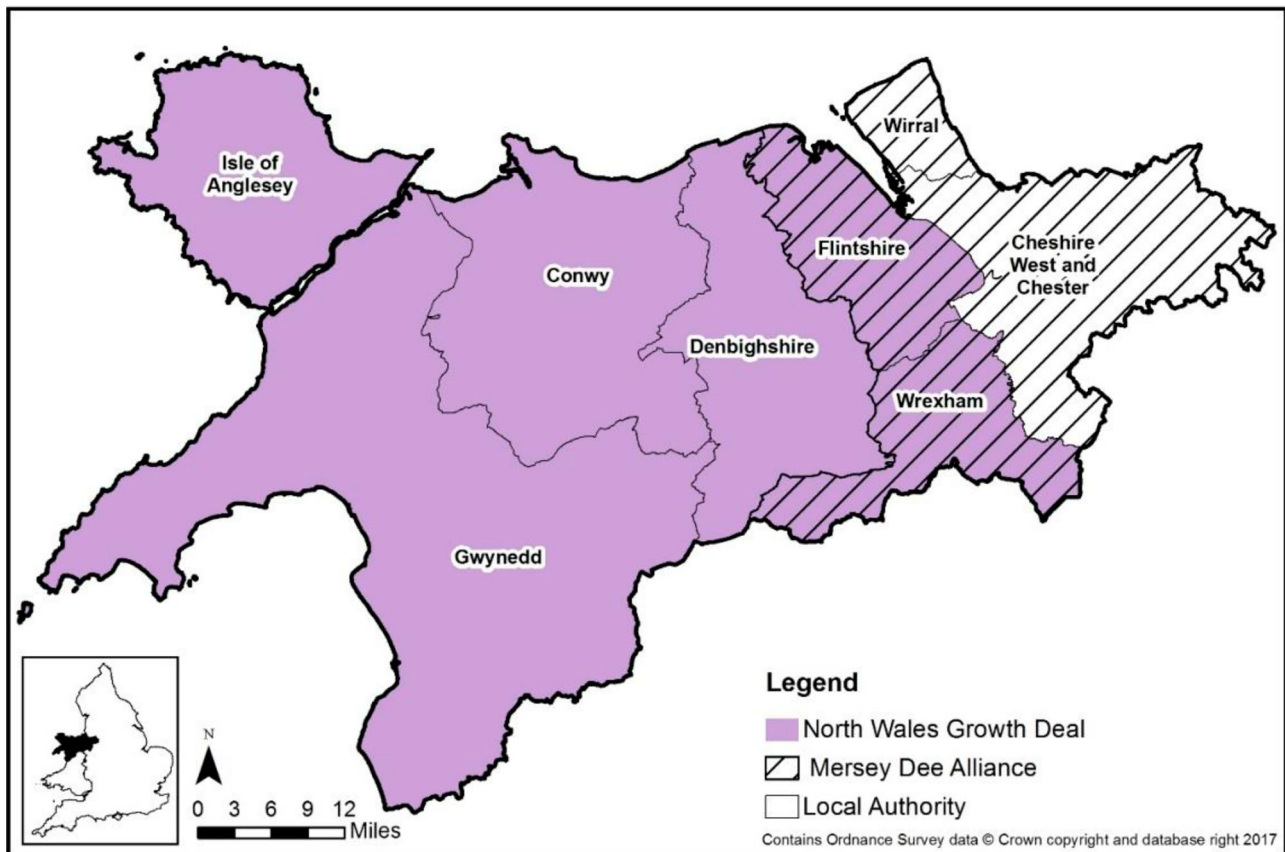
With the 'swing' (Jones, 2019) of UK subnational policy moving towards city-regions, and specifically a metropolitan focus post-2010, a variety of policy mechanisms has been

deployed in an attempt to boost economic growth, with one of these being the 'Growth Deal' approach (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2011; HM Government, 2013). The policy of delivering growth deals by the UK government began in England and has been a mechanism by which to fund and fuel local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). They have sat alongside various forms of deal-making public policy, which include both city deals and devolution deals (O'Brien & Pike, 2015). Growth, city and devolution deals, as the names suggest, require negotiation, which takes place between the UK government and the specific local or combined authority (LEPs and LAs in England) (Pugalis & Townsend, 2012; Etherington & Jones, 2016, 2018). There have been several rounds of deal-making whereby, in simple terms, collaborating LAs (in England) have progressed on a continuum from growth and city deals to devolution deals, although this has not been a linear or even process on speed and resources. There has also been a priority on granting such deals to metropolitan combined LAs first (such as the core cities; Deas, 2014), before deals are granted to less urban and more rural collaborating LAs. The metropolitan centres have consequently seen much larger and wide-ranging deals being granted (Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017).

In Wales, there have been city deals to both the CCR and the SBCR (HM Government, 2016, 2017). These came later in the deal negotiating process, signed in March 2016 (CCR) and March 2017 (SBCR) compared with those in England and Scotland, which were delivered much earlier in the then coalition government's tenure (National Audit Office (NAO), 2016). This reflected a slow process of negotiation between the collaborating LAs and then a protracted negotiating period between those LAs, the Welsh and UK governments (Beel et al., 2018). Such deals though have only covered South Wales, and this leaves the rest of Wales without any growth framework in place not counting Welsh government and individual LA plans. This has led to the North Wales LAs, since late 2017, to seek and lobby for a growth deal to shape economic development practice outside of this urban context but constrained-by-design within the city-first policy frameworks (Blackaby et al., 2018). The UK and Welsh governments, alongside the Welsh LAs, all have different visions as to what this process of deal-making is for. This is highlighted by the Welsh Assembly's (WA) Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (2017), that reveals how the processes and practices of city and growth deal-making mean that respective governance institutions have very different ambitions. Its negotiation and the possible policy levers available are, therefore, constrained in potentially disparate directions (cf. Beel et al., 2018, with their focus on the CCR city deal). In the case of the NWGD, this has led to a slowing in the ability to close the growth deal and a protracted wrangle over funding contributions.<sup>3</sup>

## Devolved regions in action: placing North Wales

Wales has a complicated and difficult geography, which reflects the main centres of population being in the south

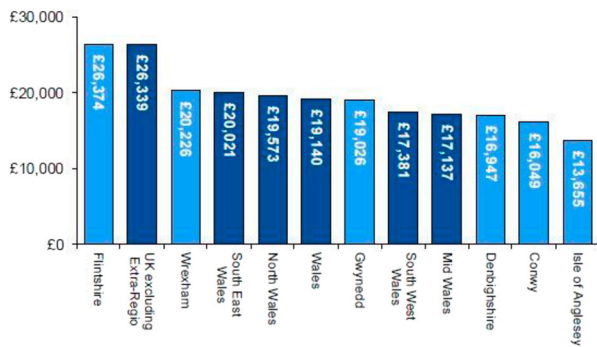


**Figure 1.** North Wales local authority areas and cross-border relationships.  
Source: Authors' interpretation.

with the cities of Cardiff and Swansea, and a mountainous physical geography to the north, which makes for more rural and dispersed population demographics (Lovering, 1983). This impacts on how policy is applied in Wales with regards to governance (Pemberton, 2016) as the WA attempts to address the problems created by this difficult geography. This, therefore, influences how investment is spread and attracted to Wales as well as how services are provided across the nation. This has led to several overlapping governance territorializations across Wales, as different actors exist on different footprints (local government, health, police, fire services and the Department for Work and Pensions). At a national level, since devolution, Wales has struggled to develop economically to the extent that proponents of devolution would have liked and in comparison to the rest of the UK (Blackaby et al., 2018; Bristow, 2018; Gardiner, Martin, & Tyler, 2012). Added to this, since 2010, like much of the UK, austerity has been an important factor impacting upon the functioning of the Welsh government and the LAs. Austerity has landed differently in Wales compared with England, having come later in funding cycles to the Welsh government, but its impact has been significant (Jones et al., 2016). This is reflected in how the Welsh government has sought to restructure local government under a time of austerity, via the Williams Commission, whereby it has looked for LAs to find ways to consolidate services and, if desired, combine them (Welsh Government, 2017).

Current developments fall well short with regards what was suggested by the Williams Commission, but highlight a direction of travel for the Welsh government.

It is within this climate of joint working between LAs that, in South Wales, two city-regions have been created via LA collaboration and this in turn has led to North Wales seeking a growth deal for itself. The 'region' of North Wales itself also reflects a complicated geography, highlighted by The Wales Spatial Plan (Welsh Government, 2008), which identified the different regions of Wales as having extremely 'fuzzy boundaries', with stretched-out and relational public policy interventions occurring in some instances (Orford & Webb, 2018). 'North Wales' stretches into what has been called the 'Deep Rural' (Wales Rural Observatory, 2009) of mid-Wales; for example, where southern Gwynedd (Meirionnydd) blurs into the mid-Wales LAs of Powys and Ceredigion. Then to the north and east, the Mersey Dee Alliance (MDA) reflects the cross-border relationships linking Flintshire and Wrexham with Cheshire and North West England (see Figures A1 and A2 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online). 'North Wales', then, stretches and blurs across different borders and boundaries (Mann & Plows, 2016), and this blurring is reflected in policy initiatives such as the MDA. Further to this, as Figure A2 online highlights, North Wales is surrounded by a plethora of English city-regions, particularly Liverpool and Greater Manchester. Importantly, North Wales is



**Figure 2.** Gross value added (GVA) per head, 2016. Source: Welsh Government (2018).

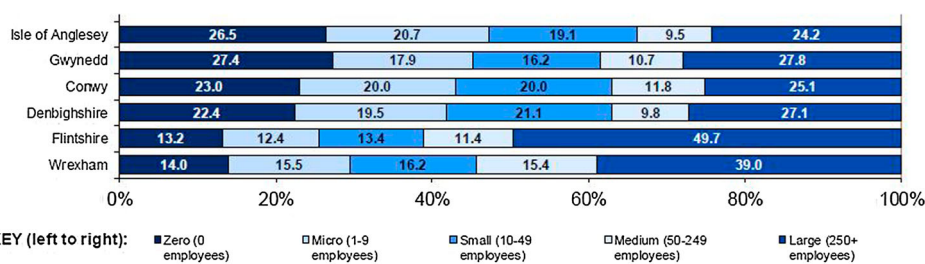
also made up of very distinctive and more territorially bounded subregions, or localities, with their own local characteristics and with very different labour market and other social demographics, such as the very marked difference in the percentage of Welsh language speakers in north-east and north-west Wales. These differences in local characteristics are important because they present locally specific challenges and opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

This is further reflected in a series of economic regional variations across North Wales. The differences highlight the variegated nature of the region and questions whether it exists as a truly economically functional region. To support this, Figure A3 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online gives an overall picture to the North Wales economy. However, when we dig into the variations across the region, we begin to see a different picture taking shape. The region has strong labour market differences between north-east and north-west Wales. This is highlighted in Figure A4 online, with substantial differences in

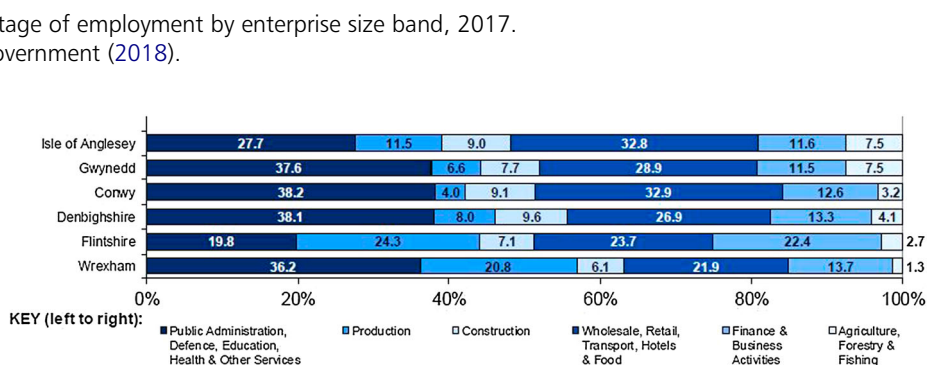
employment across the LAs – as you move west, the employment levels become lower. Conversely, unemployment levels (as shown in Figure A5 online) move the other way with increased unemployment to the east as a more significant problem. Added to this, with regards earnings, there is a significant difference in 2017 (see Figure A6 online): the average weekly wage for full-time employees in Gwynedd was £421.30 compared with £535.50 in Flintshire (the average weekly wage in Wales in 2018 was £498.40). The relative wealth difference in earnings is further confirmed with regards to disposable income levels. Figure A7 online shows slightly higher disposable income to the east, with the west bringing the regional average figures down. Finally, this regional divergence in the labour market is reflected in the GVA per head for North Wales (Figure 2).

These differences in the labour market are also reflected in the relative size of employers situated across North Wales. Figures 3 and 4 again show a regional split between east and west North Wales, whereby larger firms predominate in the east, whereas small to medium enterprises are more significant in the west.

Collectively, this suggests a variegated economy across North Wales, as well as a region that does not have a functional economic area of its own (Lovering, 1983). This means that developing policy that enables economic growth across the region is difficult; different subregions require different forms of support to enhance their economic performance better. The aim of generating agglomerative economic growth for a metropolitan centre then means that sub-city-regional and peripheral differences do not matter if the centre is growing (Fujita & Krugman, 1995; Krugman, 1998; Overman, 2012). In a rural region such a centre does not exist, therefore there is no focal



**Figure 3.** Percentage of employment by enterprise size band, 2017. Source: Welsh Government (2018).



**Figure 4.** Percentage of workplace employment by industry, 2016. Source: Welsh Government (2018).

point for growth. The labour market and firm composition differences between north-east and north-west Wales, therefore, will affect the likely impacts and uptake of economic development opportunities in the region. This is because as growth stimuli are applied and if successful, they will have uneven impacts across an already unevenly developed regional space.<sup>5</sup>

This means the NWGD faces a series of challenges that are quite different to that faced by most urban areas, which to date have benefitted from growth deals. For North Wales, we identify a series of key challenges facing the region which are: the above-mentioned regional imbalances; the lack of a Welsh 'Mittelstand' and supply chain capacity (Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), 2015) (Figure 3); the potential impact of Brexit; a lack of quality employment opportunities and the related skills gap. These also sit alongside the considerable challenges of continuing austerity; lack of infrastructure (although problematic in itself); various health challenges related to geography and deprivation; and the changing demographics of the region. There is, therefore, a critical question moving forward: Does the NWGD tackle these issues of rural development or exacerbate them?

### The North Wales Growth Deal

In attempting to deal with these difficult and overlapping geographies, LAs have sought to develop a growth deal for North Wales with the UK government via the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB). This is because local and national actors are promoting the growth deal framework as the *only* opportunity available to the region to address its economic needs, whereby the collective effort of North Wales LAs could deliver growth for the region: 'The North Wales county councils are proud to have submitted a growth bid for North Wales. The region is unified in recognizing the need to transform the way the region's economy is structured' (Aaron Shotton, Chair of the North Wales Leaders Group for Economic Growth and leader of Flintshire County Council, 2017). The NWGD and its negotiation reproduces the 'spatial imaginary' of North Wales as a bounded region, which can then be connected to other spatial imaginaries such as the Northern Powerhouse (Berry & Giovannini, 2018). This is important because despite the differentiated nature of the region, the narrative of a collaborative, functioning and bounded regional entity is essential to giving sufficient scale to make a potential growth deal plausible. To date, a deal has not been finalized, but the direction of travel for the deal is relatively clear. This is because, like other growth, city and devolution deals at this regional scale, only certain competencies are offered to LAs in pursuit of economic development (O'Brien & Pike, 2015).

The six LAs have pitched to the UK government a deal worth £1.3 billion (with leveraged finance), with £383.4 million coming directly from the UK and Welsh governments. With regards headline figures, this aims to create an uplift in GDP for the region from around £12 billion (2015) to £20 billion by 2035, and to create 5000 jobs (NWEAB, 2018). The bid has three main themes

consisting of: 'Smart North Wales', focusing on innovation in high-value sectors; 'Connected North Wales', addressing transport and digital infrastructure; and 'Resilient North Wales', seeking to retain young people, raise employment levels and improve skills to achieve inclusive growth (p. 3). Broadly, this includes focusing on low carbon and nuclear energy – including regeneration at Trawsfynydd; university research; better transport links; growing digital businesses; and increasing skills and opportunities to keep more young people in the area. Several stakeholders interviewed are hopeful that the growth deal could help with regard to political and economic 'clout': 'It's a new way of working ... we need to be more like the private sector ... they don't recognise [LA] borders ...' (Interview 1, Anglesey Council). Several stakeholders are of the opinion that this approach could help a 'parochial and inward-looking' (Interviewee 1, Anglesey Council) north-west Wales to become more outward facing. Partnership working is seen as potentially facilitating additional 'clout' because all LAs and different agencies are 'speaking with one voice'. It is clear that the stimulus of the growth deal has already catalysed a significant amount of regional partnership working – 'Team North Wales'. According to one commentator:

Economic leaders across the region are agreed on a collaborative approach, and are driving the work collectively on a singular regional approach to the Growth Bid – this is supported by regional leaders and key politicians, and is to be further developed and promoted as an inclusive approach that delivers 'Team North Wales'.

(Interview 6, NWEAB)

The NWGD is aimed strategically to enhance the impact and value of independent but strategically linked inward investment/economic development initiatives, some of which are well developed (such as Parc Adfer, Deeside, and HMP Berwyn and others at least under way or stalled; and a new nuclear plant on Anglesey-Wylfa Newydd). The 2016 NWEAB *Growth Vision* (2016) report sets out a very comprehensive 'roadmap' of these inward investment projects, which are (strategically and discursively) linked to the regions' three enterprise zones (manufacturing in Deeside, energy on Anglesey, and information and communication technology (ICT) and aerospace in Snowdonia).

Several of the stakeholders interviewed are understandably 'bullish' and optimistic about these projects, which are described as being 'significant opportunities' (Interview 2, 2017) for the region's economy and labour market, with positive impacts on employment and for developing supply-chain opportunities. There is a great deal of optimism from the stakeholders most closely involved with strategic planning and delivery of these initiatives, who have built additional capacity as a result of learning from the economic shocks of the recession, deindustrialization and associated mass redundancies:

there is a sense of real opportunity for change and growth in the region [which] is aspiring to grow ... The impacts and



implications of mass redundancies of the past has resulted in the growing, aspirational economy that North Wales is today.  
(Interview 2, NWEAB)

One of the primary focuses of the NWGD is on transport infrastructure, which aims to do two things: to connect the region better both internally and then externally to North West England. With specific reference to bordering English LAs, such as those contained within the MDA, this reflects the existing 'functional economy' of the region, which sits across the Wales/England border. Added to this is also the pre-existing 'spatial imaginary' of the Northern Powerhouse, which is also seen as a strategic opportunity for the North Wales economy due to its geographical positioning:

The North Wales Growth Bid will be aligned to the strategies for the Northern Powerhouse and the immediate North West of England, specifically the strategy of the Mersey Dee Alliance and close partnerships including the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership. ... The work is strongly aligned to the national aims of the UK Industrial Strategy and the WG [Welsh government] Economic Plan.

(NWEAB, 2018, p. 12)

Figure 1 and Figure A2 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online neatly illustrate this with parts of North Wales being within commuting distances of Liverpool and Manchester. The NWGD, therefore, seeks to align itself towards the North (West) of England and the developing agglomeration economies of two city-regions. Interestingly, this focuses the NWGD away from South Wales and Cardiff (Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee, 2017). This has meant a strong emphasis has been placed on the development of road and rail infrastructure, which is especially focused upon the north-east of the region, with the North East Metro<sup>6</sup> cited as a key infrastructure development. In total 16 projects (see Figure A8 online) are being mooted for the region alongside several pre-existing capital-spend projects and initiatives, which are completely independent of the NWGD.

The NWGD, therefore, seeks to address what is seen as the underperformance of the region due to its peripheral location in both the UK and Welsh economies. This seeks to unite actors at all levels (LA, Welsh government and UK government) in wishing to negotiate such a deal and highlights the economic rationales that are in play with regards to how best to secure growth:

A North Wales Growth Deal will revolutionise the way our towns and villages in North-Wales govern themselves – shifting powers down from London and Cardiff to local leaders who are better placed to take decisions that affect their communities. The Northern Powerhouse, coupled with a growth deal represents our best chance to bring transformational change to North Wales.

(Welsh Government, 2017b, quoting Guto Bebb, Wales Office Minister)

This, in turn, raises a series of questions with regards to whether this approach really maps onto the geographies of the region and what this means for the considerably more rural areas of the regions, particularly those to the west. To date, the NWGD has still to be finalized and several issues have held up the implementation of the deal, particularly around funding, whereby the Welsh government has been expected to match the UK government's proposed investment of £120 million.<sup>7</sup> Approximately, the NWGD hopes to secure a £335.5 million split between the Welsh and UK governments, with a further £219 million coming from universities and colleges, and around £109 million upfront from businesses. The NWGD, therefore, hopes to secure around £3.1 billion of private sector funding alongside this over the long term of the growth deal.

## DISCUSSION: DOES THE GROWTH DEAL 'FIT', CRITIQUES AND CAVEATS?

The paper turns to consider whether such a deal is appropriately framed to address the needs of North Wales and in what ways the growth deal is deeply problematic in its approach for addressing those locality needs. Drawing on the interviews, stakeholders voiced concerns about the lack of evidence for the (urban-transferred) growth deal model in relation to: cross-border working relationships; the focus on infrastructure and skills; the 'city deal' trickle-down approach; and the evidence base for 'cluster' approaches. Further concerns were raised around the potential for these approaches to have negative impacts, such as displacement and disruption, particularly at the periphery. The following section, therefore, seeks to raise a series of concerns that the growth deal approach creates, as the proposed policies for growth policies shift to a rural setting.

### Policy discourse versus geographical reality

There's a disconnect between these big schemes and peripheral economic wellbeing ... the jury's out on city deals and growth deals; there's patchy evidence at best ... no data to say its contributing positively ...

(Interview 7, Colegau Cymru)

One of the central problems with the growth deal approach is the circumspect evidence upon which it is built. Ward and Jonas (2004) suggest that such approaches often have a habit of only focusing upon areas that have been successful for their evidence base, whilst neglecting areas, which have failed in the implementation of such strategies, are not considered. Interviewees, in several contexts where they perceived evidence gaps to be present, further highlight this. Examples given include: little evidence on the successful working of cross-border economic partnerships with few examples of what 'best practice' is, or an understanding of what the pitfalls to this approach could be; the viability of the 'trickle-down' effect of inward investment and infrastructure development to local suppliers,

local economy, the periphery; and whether infrastructure and skills investment actually delivers sustainable and evenly spread economic growth and quality employment or will it exacerbate uneven growth. On the ‘what, why and how’ of micro-businesses and self-employment, which make up the bulk of businesses especially in rural (North) Wales, there has also been little attempt to find out more about what they need/want, particularly regarding their willingness and capacity to ‘scale up’. Throughout, the possible impacts of ‘Brexit’ on current/planned initiatives and policies all run deep as concerns. Added to this, the viability of North Wales as a functional economic area is questioned due to the region’s divergent east–west split. Therefore, the NWGD continues to perpetuate a ‘spatial imaginary’, which may be geographically defined but is poorly connected in economic terms – especially when the importance of cross-border relationships defines more accurately the functional economy of the region. This, therefore, suggests that for North Wales the growth deal will deliver at best very uneven benefits for the region.

The key proposals of the NWGD are more likely to deliver enhanced economic development for north-east than for north-west Wales. This is an issue of existing capacity and connectivity; stakeholders note that Flintshire/Wrexham is already ‘more aligned’ with Cheshire, Warrington, as embodied in the MDA; north-east Wales LAs ‘already work with Manchester, Liverpool’; this cross-border work is ‘business as usual’ for north-east Wales. While the hope is that improving connectivity will provide opportunities, which penetrate to the peripheral areas of north-west Wales, several stakeholders felt that the benefits were realistically more likely to accrue to north-east Wales:

On a certain level its already happening – the Mersey/Dee Alliance – Wrexham/Flintshire – they are currently able to access cross border relationships ... [there are further developments of cross border schemes which are] aspirational at the moment ... I think some of the NE [north-east] industries, chamber of commerce [are more likely to] see the opportunities.

(Interview 2, NWEAB)

For example, in terms of infrastructure, several stakeholders felt that there are ‘real benefits’ (interview 6) with regard to improving transport connections between the already closely connected regions of north-east Wales and Manchester/Crewe (North West England), but that this would not necessarily help north-west Wales.

Several stakeholders felt that it is uncertain and unproven that cross-border growth and development in North West England and north-east Wales will stimulate or facilitate supply and demand-side capacity in peripheral north-west Wales, to any significant extent:

I don’t think that you get trickle down/spin out to the periphery ... culturally and politically that’s very difficult to do ... its

wishful thinking [that the periphery will benefit] ... capital infrastructure accrues capital to areas, which are already strong.

(Interview 8, Colegau Cymru)

We want to grow the whole of North Wales as a region [of Wales] rather than suck people into the NE [north-east] ... we shouldn’t rely on [cross border growth] as the only growth deal for N[orth] Wales ... there’s a danger of hype which could turn the NW [north-west] Wales population off. There are regional opportunities, which are immediate and current.

(Interview 2)

The labour market differences between north-east and north-west Wales outlined above were identified as central to some interviewees’ concerns about the NWGD as it currently stands. A concern raised by several interviewees is, therefore, that the emphasis on large infrastructure projects does not sufficiently address the locally specific characteristics of the North Wales region. This raises a series of questions with regards to the growth deal approach to address the needs of an economically unaligned region such as North Wales, with urban, semi-urban, rural, deep rural and an east/west geographical split. This suggests from the outset that any economic benefit from the growth deal is going to be deeply uneven when delivered to the region.

### Agglomeration and spatial displacement

Several interviewees raised concerns that North West England and north-east Wales investment projects and cross-border capacity growth, while designed simultaneously to boost capacity in north-west Wales, could actually have the opposite effect and could catalyse displacement in north-west Wales (Figure 1 and see Figure A2 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online). Peripheral areas could lose human and financial capital, which could ‘leak out’ from Wales; this is agglomeration essentially. According to two sources:

[T]he problem with agglomeration is that it doesn’t happen equally around the region ... does North [west] Wales have the human capital to win the agglomeration battle? ... Liverpool/Manchester is a massive gravitational force pulling things in ... dark matter ... pulling resources in rather than sending resources spinning out ... its where the financial capital, and consequently the human capital, lies ... it’s a myth that there are no casualties ...

(Interviews 7 and 8, Colegau Cymru)

Therefore, whether transport infrastructure improvements will provide economic benefits to north-west Wales or not is a contentious issue; there are significant differences of opinion between stakeholders on this issue. Of course, several studies have questioned the economic benefits of such transport focused approaches (Melia, 2018) and the actual economic benefit they bring to the populations they serve. Several stakeholders suggest that the focus on

infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure, may be misplaced. Transport improvements are important, but it depends on the context, such as where and what sort of business you are. Transport and infrastructure improvement can

cut both ways... could actually exacerbate an outflow of capacity... it depends what the infrastructure is connected to... infrastructure doesn't necessarily take you anywhere... [when] there are more efficient nodes elsewhere...

(Interview 3, sustainability consultant)

Several interviewees made this potential for transport connectivity and infrastructure improvements to 'cut both ways' and potentially catalyse displacement. This is an area of significant disagreement, though, between those promoting the NWGD and the interviewee stakeholders above who felt there was little evidence to show that transport infrastructure brought economic benefits. Instead, it exacerbates a long history of out-migration/displacement, particularly on the periphery. Whereas for the LAs that are developing and driving strategic initiatives (informing the NWGD) on the basis that investment in transport infrastructure is key to developing the region's economic potential.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Northern Powerhouse model is a good brand, a hook even, but a lack of tangible investment runs deep... how will it actually translate in terms of opportunities for Anglesey and North Wales is limited...

(Interview 1, Anglesey Council)

This paper has sought to raise the importance of the non-metropolitan city-regional alternatives in the context of the (academic and policy) city-regional debate. It has specifically sought to raise several concerns based on the imposition of an urban 'spatial imaginary' through city-region-building. The city-region agenda, although not transported and dropped into a rural region per se, shapes the possibility of what a rural region can become when aligned to a city-region policy prescription (in both narrative and material terms). It has highlighted how such an approach potentially marginalizes 'the rural' due to the dominance of metropolitan centres in this policy approach. The paper has sought to demonstrate the way in which the NWGD has been constructed in order to align with city-region developments, though this is revealed to be deeply problematic for rural regions. The NWGD, premature in its evolution, is being implemented with little or no acknowledgement of the various concerns that have been raised above. This questions the rural viability of the implied and applied urban growth model. Moreover, this approach to economic development has the potential to create further uneven growth for rural areas by failing to consider the ways in which areas external to the city-region are capable of creating different models of economic growth, which do not rely on urban agglomeration.<sup>8</sup> All

this said, at the time of writing, a Mid Wales growth deal is being prepared, which is also without a core city context, to drive economic development and experience could mirror some of the pitfalls and dilemmas of the NWGD.<sup>9</sup>

North Wales' unique selling point is its natural resources and unique identity as a biodiverse region with important cultural heritage, which arguably chimes uncomfortably with a hegemonic discourse of partnership-based inward investment. Only specific actors from the local business communities, the LAs and the two national governments have agency to enact what a growth deal should or could be (cf. Beel et al., 2018; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2010; Rutherford, 2006). There is limited evidence that such a model can and will succeed; and certainly limited 'periphery proofing' has been undertaken. With infrastructure and skills lagging over time, based on limited rounds of investment, the jury is out on whether there is the likelihood that the growth deal model will exacerbate historic patterns of displacement (out-migration) and skills capacity to sustain any growth within economic development. There is a dire need to improve the quality of jobs and the strategic roles played by the cultural heritage and agriculture tourism sector, as well community-level economic development possibilities around green energy. As commentators point out:

We know the kinds of activity that will persist... the kinds of economic activity that are geographically bound... Welsh language tourism, green infrastructure...

(Interviews 7 and 8, Colegau Cymru)

We are not an industrial powerhouse, but we have an extraordinary landscape based on our environmental credentials... there is an opportunity to develop the image of North Wales; successful businesses do (re)locate here for lifestyle reasons...

(Interview 3, sustainability consultant)

In addressing this and offering new knowledge, future research in this rural vein can contribute to the emerging literature on inclusive growth via city-region-building (Beel, Jones, Jones, & Escadale, 2017; Bevan Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017; Lee, 2019; Vickers, Spear, Brennan, & Syrett, 2017). This is seeking out a new economic model, and for the likes of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) (2016, 2017), with regards to social and economic policy, reducing inequality and deprivation can itself drive growth. This requires investment in social infrastructure, including public health, early years support, skills and employment services, which should go hand in hand with investment in physical infrastructure, and in business development. This will have a first-order impact on productivity and living standards. This sits within a broader framing of events that the context of Brexit has stimulated: a new shared prosperity fund with potential for regional actors; increased demands for greater devolution; and a strengthening of calls for Welsh independence.<sup>10</sup> The rural challenges of

delivering on this in the context of the NWGD have never been so pressing.

Beyond the immediate discussions raised here, the paper also highlights key problems for rural regions beyond Wales and the UK, especially where, in the context of dispersed settlements, the territorial definition of the rural sits against the relational connections between urban and rural interfaces. This means that thought must be given to the potential impact of agglomeration economies on external areas and how they may pull capital, wealth and people from rural regions if rural regions are too closely aligned to those economies. The need for alternative economic development approaches, sensitive to the geographies of rural localities, has never been so urgent.

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## NOTES

1. Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd and Wrexham.
2. The empirical data in this paper are drawn from research and stakeholder engagement, undertaken in the period 2009–19 on the regional economy of North Wales. The original research was undertaken as part of the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) localities programme, which compared and contrasted localities across Wales, including the North Wales region (Jones et al., 2016). Subsequently, a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship with National Assembly Wales was awarded (to Alex Plows) to deliver a report on the North Wales economy. This entailed further desktop research and primary qualitative data, namely interviews with several regional stakeholders, with whom research relationships had been built over time. Figure A1 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online outlines the interviewees.
3. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-46031434> (accessed on 4 July 2019); and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-46482907> (accessed on 4 July 2019).
4. In 2011, the percentage of people aged three years or more who can speak Welsh in Gwynedd (north-west

Wales) was 65.4%, whereas in Wrexham (north-east Wales) it was 12.9%.

5. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation shows there are micro-localities (lower layer super output areas – LSOAs) with very high levels of deprivation within LAs across North Wales, so the picture is much more complex than simply one of an ‘affluent NE Wales versus a struggling NW Wales’.
6. The North East Metro is an integrated transport infrastructure plan that seeks to improve transport links across the region, as well as those external to the region. A major focus is on delivering an integrated transport hub in Wrexham (Welsh Government, 2017c).
7. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/uk-wales-politics-46482907> (accessed on 4 April 2019).
8. For an interesting comparison, based on a ‘Western Powerhouse’ cross-border collaboration between the Cardiff Capital Region and Bristol City Region, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-42737949> (accessed on 4 July 2019).
9. See <https://www.countytimes.co.uk/news/17684963.mid-wales-growth-deal-minister-pleased-with-progress-in-powys/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).
10. See <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/brexit/2019/07/23/cardiffs-shared-prosperity-fund-conference/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

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