Motivations behind local government transnational networking

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Author Note

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Introduction

The 1990s saw a rapid rise in local government transnational networking. Local authorities began forming relationships with their counterparts across national borders, either as directly or through networking organisations. This was fuelled by a number of contextual factors, not least the availability of European funding schemes which attached transnational or cross-border co-operation to their eligibility criteria. Conceptually, the approaches of multi-level governance and policy networks provided a framework to identify and analyse the horizontal relationships characterising this form of transnational networking. Save for a small number of studies (for example Baldersheim, Haug, & Øgård, 2011; Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Payre, 2010) contemporary research in this field is scarce. Yet it is highly relevant in the context of pressure on public finance, the Europe 2020 strategy and a new cohesion policy programme due in 2014.

The lack of contemporary literature addressing this topic from a local government perspective means little is known about the true extent of and motivation for this activity. Unsurprisingly, much existing literature has focused on the role of transnational activity in securing fi nancial benefits and European funding for its participants. There has also been a heavy focus on cross-border relationships as opposed to wider transnational links. Such a pre-occupation is hardly surprising given the extent of European funding available for transnational activity, but it can also criticised for obscuring the other important motivations underlying this activity (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009). This is compounded by a tendency to look at this activity from a wider European perspective, as opposed to a local one. It is clear, therefore, that there are two major research gaps that require addressing: fi rst, what is the current extent of local government transnational networking in Europe and second, is the heavy focus on the financial attraction of this activity justified?

Local government in south-east England provides a good case study to address these gaps. Its geographical location, particularly its close proximity to the French border, has

provided access to a number of EU funding programmes such as INTERREG. This in turn facilitates networking through funding for transnational projects. Local government in this region faces a number of unique challenges which may move authorities to adopt a more international stance. The region is prosperous with a strong international economic outlook, yet lacks institutional co-ordination and is geographically divided between urban and rural areas. Local authorities often compete with each other in order to obtain more investment and influence (John, Musson, & Tickell, 2002). This analysis investigates the transnational networking activity carried out by eight of "top-tier" local authorities in this region (figure 1), building on previous analyses (for example Church & Reid, 1996, 1999). A local government perspective on this activity has been obtained by analysing freely available committee reports and policy documents produced by local authorities. The purpose is to shed light on local government transnational activity and to highlight the function it serves for local authorities beyond those merely financial.

Extent of networking

Local government transnational networking covers a variety of activities. These activities generally fall under three broad categories: direct links with local authorities in other countries, membership to transnational networking organisations or participation in transnational projects with other international partners. The common feature in each case is that local authorities co-operate with their counterparts in other countries, be it directly or indirectly through an organisation or project.

Figure 2 visualises transnational European networking carried out by eight councils in south-east England between 2001 and 2011. Firstly, it shows that local government has been heavily engaged in transnational networking activity over the last ten years. This includes involvement in transnational projects, transnational networking organisations and direct links with local authorities in other countries. Among the relationships are the more obvious cross-border links with French *régions* and *départements*, however links with

local authorities further afield are also present, for example between Kent County Council and Bács-Kiskun, Hungary. Many of the networks local government is involved in are based around transnational projects. While some of these are isolated to the English Channel area, such as the Channel Arc Manche Integrated Strategy (CAMIS), others involve local authorities from across Europe. Membership to networking organisations, such as the Assembly of European Regions or Eurocities, provides links to many other local authorities across Europe who are also members. In many cases such organisations provide a basis for further transnational networking and co-operation through projects.

Figure 2 further illustrates the complexity of this activity, indicating that relationships rarely exist in isolation, but are often part of a bigger picture. In many cases direct links with international local authorities are supplemented with participation in several joint projects or membership to common transnational networking organisations. This indicates that forming strategic relationships with European partners can often lead to future co-operation. Finally, Figure 2 shows that while literature has declined, local government has actively continued its transnational networking activity.

Motivations for networking

Transnational networking has been an increasingly important component of local government activity since the 1990s, despite it not being a statutory obligation. Kent County Council, for example, has been actively pursuing international relationships since the late 1980s (Barber, 1997). Local government is often able to recognise the benefits transnational networking has to offer and many local authorities build it into their strategic plans.

Traditionally the focus on local government transnational networking has been on its role in securing funding for its participants. This is certainly one of the reasons local authorities cite for engaging in this activity, but it is by no means the only motivation. The focus on funding does not account for continued transnational networking despite the

overall reduction in EU funding available to south-east England, particularly since 2007 as the priority for EU funding shifted to central and eastern Europe. Furthermore, councils are only likely to invest in projects which actively meet pre-determined aims in their strategies, especially as many funding programmes require match funding from recipients.

Broadly speaking the results of the document analysis highlight three main reasons local authorities cite for engaging in transnational activity. Several examples of networking and the motivations behind it taken from this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of networking and its purposes

UK local authority	Link with	Purpose of link
Kent County Council	Conseil Régional de Nord-Pas de Calais, France	Providing access to INTERREG cross-border programmes. Facilitation of joint projects.
Kent County Council	Bács-Kiskun, Hungary	Development of potential trade links.
Hampshire County Council	Assembly of European Regions	Lobbying EU on various matters, such as the definition of a region.
Hampshire County Council	Conseil Régional de Basse-Normandie, France	Sharing of knowledge and best practices ranging from social care to transport policy. Facilitation of joint projects.

UK local authority	Link with	Purpose of link
Brighton and Hove City Council	Eurocities	Access to best practice examples. Identification of potential partners in joint projects. Promoting Brighton and Hove's European or international identity.
West Sussex County Council	Arc Manche Assembly	Lobbying EU for recognition of the Channel as a separate maritime basin and on other maritime and coastal issues. Facilitation of joint projects, such as CAMIS

While the first of these motivations is accessing funding, "added value" is gained from policy influence and knowledge transfer. A number of other motivations, often without direct financial benefits, are also present. In terms of the second motivation, policy influence, local authorities estimate between 70 and 80 per cent of the legislation they are required to implement originates in Europe. This situation makes it important for local government to have timely information about proposed legislation and policy developments so they can adequately prepare. Networking here allows this information to be shared among local authorities. As well as preparing for European policy, this "horizon scanning" activity highlights opportunities to influence policy and participate in consultation before it is decided.

Transnational networking helps local government to influence policy in a number of ways. While important in terms of policy implementation, local government has traditionally had a weak voice in the European policy making process. However, local authorities have noticed over the last ten years that the EU is more willing to listen to and consult with local and regional actors as they are seen as being closer to the citizen than national governments.

Within the European policy making process local authorities are one of many lobbying actors competing to have their voice heard. They are often up against major NGOs and other large lobbying organisations whose resources are often far greater than that of an individual local authority. It has long been recognised that by working together local government can pool resources, thus standing a better chance of having their voices heard. In many cases transnational networks are held in high regard by European institutions as they are seen to be more representative of a wide body of views from several member states (McAleavey & Mitchell, 1994, p. 238). This gives local government transnational networks a degree of credibility at a European level. Indeed, some networks become regarded as experts in certain sectoral policy areas; in this way they can take on the role of epistemic communities. For example the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) has become well respected by the European Commission as a body of local government experts on maritime policy.

Thirdly, transnational networking also provides local government with a way to share knowledge, expertise, innovation and best practice with international colleagues. The information gathered this way is ultimately used to inform or improve service delivery. In the context of new public management there is pressure for public bodies at all levels to utilise best practice in developing policy and delivering services. Transnational networking here becomes an important tool for policy learning (see Rose, 2005). Local government therefore uses networking to access examples of innovation which can be applied at home. The use of transnational networking in local government learning has been documented in other regions (Salskov-Iversen, 2006).

While this activity is used by local authorities to seek out best practice examples that can be utilised it can also be used to promote local authorities as experts in certain policy areas. For example, the Isle of Wight Council has developed a reputation as an expert in coastal management and erosion through the various transnational projects and network they have participated in.

In addition to the three main motivations outlined above, transnational networking is also used to promote local identities, both within and outside national borders. Membership to networking organisations such as the Assembly of European Regions or Eurocities, itself "concerned to foster its self identification as a network of 'major' or 'important' cities" (Griffiths, 1995, pp. 215–216), is often used for this reason. By using transnational networking to promote identity within national borders authorities are able to compete for influence and funding with others within their state or even region. Promoting local identity at a European or even international level brings similar benefits. It places local authorities in a better position when it comes to bidding for funding, trying to influence European institutions or attracting investment. Again, this motivation is not confined to local government in south-east England with authorities elsewhere in Europe participating in transnational networking for this reason (for example Payre, 2010; Phelps, McNeill, & Parsons, 2003).

What is clear from the examples presented is that funding is by no means the only motivation behind local government participation in transnational networking. Indeed many of the motivations bear no direct financial motives. This challenges assumptions that access to European funding is the primary driver behind local government transnational activity. It also highlights the need for researchers to broaden their horizons when studying this activity.

Conclusions

While academics' attention may have drifted away from the topic, local government transnational networking has remained a common behaviour. And although the focus of this paper is on a single region, namely south-east England, this activity is carried out by local authorities across Europe. For example, transnational networking organizations such as the Assembly of European Regions, Eurocities or the CPMR attract a membership from almost every country in the EU. Likewise, European funding programmes such as

INTERREG facilitate cross-border and transnational working between localities in many states (Perkmann, 2003).

Arguably this highlights the need for us to once more study this activity; however, we need to look beyond traditional funding motivations. As this paper has shown, local government often seeks benefits beyond access to funding, and direct financial benefits are not always present in their transnational activity. This suggests these relationships have a wider political significance rather than a purely functional or rational one. Taking such a perspective can have implications for our understanding of local government activity, not only in relation to this type of networking but also in a wider European and international context. This can contribute to our understanding of the EU as a "networked" and "multi-level" polity. It also sheds light on the role of local and regional government as key actors in Europe.

These findings have benefits beyond our academic understanding. There is potential for engagement with local government practitioners, for example through highlighting the possible benefi ts of transnational networking (e.g. greater influence, sharing best practice, access to funding and better representation of local issues in Europe), or identifying ways in which local government could improve their networking activity.

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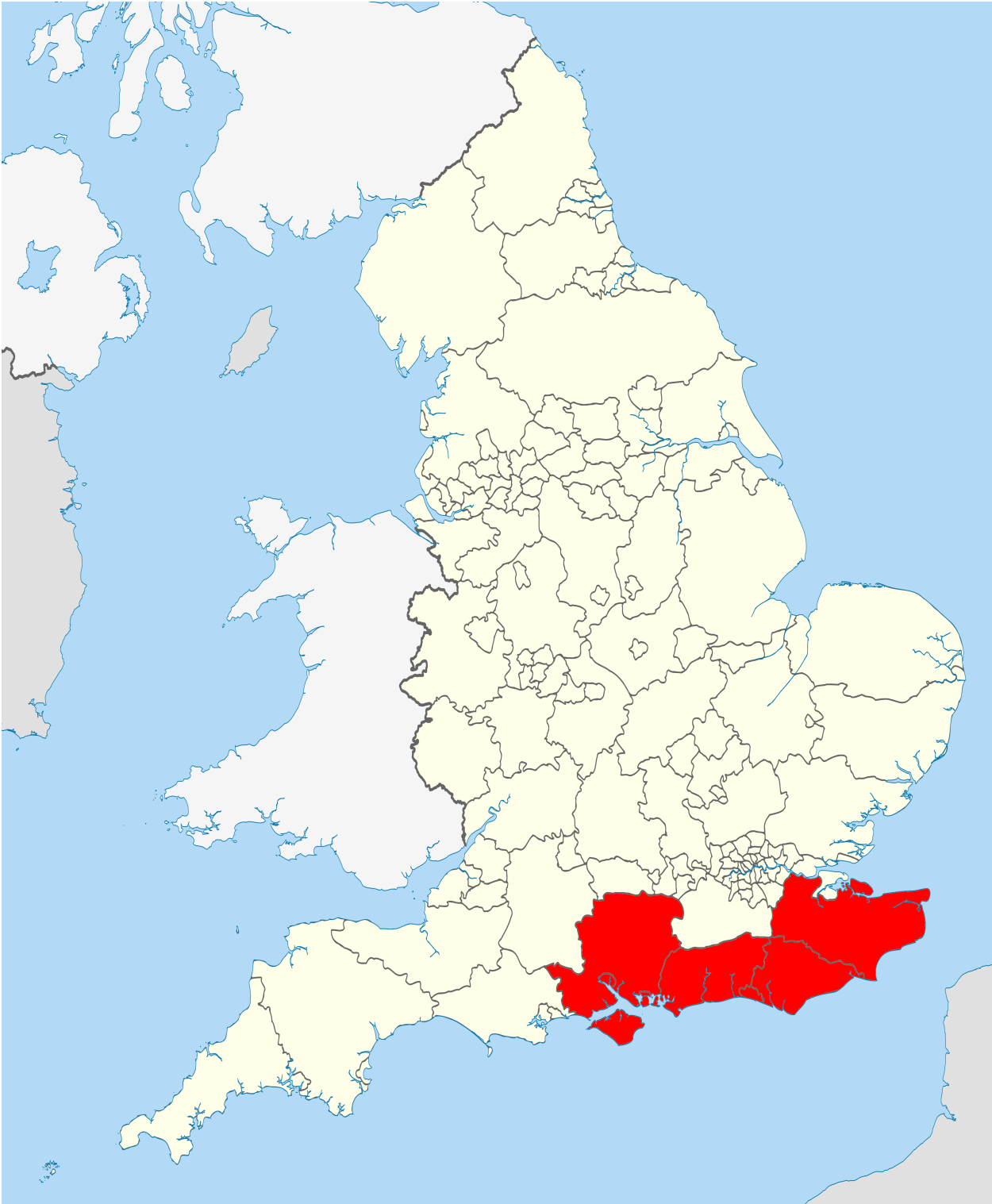
Figure 1. Local authorities included in case study (source: Wikimedia commons)

Key
- Case study
- Local authority in another country
- Transnational networking organisation
- Transnational project

Brighton & Hove City Council

Southampton City Council

Hampshire County Council

Kent County Council

West Sussex County Council

Portsmouth City Council

Isle of Wight Council
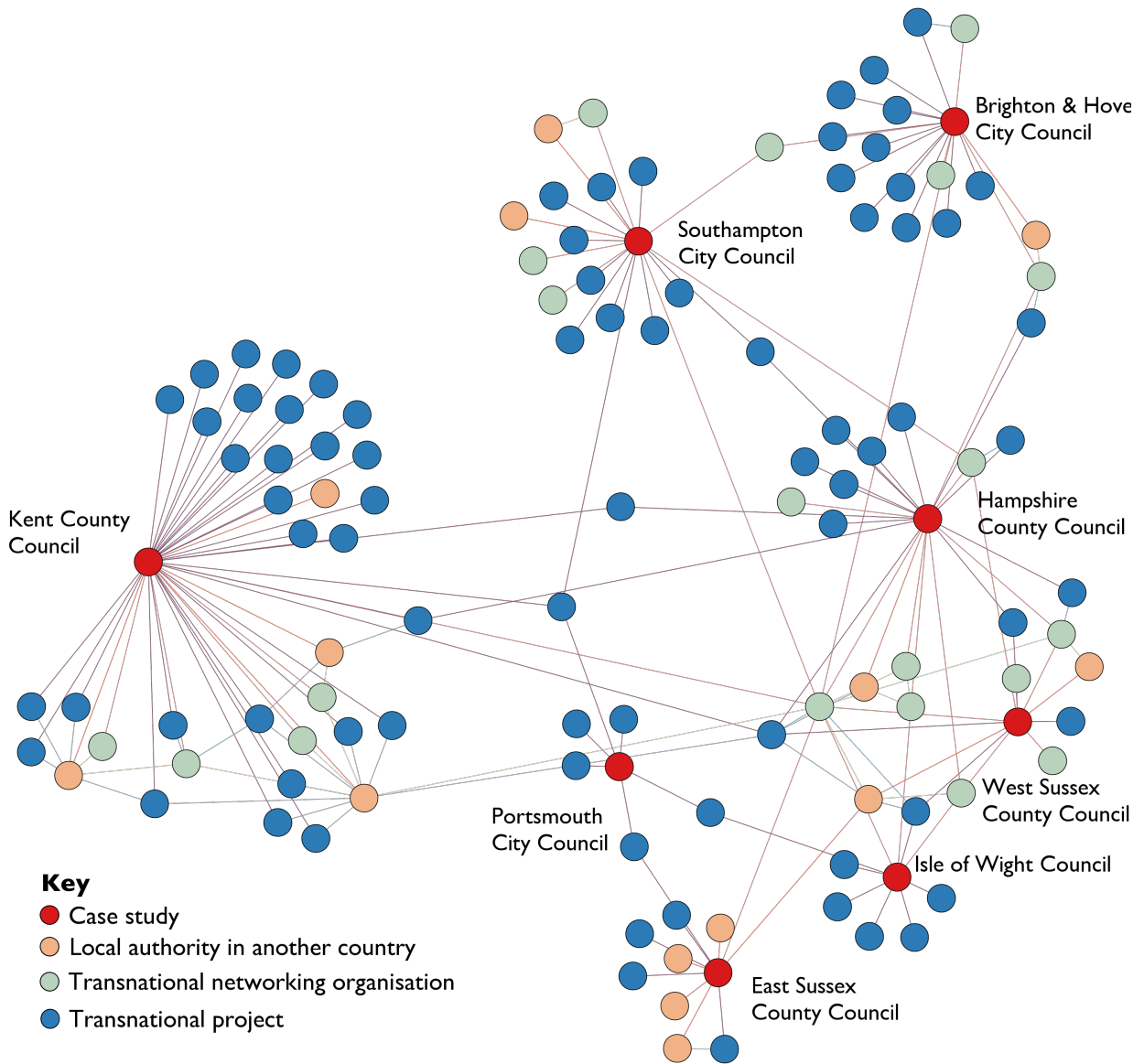
East Sussex County Council

Figure 2. Transnational networking by eight local authorities between 2001-11