



English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

ADEPT policy statement on environment and climate (August 2025)

ADEPT welcomed the introduction of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (the Bill) in July 2025 and the opportunity it presents for strengthening local leadership and place-based service delivery. It is essential that the professional expertise and operational knowledge of local government is fully recognised and utilised as devolution moves forward.

However, we are very disappointed that the Bill does not propose to transfer or introduce new statutory environmental or climate-related functions to Strategic Authorities. ADEPT continues to engage positively with Ministers and officials at Defra and DESNZ to help strengthen the local delivery of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), climate adaptation, and net zero. The Bill, as currently drafted, represents a major missed opportunity to build on this by giving a more robust statutory basis to local environment and climate leadership.

We consider this to be a step backwards, and a significant risk to the delivery of the EIP, resilient communities, and decarbonisation – particularly in those areas where councils are now working hard to deliver the government’s devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR) agenda.

We were pleased that our previous engagement with government led to the inclusion in the Level 2 devolution deals announced in March 2024 for Buckinghamshire, Surrey and Warwickshire of a commitment to support opportunities for strategic leadership in planning, advising and coordinating action on climate and environment matters for the areas. This included support for the proposal for a local Environmental Improvement Plan to enable joined up delivery of local objectives and government’s EIP, net zero and climate adaptation ambitions.

It was also positive to see that in the December 2024 Devolution White Paper the list of proposed areas of competence for Strategic Authorities to be set out in law included environment and climate change. The White Paper stated that:

Strategic Authorities will play a crucial role in preparing for the future and tackling climate change and nature emergencies at the local and regional level. Local, place-based environmental leadership is an essential part of this.

Despite further engagement with government over recent months, we are very disappointed that the Bill does not propose to transfer or introduce new statutory environmental or climate-related functions to Strategic Authorities. At the very least we would have expected the functions referenced in the White Paper to be included in the Bill (where they are not already a statutory requirement such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies). The Bill should include some indication of the environment and climate functions to be given to Strategic Authorities, in the same way as functions under the other areas of competence are outlined. The absence of this is very concerning.

We appreciate that the Bill allows for additional functions and devolved powers to be given to Strategic Authorities in the future. Mayors will also be able to appoint Commissioners and

convene stakeholders in each of the seven areas of competence. However, this does not alter the fact that there is nothing on environment and climate in the Bill as it stands.

We understand that the Bill is a “floor not a ceiling” but this creates a significant risk that environment and climate matters will not get traction locally. This risk is perhaps greatest in those areas where councils will now become constituent members of new Strategic Authorities and, for those still in two-tier areas, going through LGR. In the current financial situation and with many local authorities focussed on developing their LGR proposals and working to ensure that statutory services are safe and legal on day one of the successor authority, non-statutory matters will inevitably have a lower priority. There is a significant risk that environment and climate ambitions will not be delivered except where there are specific statutory duties and funding to do so.

This is a particular and immediate risk for those councils in the six Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) areas. Our members in these areas are already working to design the new Strategic Authorities and are using the Bill as a template. There is a further risk in those existing larger county councils that may be disaggregated because their population is well above the government’s 500,000 population guideline for unitary authorities: here, colleagues are having to redesign services so that functions currently integrated at a county level, such as highways and waste management, are split between two or more new unitary councils.

In order to mitigate these risks and give a more robust statutory basis to local environment and climate leadership we would urge that – as a minimum – the relevant section of the Bill is strengthened by the addition of the relevant wording from the White Paper. We would also urge that government considers applying a similar approach as is taken in the health and wellbeing section of the Bill which will introduce a new statutory requirement for Strategic Authorities to have regard to the need to improve the health of local people and to reduce health inequalities when they act. A corresponding duty in respect of environment and climate would ensure that these matters are properly considered in all policies and actions. A further step would be to give Strategic Authorities a specific duty to produce an environment and climate action strategy in the same way that they will be required to produce Local Growth Plans and Spatial Development Strategies.

We support the [briefing](#) of 27th August 2025 prepared on behalf of Wildlife and Countryside Link and Climate Emergency UK calling for a statutory climate and nature duty. We will work with these partners and the wider coalition of signatories to the briefing to build support for constructive amendments as the Bill is debated in Parliament.