

Lords Report Briefing: The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill – Nature & Climate Duty

30 March 2026

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)).

Executive summary

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will establish powerful new strategic authorities whose decisions on planning, housing, transport and infrastructure will shape England's carbon emissions, climate resilience and natural environment for decades to come. Despite this, the Bill still contains no clear mechanism to ensure these authorities consistently contribute to the UK's legally binding climate and nature targets.

A robust Climate and Nature Duty is essential to close this gap. National oversight bodies have made clear that the sustainable energy transition and meeting nature recovery targets depends on effective local and regional action, yet existing duties are weak, inconsistently applied and routinely outweighed by other obligations or political concerns. Without a clear statutory duty, there is a real risk of policy misalignment, legal uncertainty, lost investment and backsliding on national ambition.

The Duty proposed is strongly supported by local authorities, businesses and civil society alike. It would consolidate existing obligations, align local action with national targets, and provide the clarity and legal certainty that investors, developers and local leaders need. There are strong precedents for this approach, including existing duties on the Greater London Authority, NHS bodies, the Crown Estate and Ofwat, and public support for environmental action remains high.

A strengthened Climate and Nature Duty is a proportionate, common-sense amendment. It would ensure devolution becomes a driver of climate-ready, nature-positive growth rather than a source of inconsistency and risk.

Peers are urged to support Amendment 311.

Introduction:

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill seeks to create a more consistent system of devolution in England, establishing 'London-style' strategic authorities with responsibility for housing, planning, land use and transport across regions of around 1.5 million people. These bodies will prepare regional growth plans, set frameworks for local planning, hold revenue-raising powers, take on development and land assembly functions, and shape long-term patterns of infrastructure and economic development. These decisions will directly influence emissions, energy investment, land-use change and nature recovery outcomes.

Yet, despite the scale of these new powers, the Bill still contains no provisions to ensure that climate mitigation, climate adaptation and nature recovery are fully and robustly embedded in the decisions of the new authorities. It acknowledges that Strategic Authorities will play a crucial role in tackling climate change and nature loss at the local and regional level, but it does not provide the legal mechanics needed to make this a firm reality. This risks entrenching a structural gap between national environmental ambition and the new local decision-making architecture, impeding progress towards pressing national priorities, such as securing sustainable energy and halting ecosystem collapse.

Introducing a Climate and Nature Duty for these authorities would ensure that they contribute meaningfully to statutory goals under the Environment Act 2021, the Climate Change Act 2008 and, delivering the coherence required for consistent national progress.

Why a strengthened Climate and Nature Duty is needed:

(*Amendment 311 - Baroness Willis)¹

1. National oversight bodies have identified a fundamental gap:

The Office for Environmental Protection has warned that progress on nature recovery remains far too slow to meet legal commitments, while the Climate Change Committee has repeatedly stressed that meeting carbon budgets will depend heavily on effective local and regional action. Despite this, many strategic local decisions continue to be taken without meaningful reference to national climate, nature or air quality targets, highlighting the gap that needs to be addressed in order for progress to be consistently delivered.

2. Current duties are insufficient

Existing duties rely on weak "have regard" language, lack clear links to measurable outcomes, and are routinely outweighed by stronger, more explicit short-term growth-focused obligations. This creates

¹ This amendment is supported by a range of stakeholders including Climate Emergency UK, UK100, The Better Planning Coalition, Friends of the Earth, The Wildlife Trusts, South East Climate Alliance, Hampshire Climate Action Network, Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT).

a structural imbalance in decision-making, allowing environmental considerations to be deprioritised.² Given the range of views held by regionally and locally elected representatives on the energy and nature transition, this issue is too important to rely solely on local political will. Far from curtailing local leadership, a clear Duty would instead empower ambitious authorities and level the playing field, ensuring no region becomes a weak link in the national effort.

The legal implications of *not* addressing this gap are significant. Without a clear duty, strategic authorities may interpret their responsibilities inconsistently, creating misalignment with central Government policy and legal targets, and exposing decisions to legal challenge. This ambiguity undermines investor confidence, delays delivery, and weakens the overall coherence of the policy framework.

3. It is legitimate and appropriate for central government to impose this Duty

An objection to statutory duties is that they constrain devolved decision-making. This concern, while understandable, is misplaced here. The UK's climate and nature targets are set in primary legislation, the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Environment Act 2021. These are not ministerial preferences or policy choices that can be set aside: they are legally binding national commitments. It is therefore entirely legitimate, and indeed necessary, for central government to require that bodies exercising public power contribute to their delivery.

This is precisely the model applied to the Greater London Authority, to NHS trusts and integrated care boards under the Health and Care Act 2022, and more recently to the Crown Estate and Ofwat. In each case, Parliament has judged it proportionate to impose environmental duties on bodies whose decisions materially affect the prospects of meeting statutory targets. Strategic authorities under this Bill are in an analogous position, and the same logic applies.

The Duty does not override local decision-making or remove flexibility. It simply requires that climate mitigation, adaptation and nature recovery are given due weight alongside other statutory objectives. That is a floor, not a ceiling.

4. The energy transition requires consistent cross-national action — and cannot be left to chance

The current geopolitical situation makes this argument more pressing than ever. Instability in the Middle East, notably the ongoing conflict in Iran, has once again exposed the vulnerability of economies that remain dependent on imported fossil fuels. The UK's energy security, as well as its long-term economic resilience, depends on accelerating the domestic, renewable clean energy

² Recent research by UK100 found that 88% of local authorities in their network support a statutory climate duty provided it comes with necessary powers and funding. See UK100, Local Net Zero 2.0: The moment to deliver (2024)

transition. Strategic authorities, through their planning, housing, transport and infrastructure functions, are central players in that transition.

If the pace of the clean energy shift is left vulnerable to political fluctuations at the local and regional level, with some authorities prioritising it strongly and others doing the minimum, the result will be fragmented, inconsistent progress that undermines both national targets and consumer interests. Households in regions that lag behind will face higher energy costs for longer; businesses will face greater planning uncertainty; and the UK as a whole will remain more exposed to global fossil fuel price shocks, possibly necessitating greater central government intervention.

A statutory Duty provides the consistent, cross-national framework necessary to maintain momentum, ensuring that the energy transition is embedded in strategic decision-making regardless of which parties hold power in individual regions. This is not uniformity, it is the minimum common baseline that a legally binding statutory target requires.

5. Local Nature Recovery Strategies need statutory backing to be effective

A strengthened Climate and Nature Duty would reinforce the delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs). LNRSs are designed to guide where nature protection and recovery should take place, in connection with the Nature Recovery targets under the Environment Act 2021. Without a clear duty on strategic authorities, they risk being treated as advisory documents rather than frameworks with real legal weight. Embedding the Duty would ensure that regional growth plans and devolved land-use decisions are properly aligned with LNRSs and Environment Act priorities.

6. The benefits for people, communities and the economy are clear

Without a strong Duty, climate and nature ambitions risk being neglected, with direct consequences for communities: loss of green jobs, weakened economic resilience, greater exposure to flooding and heat, worsening air quality, and accelerated loss of valued green spaces.

Conversely, a strengthened Duty would reduce long-term costs, support high-quality development, and deliver more resilient, healthier communities. Crucially, recent polling has reiterated that greater action on tackling climate change and nature recovery remains popular with the public.³ More in Common polling shows that nature is a major source of pride for the public, second only to the NHS, and, despite the pressures of daily life, 83 per cent say that restoring it is important or a top priority to them personally. This rises to 91 per cent for Labour voters.⁴ This is not a niche concern, it is a mainstream public priority.

³ <https://www.ippr.org/articles/apathy-and-opposition> ;

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/national-trust-calls-on-people-to-ask-their-mp-to-step-in>

⁴ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/national-trust-calls-on-people-to-ask-their-mp-to-step-in>

The Duty would also provide vital long-term certainty for investors, developers and local partners — supporting sustainable private investment in the transition and helping authorities deliver better value for money over time.

7. It does not add new burdens — it consolidates existing ones

Crucially, this is not about creating new obligations from scratch. Authorities are already linked to national climate and environmental law. The Duty simply ensures that these obligations are applied consistently and coherently at the strategic level, avoiding the inefficiency and legal risk of retrofitting or correcting poorly aligned decisions further down the line.

8. There is strong cross-sector support:

Support for a statutory Climate and Nature Duty is broad, deep and growing. Over [100 businesses](#) have twice signed open letters in support. The [Local Government Association](#), the [District Council Network](#), London Councils, ADEPT and the vast majority of [UK100 members](#) — representing 88% of UK100's network — have all called for a statutory duty to ensure effective climate action at local level.

Over [500 councillors](#) from across England and from almost every major party have signed an open letter in support of a stronger Duty, including more than 20 council leaders or deputy leaders, 70 cabinet members, London Assembly Member Leonie Cooper, and Labour Mayoral candidate for Hampshire & Solent, Lorna Fielker. This breadth of cross-party, cross-sector support demonstrates that the Duty is not only necessary but widely recognised as essential to deliver coherent, future-proofed devolution.

Precedents:

The inclusion of a climate and nature duty for strategic authorities is entirely consistent with how Parliament has approached comparable bodies:

- **The Greater London Authority** was established with climate and biodiversity duties from the outset. As it currently stands, the Bill will create a two-tier system — one strategic regional authority with these duties, and all others without. That anomaly should be corrected.
- **The Health and Care Act 2022** placed duties on NHS trusts and integrated care boards to have regard to statutory emissions and environmental targets.
- **The Crown Estate** and **Ofwat** have both recently had their statutory duties updated to require consideration of nature and climate targets.

In each case, Parliament has judged it proportionate and appropriate to require major public bodies to align with legally binding national targets. The same applies here.

Conclusion:

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to align England's new devolved architecture with the UK's legally binding climate and nature goals. Report Stage is the last real chance for the Lords to ensure that opportunity is not missed.

Amendment 311 would ensure that Strategic Authorities are required to contribute to climate mitigation, adaptation and nature recovery, providing the consistent statutory baseline that national targets demand, that local leaders and investors need, and that communities deserve.

It is proportionate. It is well-precedented. It is strongly supported. And in the context of an accelerating energy transition and growing geopolitical instability, it is more urgent than ever.

Peers are urged to support **Amendment 311**.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 96 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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