



English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill - Better Planning Coalition briefing for Commons second reading

About the Better Planning Coalition

The Better Planning Coalition (BPC) represents over 40 organisations working across the environment, housing, planning, landscape, heritage and transport sectors with one common goal: a planning system fit for climate, nature and people.

Summary of main points

This briefing focuses on the interactions between the English Devolution Bill and the planning system (including housing, transport and health).

Together with the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, this Bill will over time create a very powerful regional layer of authorities covering planning, housing and transport.

Given the significant powers on offer, the Bill needs to do more to ensure

1. Sufficient scrutiny of strategic mayors and authorities
2. Strategic mayors and authorities address the needs of all communities
3. Long-term issues are addressed, such as tackling climate change (including adapting to a changing climate), restoring nature and tackling health inequalities
4. The transition to strategic authorities does not overwhelm existing resources still further, given it will take place alongside major local government reorganisation

Powers for strategic authorities

The Bill aims to standardise how devolution within England will work. The aim is for all of England to move over time to having London-style devolution with strategic authorities having “sensible economic geographies” with a population of around 1.5 million.¹

Strategic authorities will have significant powers, including:

- Public bodies will have to have regard to strategic authorities’ growth plans (where growth plan objectives are agreed with central government) (clause 38)
- The strategic authority will be the transport authority for their region through their transport plan, becoming the sole local transport authority for their region (clause 29 and schedule 9). They will also define the key route network of roads in their region and constituent authorities can be directed to follow their instructions in the management of this road network (clause 27)
- Local Plans from constituent authorities need to conform with strategic authorities’ spatial development strategies² and planning decisions need to be in conformity with

¹ MHCLG, [English Devolution White Paper](#), December 2024

² Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities will not only be ‘strategic authorities’ for the purpose of the English Devolution Bill but also ‘strategic planning authorities’ under the Planning and

it (as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill). Mayoral strategic authorities will have call in powers for significant developments (clause 31)

- Strategic authorities can take on housing and land assembly powers from Homes England and constituent local authorities (mayoral authorities just need to consult those local authorities affected when using these powers though non-mayoral strategic authorities need agreement to use them) (clauses 34 and 35)
- They can require local bodies to meet them in the exercise of their core functions (clause 21)
- They can raise funding from their mayoral precept, transport levies and mayoral community infrastructure levy, plus some borrowing powers (clauses 11, 12 and 13)

The Bill also makes it easier to give strategic authorities more powers in future.

1. Scrutiny of strategic mayor and authorities

Given the scale of powers on offer, the Bill is relatively light on scrutiny or consultation requirements. Duties will be carried forward from existing legislation relating to strategic authorities taking on the function of, for example, fire and rescue authorities or in relation to the appointment of commissioners to whom strategic mayors would delegate functions. New spatial development strategies do not include a right to be heard for those making representations in their development, unlike with Local Plans.

This is in comparison with London where the directly-elected London Assembly forms the Greater London Authority together with the Mayor and has significant powers to scrutinise London's public bodies, including to ensure they attend hearings and provide papers. Powers for scrutiny committees of combined authorities are much weaker and members are appointed by the authority rather than directly or indirectly elected.

This matters because of the combined powers of strategic authorities which will be able to coordinate policy and delivery on more issues and over a bigger scale. The English Devolution Bill is a missed opportunity to address this scrutiny and consultation deficit.

2. Addressing the needs of all communities, including rural communities

The concept of strategic authorities draws on the previous development of metro mayors for large urban areas. Much of their focus will be on economic growth, transport and other infrastructure, and the Government is clear that it sees cities and larger towns as the focus for economic growth and infrastructure investment.³

There is therefore a risk that rural communities will be sidelined as strategic authorities draw up their strategies and develop their workplans. The Bill has no mention of rural communities and it should be amended to ensure that strategic authorities proactively consult with rural communities and have regard to their needs.

Infrastructure Bill. However, the latter term (and the responsibility to draw up a spatial development strategy) can also encompass upper-tier authorities where a CA or CCA has not yet been formed, or groups of such authorities where they have agreed to form a strategic planning board to collaborate on a joint spatial development strategy or have been directed to do so by the Secretary of State.

³ HM Treasury [UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy - GOV.UK](#), June 2025

3. Long-term issues – health, nature and climate change

We welcome the duty to have regard to the need to improve the health of people in their area and reduce health inequalities (clause 43). Some additional duties will carryover from existing separate pieces of legislation. These focus on the development of strategies like the local transport plan (eg the duty to take account of national government climate policy) or spatial development strategies (which must be designed to secure that the use and development of land in the strategy area contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change and take account of any local nature recovery strategy).

But strategic authorities' powers go beyond just writing strategies. They include running transport services, calling in major planning applications and taking on housing delivery from Homes England and individual local authorities. Given this powerful delivery role, stronger duties to have special or due regard to contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change and to restoration of nature are needed in the Bill.

Given air quality is so strongly linked to health inequalities and the decisions of local political leaders can really make or break progress on air quality, there is also a strong case for including duties on air quality in the Bill. This is particularly the case given strategic authorities powers over transport and planning which are so important for air quality, as highlighted in the 2022 Chief Medical Officer's annual report.⁴

4. Transition plan for strategic authority resourcing and longer-term specialist skills

The transition to strategic authorities takes place alongside local government reorganisation. Strategic authorities will be developing new spatial development strategies as well as revising or writing new growth, skills and transport strategies.

Strategic authorities will need to draw on the resources of existing local authorities, particularly for planning and transport (the Planning and Infrastructure Bill's impact assessment estimates that the preparation of spatial development strategies would require a total of 150-175 extra planners across a range of experience levels). The Government should therefore set out how it will support the resourcing of this transition. There is a particular concern about the impact on specialist roles, including those working on areas like records for commons, village greens, and rights of way or heritage services.

Additionally, new age restrictions on Level 7 apprenticeship funding will damage the pipeline of qualified planners. The Government should set out a package to avoid this, eg through investment to train planners while an alternative programme is developed.⁵ The RTPI has recommended that the Government should set out the exact expected need for planners over the next 10 years to deliver devolution and planning reforms, and set out how the system will be provided with these workforce numbers. This should be achieved through the preparation of a long-term workforce strategy.

Contact details:

Richard Hebditch, Better Planning Coalition coordinator
richard@betterplanningcoalition.com / 07970 177441

⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, [Chief Medical Officer's annual report 2022: air pollution](#), Dec 2022

⁵ RTPI | [RTPI warns of major threat to planning profession from apprenticeship restrictions](#), August 2025