

Thank you for taking the time to attend the CLOA AGM today. I appreciate the many pressures on our members, professional and personal, and hope that the programme we have for you makes this a rewarding morning.

This time last year we were in the early stages of the pandemic. Looking back, our first online AGM seems a world away. During the past year I am sure that you all, like me, have found the support of colleagues and peers vital to keeping your head above water.

Later on today we will hear some of the many examples of innovation, response and recovery that have been borne out of necessity in extreme circumstances. They are an inspiration in a continually uncertain world. Across the country, local government has shown that with resourcefulness and determination, new partnerships, new ideas and new models can continue to reach and improve the lives of people in our communities. We have developed a social resilience to build from.

Over the last year we have continued to provide up to date information, case studies and good practice, and I'd like to thank Heidi Bellamy at Culture First for her extraordinary energy and commitment in keeping the CLOA machine on the rails. She really has gone well beyond in order to ensure our services have responded to the imperative for moving to digital, putting in many more hours than she is paid and I am also personally grateful for her considerable patience, intelligent suggestions and efficient administration of all our business.

We have been able to cascade Covid-19 updates and guidance, highlighted recovery frameworks & reopening plans. We've shared information on funding opportunities through our e-bulletin and website and input into numerous policy debates, reviews and thinkpieces. These exchanges are vital to retaining our status as the lead body for local government culture and leisure professionals, they provide a chance to highlight the quality, depth and range of our work, and ways for us to debate, analyse, and lead thinking in the sector.

In aiming to provide you with the best possible service, we have offered a programme of virtual roundtable events which have proven enormously popular. These have enabled CLOA members to share experiences, common challenges and knowledge regarding potential solutions on a wide range of topics and we hope to continue them into the future.

This programme could not have been possible without your Executive Committee members who have chaired, programmed and contributed to topics including:

- **Tourism & the Visitor Economy**
- **Climate Emergency**
- **Culture under Covid**
- **Topical issues for Archives**
- **Tackling Health Inequalities**
- **The Future is Phygital – Libraries roundtable**

Particular thanks to Nigel Lynn, Jane Knight, Jane Wilson, Symon Easton, Tony Witton, Sue Thiedeman, Julie Russell and Iain Varah. National partners including Libraries Connected and the National Archives have helped to make these sessions a rich source of knowledge sharing. We also worked with OpenActive to secure a webinar specifically for local authorities.

I'm very proud that CLOA recently adopted a clear statement on [equality, diversity & inclusion](#) in order to highlight our commitment to actively remove barriers and promote accessibility across the sector and in our activities, members and governance. While the EDI statement sets a clear direction of travel, this is such an important subject for us all and we know there is a lot to do in this area to support a more diverse leadership across our sectors and it's only a start. We will be developing an action plan over the coming months.

Immediate Past Chair Ian Brooke gave evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on a National Plan for Sport and Recreation and Vice-Chair Debbie Kaye contributed to the Active-net online panel debate on 'The future of public sector leisure - Post Pandemic'.

A key piece of work being led by the Honorary Secretary, Mark Allman, is the Future of Local Authority Sports & Leisure research project (in collaboration with APSE/LGA). This research will explore how, by embracing a more collaborative, systems-based approach to addressing physical inactivity, local authorities can influence and shape the look and feel of a locality. The research will provide evidence-based guidance for councils, helping them to reconsider the role they play in supporting better place-based outcomes, including post COVID recovery.

We've continued to work with strategic partners such as LGA. Our regular discussions and attendance at the Culture Tourism & Sport Board have helped to keep both officers and Members connected and we have recently been successful in increasing our direct contact with central government as a result. CLOA has also input into the soon to be published LGA guide that will support Councils considering reverting their leisure operation to an in-house model.

We collated your queries regarding the Arts Council England's Cultural Recovery Fund, so that FAQs could be compiled specifically for local authorities who were considering applications. The work of the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership continues to be Chaired by Ian Brooke on behalf of CLOA and recently this has been focused around developing a Climate Change position statement.

Our collaborative project with Sport England, Navigating Local Systems, continued and we produced a set of [learning resources and practical tools](#) from the experience of the 3 localities – Liverpool, Luton, and Wakefield - about the journey to better understand the local system they work within. We also held a roundtable session for those wanting to explore the approach further.

I have attended the Arts Council England Local Government Stakeholders Group, with representatives from LGA, CLUK, Core Cities, London Councils, Rural Services Network and County Councils Network, which has discussed building user confidence for audiences to return, the Culture Recovery Fund and levelling up amongst many other issues. Tony Witton, Sue Thiedeman, Jane Wilson and I also contributed to the AHRC Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery project and met ACE colleagues to discuss the Cultural Cities Enquiry Covid Response.

Caroline O'Neill and Ian Jones have worked hard to ensure active participation from our Welsh Members and attention to the different constraints and initiatives affecting members in Wales. We were delighted to have been joined recently by Sharon Davies from WLGA, counterpart to the LGA's Ian Leete, as an observer on the Executive, which will give us even stronger links to Wales.

Stefania Horne has helped to ensure that we are strategically connected to discussions around parks and open spaces and that CLOA is represented on the Parks Management Association.

A big thank you too, to our two Chief Executives on the committee, Nigel Lynn and Matt Partridge, who have used their influence nationally to highlight the work of CLOA and raise sector issues with decision-makers in Whitehall.

Debbie Kaye has been extremely active as Vice Chair, and I'm grateful to both her and Polly Hamilton for the work they've led in reviewing all our strategic partnerships, and including all the Executive in shaping our priorities and ensuring everyone has a principle stakeholder relationship to manage.

It continues to be a challenging time for us all, but equally to be a time when our work delivers on its enormous potential to be a force for good in our communities. For us to be most effective advocates, our professional association gives us access to influential audiences that we would find impossible to reach individually.

To get the full value of your membership, I'd encourage you to engage as much as possible (the [Members' LinkedIn Forum](#) is a good place to start). It's vital that we continue to refresh and hear new and diverse voices, to keep our debate well-informed, relevant and inclusive, so do think about whether you could join the Executive in the coming years.

I've been honoured to be the Chair of CLOA these past two years and Vice Chair prior to that. I would just like to repeat one last time that CLOA is your association, it exists to support you, as leaders. Tough times are ahead no doubt, but together we will improve our practice so that our services excel, are resilient and change our places for the better.

Val Birchall – Chair of CLOA