

This short paper from CLOA¹ focusses on the opportunity to reflect and to create much-needed lasting positive change in the impact of our services. It seeks to stimulate debate and set a 'reset and build back better' tone to the national discussion, reclaiming the place-making value of the leisure, sport and culture sectors in the short and long term recovery and emphasising their role in meeting the broader needs of local people. It advocates for working collaboratively at a national level to grow and support a responsive and resilient ecosystem for the future.

Without doubt it's currently hard to be heard in amongst the current emergency response. However, our services can and should be right at the heart of recovery, using this opportunity to really challenge ourselves and colleagues across our sectors about the outcomes we are seeking to deliver.

Local Authority areas will be impacted differently across the country and finding capacity to respond to the challenge is going to be hard; so we need to act together, helping each other through the challenges that lie ahead.

There is clear demand for our work

- Across the country, in the lockdown, people of all ages and backgrounds are finding a new hunger for physical activity, sport and exercise, and for cultural, creative and heritage participation. Leisure and culture have never been more needed or more valued.
- It has been fantastic to see the Government amplify the importance of being active and we have seen people embrace the opportunity to get out of the house and do some exercise as an essential part of life.
- The value of local authority run parks and open spaces has proven incredibly important and helped to reinforce their role as part of the core services to maintain a healthy and active life.
- Libraries across the country have seen an increase in membership as a result of access to EBooks and other online resources.
- Inventive approaches to moving content on-line and enabling people to participate individually or collectively from home offer insight into future operating models.
- As many in the voluntary and private sector have been subject to furloughing arrangements and been unable to respond, Local Authority run cultural services have taken the lead in delivering high quality digital content and

¹ www.cloa.org.uk CLOA represents the interests of local government leaders responsible for culture and leisure across England and Wales. It is not only important in its own right; it acts as the connective hub for many of the influential professional organisations working in the leisure and cultural industries.

engagement during the lockdown and ensured that a cultural offer is delivered to the most vulnerable in our society, including the digitally excluded.

- There has been an acknowledgement of the importance of the cultural, tourism and leisure sectors within the national economy, measures to try and protect them, and reference to the future role of the creative sectors in innovation to support economic recovery.
- Whether as families, individuals, friendship groups or e-learners, as a result of having increased leisure time or improved access to low-barrier activities online, there is a greater thirst for leisure and culture and an acknowledgement of our sectors' potential to enhance daily life, connect people and keep them healthy.
- Locally-produced and locally-curated content is proving popular as residents are seeking experiences which connect them with their neighbourhoods and immediate localities. For example, online nature trails in local parks and green spaces; online access to local historic collections and story-times with local librarians.
- Our services are contributing to individual and community resilience - supporting grieving families and key workers through activities which supplement clinical and talking therapies, enabling people to memorialise and remember those who have lost their lives, and marking the contribution of key workers and volunteers.
- Local places are keen to innovate and design new approaches that can address a range of policy priorities (such as climate change or social cohesion). New partnerships are being built as other agencies recognise the value of the cultural and leisure sector to reach, inspire and provide morale-boosting and uplifting experiences for communities.
- Our role will increasingly be important to the prevention agenda for public health and we have the opportunity to design service provision for the future based on need and addressing social and economic priorities.

The structures supporting our work lack resilience

- We are hindered by a lack of consistent clarity of purpose and values, a complicated resource base, a multitude of unconnected public sector strategies and layers of prioritisation, and a low level of trust between those with the clearest need to work seamlessly together including commissioners, deliverers, national and regional agencies, local government and our communities.
- Facilities with complex partner or contractual arrangements have tended to dominate the debate and at times have skewed the focus away from the purpose of key services.
- Organisations in many places have inadequate crisis continuity plans, cash reserves or flexibility to adapt quickly.

Call to Action - An Appetite for a Rethink

- Local government leisure and culture services have in some places been reduced to minimal capacity following sustained budget reductions.
- We lack high quality information about the supply chains that underpin our operations and have an under-developed understanding of the complexities surrounding the leisure economy, or the diversity of models and interactions within it.
- With a highly precarious workforce, little support for the grass roots and developmental activity, and a disparate approach to policy across the increasingly convergent subsidised and commercial sectors, there is a significant gap in our industrial strategy in relation to leisure and culture.
- We are facing a perfect storm of fragility of operations, inconsistency of approach, declining public funding, declining discretionary spend, and increased demand for services, and are focussed on the immediate challenge of the threat to public health.
- Yet we can play a key role in the economic, health and environmental responses that will underpin many Local Authority recovery plans with significant opportunities within our sector to re-think how our services can strengthen health and wellbeing.
- The Marmot review has demonstrated that the current system has resulted in a lack of progress in reducing health inequalities in the last 10 years. Certain population groups and regions will be disproportionately affected by this current crisis and it is likely that without a joined up approach, gaps will increase.
- There is an enduring need to be consistent nationally but responsive locally. Meanwhile our system is fragmented to the point where interdependencies are tested to the limit. We no longer have confidence that what has grown organically is fit for purpose for the future and we seek to challenge ourselves and our partners to collaborate more closely to create a fit-for-purpose model for the future.
- To help address these major challenges, and harness opportunities, CLOA is advocating the need to establish a clear and jointly owned clarity of purpose
- We believe that a return to “normal” is not an option. A disruptive revolution is needed to revitalise and rethink our approach, so that the sector is fit for the future.

CLOA Call to Action

We see a need to regroup around the unique place-making potential of our sectors. Local government is one local leader amongst many, and we want to work in true collaboration with national government, the provider sector, private business, charities and communities. The present crisis has shown there are many competing needs amongst these partners and we do not serve our places well by jostling for space at the table.

We believe that our sectors are uniquely placed to offer solutions for health & wellbeing, economic recovery, community cohesion and social identity, but to deliver on that promise requires us to re-think received wisdom about how they should function. We have the opportunity to develop new approaches with built-in capability to identify, target and meet needs in our communities.

We therefore call on all our partners to work with us as one, on new narratives, new structures and new business models.

We want to establish a new Culture, Tourism, Sport & Physical Activity Commission – a national coalition of the willing, to use our shared capacity for creative thinking and bring the best minds to bear on these pressing issues, to ensure that debate is well-informed and sector and sub-sector interests do not obstruct a constructive dialogue about system change.

The Commission would:

- Set out a new narrative about the invaluable role of parks, culture, sport, leisure, libraries and tourism
- Better articulate the contributions being made and the 'cost' of failing to protect and develop the richness and diversity of the leisure and culture offer
- Develop an evidence base of good practice within localities (particularly in relation to cross-sectoral practice)
- Identify new financial and investment models to underpin recovery and reset, taking account of local context, the 'levelling up' agenda and the changing role of the public sector
- Address issues of inequality

Specialist expertise in the diverse but connected fields of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Parks, Sport, Physical Activity and Libraries in dedicated work streams, would be pulled together by the Commission to give a rounded and outcome-focused approach across the DCMS portfolio.

Together we can influence public policy so that we relaunch with a clearly stated intention of putting people and places at the heart of our thinking, and fully realise the future opportunities to address inequality, improve lives and strengthen bonds in our neighbourhoods, districts and cities.