

Good morning and thank you everyone for taking the time to attend the CLOA AGM & conference today.

For the next 40mins or so, it's our AGM, (for which it's super important we're quorate - so please don't disappear to put the kettle on!!). We will then have an official tea break, and then we're off for a jam-packed programme; focused on Community Cohesion.

Wherever you live, play, study, work or visit – we all rely on places where everybody can feel safe, welcome, happy and fulfilled throughout their lives.

Today, we'll learn from experts and fellow colleagues about the evidence, and the tested approaches, where physical activity, culture, heritage and creativity (in all its forms), can support cohesive communities – communities which embrace their connections, have a shared vision and a sense of belonging for all.

Over the last year, as well as strategically leading, enabling and delivering, many valued services, CLOA members will have experienced a dramatic General Election, resulting in wide scale change in elected representatives. You may also have experienced local elections just last month, with some equally dramatic changes to the political landscape.

If that wasn't enough to navigate for us all: in coming months we expect to see the most significant changes to local government in 40+ years: with widespread reorganisation of two-tier authorities, and/or the formation of a new map of regional authorities with elected mayors.

This comes at a time that the worldwide landscape remains challenging: there has been political and economic turmoil with newly elected leaders, tariffs and trade wars. We've seen environmental disasters, from floods to fires; and indeed, greater physical and digital threats to our UK security. There is, sadly, greater world conflict too, from Russia and Ukraine to Israel, Gaza and Iran; and beyond.

We know that our CLOA Members will need to dig deep and draw upon a breadth of leadership qualities; to advocate for services, work within restrained resource: and support our frontline staff to navigate complexity with kindness and hope, to create shared outcomes in local place.

At a community level, we need to practice deeper democracy and ensure we are engaging the breadth of voices across our communities, so they feel empowered to lead change for themselves where possible. To do this, we do need to open our hearts and minds to different approaches and perspective in our work.

One of the fantastic strengths of the CLOA family is the wide-ranging ways we seek to support leaders across the system. Executive Committee members have shared advice and support in a range of ways: we've presented and supported several LGA leadership courses, for emerging leaders and politicians, in partnership with Arts Council England and Sport England.

We've also offered support by linking 'members with members', and by enhancing our website, not to mention the fortnightly ebuletin, which always overflows, with important sector news, research policy updates and emerging opportunities.

We've also offered some roundtables, and discussions, on areas of learning: and we will continue to offer these as requested, so please keep sending in your ideas -which could equally be about sharing brilliant practice around a theme!

At our April 25 Executive meeting we welcomed an in-person wider members session, kindly hosted by the LGA. We focused on local government re-organisation and devolution. We were able to listen and share thoughts in small groups; and whilst there aren't many easy answers – it's reassuring (and consoling) that members and key agencies want to help each other. CLOA will continue to try and support on these issues alongside the LGA.

My overall reflection though, was that there was a real energy and bustle in the room. It illustrated, the immense passion we all have for supporting each other to work together, to lead, support and grow the culture, creative and active offer which helps our communities thrive. We are, in my view, undoubtedly a 'force of good' to wider society – so please do keep on moving forward.

Otherwise, since our last AGM and the general election, the CLOA Executive has continued to advocate at a national level. On behalf of our membership, we have been invited to several ministerial discussions (meeting with Stephanie Peacock MP, Sir Chris Bryant MP, Baroness Twycross), across the 'system' or 'sector'.

Similar discussions have occurred with DCMS too – but the fast-changing officer structure continues to make this tricky; we will keep going on establishing rounded conversations for local government, encouraging holistic discussion(s). Our regular attendance and 'mission led' presentations to the LGA Culture, Sport and Tourism Board, has also helped us to work collaboratively to influence government.

More recently, the Executive has also been interviewed for the Arts Council England Review, led by Margaret Hodge; we are currently engaged in several thematic linked roundtables, for Libraries, Museums and Communities. Our response to date is [available on the website](#), and I encourage us all to continue positive dialogue so we can inform and help shape the future. We have also convened an [audience with the Deputy Chief Medical Officer](#), and been engaged by Sport England to inform work of the Chief Medical Officer and DCMS.

Throughout the government and funder discussions, we have worked alongside the LGA to consistently request longer term financial settlements for local government, and less competitive funding. Further, as local government models evolve, we will keep encouraging a better way of working together in local 'place' – striving for a more joined up conversation, which is much closer to the communities we serve, and reflective of local voice.

All of these exchanges are vital to retaining our status as an independent voice for local government and place. They provide the opportunity to highlight the quality, depth and range of all our work, and ways for us to debate, analyse, and lead thinking in the sector.

Advocating for our sector relies on good evidence and robust data: and I would argue were still very much ‘work in progress’ as a sector! Across the cultural remit, Thorsten Dryer and Val Birchall, have wrestled with the subject for the last 12 months, to set an ambition to engage in key national data projects to influence central government thinking. Following exploratory meetings with arms-length bodies, DCMS, MHCLG, LGA, the CLOA Executive has prioritised two main approaches to improve:

- Engagement with the National Cultural Data Observatory project (linking to National Cultural Framework project through participation in the project advisory group)
- Engagement with National Heritage Capital Project

Similarly, Penny Greenwood-Pearsons has taken the lead in our support for the Sport England Moving Communities Board, encouraging more to adopt the platform and steadily encouraging more robust impact measurement using Quality Lived Years (QALY) and/or life satisfaction (WELLBY), measures. Our focus on evidence needs to remain as a continued conversation.

Whilst CLOA protects its independent voice, we know that influence often comes from when many partners are pointing in the same direction! We’ve been working hard to try and achieve this, building on the great work we developed last year.

The work of our [National Alliance for Cultural Services](#) has continued to grow from strength to strength: The Alliance is chaired by Vice Chair, Val Birchall, with great support from the LGA. We convene all the local government focused voices on culture into one Alliance drawing together representatives from many local government networks (District council networks, core and key cities etc); and of course, the key culture arm’s length bodies.

Increasingly, we hope the Alliance is considered as the key forum for local government cultural sector discussion(s), navigating duplication and reducing complexity. More information about the Alliance progress and the statement of common purpose can be found on our [website](#). This work has drawn upon many of our Executive members knowledge and wisdom, and I’m very grateful of the support you have afforded across the last year.

Meanwhile, the Place Based Physical Activity Leadership Network, which was first convened last May 2024, has enjoyed a rapid rise in growth and found itself at the heart of many of the emerging discussion on ‘Active Wellbeing’. We have continued to ensure the network purposefully welcomes wider perspectives, and to truly focus on how we tackle health inequalities, long term.

The network, now called ‘the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network’ regularly engages with officers from DCMS, OHID and Sport England and the wider range of national

partners from health, sport and physical activity. 40-80 participants have attended each session: and many follow the success virtually.

The network produced its first Thought Piece in July 2024 Active Wellbeing: A Movement for Change which first set out our proposed four corner stones and range of evidence-based case studies. This has been accessed many times!

Since then, the network has provided updates and has convened a total of 8 national network sessions. The network and a small organising group have been instrumental in producing updates to DCMS officials and Sport England: and recently produced a wider update called [A Nation in Motion: Why Active Wellbeing must be the Future](#). Planning is under way for next steps to support the network of professionals to share and learn together, and we will continue to ensure the network is dynamic and keeps learning together.

I have also had the pleasure of sharing Our Active Wellbeing approach on several national platforms, engaging with parts of the health system and the traditional 'leisure' system. There is always more to do; and whilst we haven't landed our requests for a wide scale 'prevention' precept or investment: we have certainly 'turned' heads: and the network is now seen as a key part of how we work nationally to create an Active Wellbeing Approach, in every place.

Once again, I should also thank a range of Executive members who have supported this work, directly and indirectly.

It's also important to note that both the Cultural Alliance and Active Wellbeing Leadership Network includes and engages our Welsh Executive members. The issues and challenges are often similar for our Welsh members too, and we continue to have enjoyed representation from Wales on our Committee, through Caroline O'Neill and Ian Jones. Together they convene Chief Culture Officers Wales Group and Chief Leisure Officers Wales Group. Ensuring we cross fertilise our thinking and solutions remains important: there is lots to learn from such cross-border dialogue.

As you'd expect I have some special thanks as I conclude my time as Chair. Firstly, I'd like to once again thank Heidi Bellamy – who is the engine behind so much that we offer members. We have also enjoyed increased sponsorship through Heidi's hard work, and our Treasurer will outline late the opportunity this affords for planned investment in work of the Cultural Alliance and Active Wellbeing Leadership Network.

Special thanks to our Executive member Zsuzsi Lindsay for championing our EDI work: we will hear from Zsuzsi later on the agenda. I'm particularly proud to hand over the baton today to an Executive which is almost full, aiding our resilience; but importantly we are more diverse and reflective of the sector we represent. Great work to all that have helped in this area.

Thanks to:

- Debbie Kaye, as immediate Past Chair, and for brilliant work in chairing the Swimming Alliance.
- Val Birchall and Donna Pentelow as Vice Chair(s);

- Mark Allman as Honorary Secretary: Vince Paliczka as Honorary treasurer
- And of course, for the long service of Matt Partridge and Nigel Lynn, both chief executives who have retired this year.

Finally, I have enjoyed my time as Chair, albeit sometimes tricky to manage around the normal day job! I hope I've made a difference to you as members and indeed the wider sector. I've enjoyed the support of a brilliant group of Executive colleagues as mentioned: and feel genuinely lucky to have had the chance to learn and share the journey with you.

CLOA is well respected for our honest representation, of local place and communities, across both England and Wales. We will continue to be independent and influential. In a changing world, we should be open to presenting our ideas on how the sector or system could evolve to work differently in a new landscape.

To quote Adriene Marie Brown (an emergent strategist)

***Remember - we're always practicing something: 'Practicing upholding the world as it is?' or 'Practicing shifting into the world as you want it to be'***

So please do keep creating a better world - and help everyone across England Wales and Northern Ireland to access the benefits of active wellbeing, culture and creativity

**Julie Russell, Chair of CLOA, June 2025**

#everyoneCANlead.