

## 1. Introduction

It is a pleasure to welcome you all to this year's Annual General Meeting. Our overarching theme, Inclusive Growth: Harnessing Culture, Heritage, Tourism & Wellbeing, sets an important tone for our discussions today on how we harness the power of culture, active wellbeing, heritage and tourism to leverage inclusive growth across a place and the benefits shared fairly across every single community we serve.

I've reflected on my first year as Chair and 2025-26 feels like it's been characterised by a year of uncertainty and challenge. Uncertainty arising from global geopolitical circumstances, major reform with Local Government Reorganisation and shifting political landscapes. We have seen AI in far more areas of our sector than before both as we navigate its use as senior leaders but also as residents and communities harness its use too.

## 2. Navigating the Political Context

We are operating in a climate of global geopolitical uncertainty and anticipating major local government reorganisation (LGR). These shifts bring significant implications for our members' leadership roles. In times of complexity and political change, CLOA's role in supporting sector leaders and the wider sector nationally, is more critical than ever. In response, the Executive has robustly articulated CLOA's position statements across a wide range of policy areas—including libraries, sport and active wellbeing, LGR, museums, and data. These set out CLOA's policy positions and serve as a powerful reminder of the breadth of the policy areas our members lead and the common themes that cut across them. They have proved valuable in providing a coherent and consistent voice of CLOA for the Executive to carry out their role effectively.

## 3. Executive Activity & Member Support

In response to these challenges and opportunities for change, the CLOA Executive has been incredibly active, convening targeted peer networks, and leading interactive roundtables to keep our members connected and supported. Some are highlighted below:

Activity / Initiative	Lead / Host	Focus & Impact
<b>Inclusive Culture Roundtable</b>	Zsuzsi Lindsay (EDI Champion)	Co-creating accessible experiences and inclusive workplaces (September 2025).
<b>Cultural Strategies Think Kit</b>	CLOA Chair	Delivered in partnership with the LGA and

Activity / Initiative	Lead / Host	Focus & Impact
		University of Southampton (November 2025).
<b>Martyn's Law Roundtable</b>	Dan Buck (Committee Member)	Navigating upcoming safety legislation and protective security impacts (December 2025).
<b>Local Cultural Renaissance</b>	Val Birchall (Vice Chair)	Positioning local government as a catalyst, hosted as Chair of the National Alliance for Cultural Services (December 2025).
<b>Visitor Levy Roundtable</b>	Rob Campbell (Committee Member)	Exploring local tourism funding mechanisms and tourism taxes (April 2026).
<b>Pride in Place Roundtable</b>	Grant Taylor (Committee Member)	Leveraging culture to boost local pride, identity, and civic belonging (May 2026).
<b>LGR &amp; Devolution Peer Network</b>	Jayne Knight (Committee Member)	Five dedicated peer network sessions guiding members through structural reorganisation.
<b>Swim Alliance Representation</b>	Hagan Lewisman	Advocating for swimming provision and local leisure water infrastructure.

We also launched a new Aspiring Leaders Award to celebrate and spotlight upcoming talent across our sector.

Our fortnightly bulleting received a fresh new look. This features a highly accessible layout optimized for mobile, tablet, and desktop, offering quicker navigation to headlines so you can stay informed, connected, and inspired effortlessly.

#### **4. National Advocacy, Policy & Data Engagement**

The CLOA Executive has worked persistently on national advocacy, consistently advocating for our members' voices to be heard and pushing for long-term financial settlements and less competitive, fragmented funding streams. Key engagements this year include:

- **Ministerial Meetings:** Direct engagement with Stephanie Peacock MP, Sir Chris Bryant MP, and Baroness Twycross to voice local authority priorities.
- **Strategic Board Attendance:** Maintaining regular attendance at the LGA Culture, Sport & Tourism Board and actively contributed to the Arts Council England Review.
- **Evidence & Data Systems:** Cultural data work led by Vice Chairs Thorsten Dryer and Val Birchall, connecting with the National Cultural Data Observatory and the National Heritage Capital Project. Vice Chair Penny Greenwood-Pearsons leads our input into the Sport England Moving Communities Board, championing critical health metrics like QALY (Quality-Adjusted Life Year) and WELLBY (Wellbeing-Adjusted Life Year).

### 5. National Networks

Our influence continues to grow via core national networks:

- **National Alliance for Cultural Services:** Chaired by Val Birchall, driving cross-sector collaboration and commissioning the development of the landmark National Cultural Framework.
- **Active Wellbeing Leadership Network:** spearheaded by Immediate Past Chair Julie Russell and supported by Vice - Chair Penny Greenwood- Parsons continues to strengthen, bringing partners from across the active wellbeing system who are committed to creating the conditions for people to live more active, healthier lives, especially in places where inequalities mean activity levels and health outcomes are lowest. Their first in person conference takes place next week and is already sold out. The network has achieved rapid national growth, publishing influential thought pieces, and helped shape DCMS and Sport England strategies.
- **Cross-Border Collaboration:** We celebrate the continued involvement of our Welsh Executive members and our close links with the Chief Culture Officers Wales and Chief Leisure Officers Wales, proving the immense value of cross-border learning.

### 6. Acknowledgements & Special Thanks

CLOA thrives entirely on the generous dedication of its people. I want to express my thanks to:

- The Executive Members, who generously volunteer their time and learning.
- The Vice Chairs, Val Birchall MBE, Penny Greenwood Pearsons and Thorsten Dreyer, and immediate Past Chair, Julie Russel, for their support and advice to the Chair and unwavering commitment to advocating for culture and leisure and local authorities.
- Our EDI Champion, Zsuzsi Lindsay, for continuing to shine a bright light on our commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion, and for leading our new Aspiring Leaders Awards.
- Our Treasurer, Vince Paliczka, for leading the comprehensive membership review this year and keeping our organisation functioning effectively and sustainably.



CHIEF CULTURAL & LEISURE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

## **Chairs' Report 2026**

- Our outgoing Executive Member, Mark Allman. Mark's long-standing commitment to CLOA has been incredibly valued by myself and many Chairs before me; we wish him the absolute best.
- Heidi Bellamy, who leaves us in March and this is her last AGM. Heidi is the person who behind the scenes ensures the smooth running of CLOA and provides valuable advice and guidance to the Chair. We'll miss you.
- Our generous sponsors—Playfootball, Blake Morgan, and Bigwave—whose financial support ensures CLOA can continue to advocate and champion culture and leisure effectively.

### **7. Chair's Reflections & Closing Message**

Reflecting on my first year as your Chair, it has been a steep, challenging, but thoroughly enjoyable journey. It has given me opportunities and experiences that stand out as genuine career highlights, challenging me to develop entirely new leadership skills. Through it all, CLOA has maintained its status as a highly respected, fiercely independent voice for culture, leisure, and active wellbeing.

The recent Stephen King Membership Review provided us with a timely and constructive mirror. It rightly recognised the immense value of what CLOA already offers, while highlighting opportunities for us to evolve, modernise, and broaden our reach.

Thank you for your ongoing support, passion, and engagement. Here's to another highly successful year. Enjoy the annual conference!

**Donna Pentelow – CLOA Chair**