

Position Statement

CLOA (Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association)

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Title of Position Statement

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and Devolution

Purpose of the Statement

To set out the association's position regarding key issues in this sector in order to influence and shape thinking in relation to policy development and implementation of LGR and devolution.

Background / Context

Based on the English Devolution White Paper published in December 2024 and subsequent updates, the UK government is driving a major, accelerated programme to end two-tier local government in England and replace it with a system of unitary authorities (LGR) paired with regional, mayoral strategic authorities (devolution). This is intended to create a simpler and more cost efficient system across the country, with decisions closer to the communities affected.

These reforms provide an opportunity to embed the principle of subsidiarity, ensuring that decisions are taken at the lowest effective level, as close as possible to the communities they affect. This is particularly important for culture, sport and leisure services, which are inherently place-based and community-driven.

CLOA's Position

CLOA's base position is the same as the National Alliance for Cultural Services calling for a new approach to:

- Simplify the funding landscape and move towards a more coherent, long-term, strategic partnership investment settlement for place integrating with locally agreed strategies
- Remove duplication of effort across the system and create a single point of strategic discussion between DCMS and local authorities

- Revisit the balance between revenue and capital funding; investment in new capital schemes should always include appropriate provision for revenue.
- Create a national strategy for culture developed with the key stakeholders including local government and which analyses and addresses the brakes and accelerators on country-wide cultural development
- Explore an “area specialism” element to funding, relating to local contribution to national strategic priorities (eg tourism, creative industries cluster, skills)

In relation to local government reform and devolution, specifically, CLOA's position is:

1. Local government as a core system leader in place-based delivery

Local authorities play a fundamental role in delivering and supporting local ecosystems across culture, sport and physical activity. They operate facilities, commission programmes, fund community providers, and convene partnerships. Any devolution or reorganisation must recognise councils as the primary strategic leaders in shaping local outcomes.

2. Need for a simplified and coherent national–local relationship

The current landscape for funding, policy, and partnership working is fragmented. CLOA advocates for:

- A clearer national framework that aligns with local strategies and priorities
- Reduction in duplicated effort across national bodies, agencies and funding programmes
- A single strategic interface between central government (such as DCMS) and local authorities, applicable across culture, sport and leisure

3. Long-term, place-based investment settlements

Short-term or piecemeal funding undermines stability and strategic planning. CLOA calls for:

- Integrated, multi-year investment settlements built around local place priorities
- Funding models that flex to different local governance arrangements, including combined authorities, counties, unitary councils and expanded mayoral structures
- Strategic partnership investment that supports the full ecosystem (not just individual sectors or institutions)

4. Better alignment of revenue and capital funding

Whether for arts centres, libraries, sports facilities, parks or leisure estates, capital investment often does not include the revenue required for sustainable operation. CLOA's position is that:

- Any future devolution deals or reorganisations should ensure capital investment is matched with long-term revenue funding

- National policy must recognise the need for lifecycle management and long-term viability of community assets

5. Developing a national strategy that genuinely integrates local government leadership

CLOA calls for a national strategic approach – for culture, sport and physical activity – that:

- Is co-designed with local government
- Addresses systemic barriers and enablers to local delivery
- Aligns with devolved structures, ensuring consistency while allowing local tailoring
- Recognises cross-sector collaboration (e.g. health, education, high streets, community safety)

6. Recognition of local specialisms and contributions to national goals

Local areas often develop unique strengths – whether in cultural industries, tourism, elite sport pathways, community wellbeing, or skills development. A devolved funding approach should:

- Incentivise and reward local specialisms
- Allow places to shape investment around their contribution to national priorities
- Reflect differing geographies, needs and opportunities

7. Clearer recognition of statutory and core local responsibilities

As with libraries in the arts text, CLOA argues more broadly that:

- Central government should clearly recognise the statutory and essential public service role of local cultural, sport and leisure provision.
- These services should not be treated as optional or siloed functions but as integrated, place-making assets vital to health, wellbeing and community cohesion

Recommendations / Calls to Action

CLOA calls on central government, national agencies and strategic partners to:

- **Embed local government leadership** formally within devolution and reorganisation frameworks for culture, sport and leisure, recognising councils as core system leaders in place-based delivery.
- **Embed the principle of subsidiarity** within devolution and reorganisation frameworks, ensuring that decisions on culture, sport and leisure are made at the most local appropriate level, supported—but not overridden—by national and regional structures.
- **Establish a single, coherent national–local strategic interface** for culture, sport and physical activity, reducing duplication across departments, arm’s-length bodies and funding programmes.

- **Design multi-year, place-based investment settlements** that align with local strategies and reflect differing governance arrangements, including unitary authorities, combined authorities and mayoral structures.
- **Ensure all future capital investment programmes** include appropriate, long-term revenue provision to support sustainable operation, maintenance and lifecycle management of community assets.
- **Co-develop a national strategy for culture, sport and physical activity** with local government, integrating devolved powers and funding with national policy objectives across health, education, skills, town centres and community wellbeing.
- **Recognise and reward local area specialisms** within funding and investment models, enabling places to shape delivery around their contribution to national priorities while reflecting local need, geography and opportunity.
- **Provide clearer recognition of statutory and core local responsibilities**, including libraries and broader cultural, sport and leisure services, as essential public services integral to place-making and prevention agendas.