Thank you for the introduction, Jessica.

It’s a pleasure to be here. I think you may have been expecting someone else a couple of weeks ago, but I am absolutely thrilled to have taken on the Civil Society portfolio and to be here today.

Thank you Carol and Jessica for inviting me. I know this is a big event in the ACF calendar, as well as being your first ‘in person’ conference in the last three years.

It is also my first engagement as Minister for Civil Society, and I am delighted to be in the presence of so many inspiring leaders of such a vital part of our sector.

Trusts and foundations are lifelines to so many civil society organisations - providing crucial independent funding to enable them to carry out their work and support communities across the country.

I’d like to extend my thanks and appreciation to you, the leaders of trusts and foundations, for the resilience you’ve shown over the past few challenging years. And the determination you’ve displayed in tackling our current economic challenges.

Your wealth of experience is a clear asset to be harnessed in promoting innovation in philanthropy, empowering the sector, and supporting trusts and foundations to thrive.

As you might know, my early career was in the charitable sector. As a fundraiser, I understood the generosity of the British public as well as the importance of philanthropy.

At Hope House Children’s Hospice, I experienced first hand the challenges that crises can have on giving - I was there at a time where donations dropped 50% during the Kosovo crisis.

We had to come up with solutions at a fast pace. And I’m aware of how - amidst the current pressures - funders have had to quickly adapt to a changing environment.

Throughout my career - in charities, and in politics - I have witnessed the impact that valuable funds can have for those who need it most - from vital health services for children and their families, to tackling homelessness, and levelling up our communities.

I know you have been focussing today on courageous leadership, and what it means over the next 10 years.

To me, courageous leadership is about three things: resilience, collaboration and humility.

We are facing unprecedented times - the global pandemic, climate change, Putin’s war on Ukraine, and the cost of living have created significant impacts across our society.

And it is the civil society organisations who are on the front line - helping individuals and families.

We have seen the resilience of great leaders and trustees who are able to adapt, pivot and flex against these challenges.

I’ve been inspired by the work and innovation in the civil society sector to make precious resources go further to reach those most in need.

I also believe that resilience means drawing on support.

I’m aware that trusts and foundations are seeing increased demand, and organisations - from small to large - are facing higher energy prices.

And I know that many of you are looking at the grants you have in place with vital civil society organisations - and are now providing flexibility, or additional funding to help them through the challenges they are facing.

In Government, we are also taking action to support these organisations by helping them with their bills over the winter, as part of our Energy Bill Relief Scheme.

And my department will continue to engage constructively across the civil society sector to monitor the impact of rising costs and pressures.

In order to be resilient, to be truly resilient in a way that allows us to ‘spring back’, we also need strong foundations to ensure our impact is sustainable.

ACF’s Stronger Foundations initiative does just that - bringing foundations together to share best practice - from strategy to investment - with the aim of understanding and promoting what works best.

At a time of huge global change, collaboration is more important than ever.

I was impressed to see that your Stronger Foundations format is a world leader, with influence outside the UK.

And finally, courageous leadership is about humility. As leaders, we don’t know it all, and never will. Acknowledging that is courageous.

We must continually listen to those around us - to those whose views resonate with ours - and just as importantly - those which challenge them.

As Minister for Sport, Tourism and Civil Society, including Minister for Equalities, there are - quite literally - countless opportunities to connect across my portfolio and the intersections of this amazing sector.

I am committed to listening to your views, championing the fantastic achievements of civil society, and building a strong relationship together.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I look forward to meeting with some of you this evening, and to working with you in the months and years ahead.