

# CREATIVE COLCHESTER

DEVELOPING THE VISION



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Capitalising on Colchester's creative assets to improve the town's future

Colchester is well known for being the oldest recorded town in Britain, boasting a Norman castle and the former home of Queen Boadicea. It also has a wide-ranging cultural presence including the Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and of course the new firstsite, a leading regional centre for contemporary visual arts which is set to achieve international recognition.

It is this focus on the growing and thriving cultural and creative side of Colchester (18.3 per cent of business in the borough comes from this sector, employing over 5,600 people) that has led to the conception of Creative Colchester.

Creative Colchester recognises culture and creativity as a driver of job creation, economic growth and sustainable community development to raise the profile of the town overall.

Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy was appointed to develop a vision of Colchester with culture and creativity at its heart. The project has been

developed through a series of one-to-one interviews and a workshop with the town's cultural and creative business partners.

This document outlines some of the major economic and social challenges faced by the town, its cultural strengths and weaknesses and the main opportunities for the development of the creative industries - a priority economic sector - over the next five years.

This strategy will help to ensure that the most is made of Colchester's creative assets so that it is widely recognised as offering cultural and creative opportunities for everyone who lives and works there, as well as visitors to the town.

To deliver this strategy, we need input to the action plan from partners in the cultural and creative industries, education and tourism sectors and community organisations. This is the focus of an event on 11 November to which a wide range of representatives have been invited.

Colchester is steeped in cultural heritage, from its Roman ancestry to its place in history as the site of a Civil War siege.

Today, as well as established cultural centres, there is also a wealth of other cultural activity within the borough, including creative education opportunities at the University of Essex and Colchester Institute.

Meanwhile, Colchester can boast 1,300 creative businesses providing employment to over 5,600 employees. A priority growth area for the town, this accounts for 18.3 per cent of all businesses in the borough, and includes advertising, design, film, arts and crafts, performing arts and publishing. Over 156,000 people visit the Arts Centre and Mercury Theatre annually and an estimated 150,000 people will make a trip to firstsite in its opening 12 months - not to mention the 100,000 visitors to the Castle each year.

But with all this to offer, is the town's potential as

a cultural and heritage centre being fulfilled? A new vision and ambitious action plans are being drawn up to ensure Colchester makes the most of its history and tourism potential - and capitalise on its abundance of creative businesses, education opportunities and communities.



Colchester's distance from London means it is a commuter town, but it is also far enough away to be able to develop its own lifestyle offer. The town should see its cultural offering as an important part of what makes it a special place to live, work and visit.

Colchester suffers from the relative geographic anonymity of the Eastern region and is still probably most famous as a garrison town. Yet many people fondly celebrate a creative, quirky, individual spirit that has been encapsulated by new initiatives in the town such as Slack Space, 15 Queen Street and the Colchester Free Festival.

Colchester has an extraordinarily rich heritage and contemporary arts offer, including:

### **Mercury Theatre**

This critically acclaimed theatre company produces a mix of classics and new writing, working extensively with the local community and providing a platform for local performing artists.

### **Colchester Arts Centre**

A celebrated venue offering live music, comedy, performing arts, literature and more. It leads on the development of talent through activities such as East to Edinburgh.

### **Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service**

Colchester's heritage offer includes the Castle Museum, Hollytrees and the Natural History Museum. It has forged successful links with the British Museum and with China and will host an exhibition of Chinese treasures in 2012.

### **firstsite**

Since 1994, firstsite was recognised for its exciting programme of work by local, national and international artists as well as its outreach work in schools and the community. firstsite opened in its new building in September 2011 and is now the most significant contemporary gallery space in the east of England. It has forged a successful partnership with the Tate.

There is yet more cultural activity in Colchester, including **Cuckoo Farm Studios** offering affordable studio spaces for artists, **Signals Media Arts**, one of the country's longest running providers of digital and media activities, and **Keep Colchester Cool** which has emerged as a movement with over 2,500 Facebook friends tapping into a groundswell of support for music and underground culture in the town.

The **University of Essex** and **Colchester Institute** are renowned in many fields, but their presence in the town centre is minimal. The retail and leisure offering is strong with a good selection of independent shops. The nightlife is popular, but can be dominated by younger people at the exclusion of more diverse offerings that appeal to a broader customer base.

In short, Colchester has so much to offer but it needs to get its assets working better together. The opening of firstsite and the development of the St Botolphs Quarter is only a starting point for wider

cultural, economic and social improvements in the town. This is a vision for a joined-up, strategic approach to the development of the cultural and creative offer.

### **Culture – delivering jobs, audiences and visitors**

**Jobs** – The Arts Centre, Mercury Theatre and firstsite together contribute nearly 100 full time equivalent jobs.

**Audiences** – The Arts Centre and Mercury Theatre between them attract over 156,000 visitors, while it reaches a further 25,000 people in the community. firstsite anticipates it will attract more than 150,000 visitors in its first year.

**Tourism:** Estimated at 4.7 million visitor trips per annum. Tourism was worth £224m to the economy of the borough in 2010 and supported more than 5,300 jobs. It is anticipated that with the opening of firstsite, new hotel facilities and other visitor attractions, more than 500,000 extra trips will be attracted per annum.

Figures sourced from Colchester Borough Council Cultural Services Strategic Arts Funding Programme Economic Impact Evaluation (PRIME Model) 2008 and Tourism figures Economic Impact of Tourism to the Borough of Colchester (Cambridge Model) 2008

Culture and creativity are not currently perceived by all as part of the mainstream of life in Colchester, despite the strengths of the sector. There are five main reasons why culture and creativity are not more widely accepted:

### **Limited connectivity to local priorities**

Culture is not widely perceived as being central to the town's 'big issues' which include economic development, job creation, community development and health inequality.

### **Invisibility of the creative economy**

While there are 1,303 creative businesses in the borough with 5,647 employees accounting for nearly 18.3 per cent of businesses and 8 per cent of employees there is no focal point at the heart of the town. The town does not have a high profile regionally or nationally for its cultural offering.

### **Absence of a joined-up approach**

Despite many examples of joint working between organisations there is no co-ordinated approach

for growing the overall market for culture in Colchester. There is also an lack of connectivity between the elements that make up the cultural offering of the town including links to the creative and wider economy, schools and further and higher education.

### **A need for more leadership and vision**

Culture in Colchester requires a stronger vision and set of priorities. While cultural organisations individually have strong established leaders, in the wider town there needs to be a stronger, more joined-up approach between culture, business and the council.

### **The story isn't told**

The lack of attention given to and invisibility of the Town Walls is symptomatic of a wider failing to tell the multiple stories of Colchester to the outside world. The contemporary and historic, cutting edge and family orientated sit side-by-side in the town but are not communicated as widely as they could be.

There is extraordinary potential for culture to make a real difference to all aspects of life in Colchester over the next five years. Currently, the cultural institutions in the town have an individually strong offering, while emerging grass roots activity such as Keep Colchester Cool and its free festival show how popular and vibrant the informal culture of the town is.

However, for culture and creativity to become something as synonymous with the town as the Romans and Civil War, a joined-up approach to developing culture and creativity is required. There are five main opportunity areas to consider:

### **Making Colchester a better place to live in, work and visit**

Provide the kind of 21st century facilities and experiences people expect and value in their town

### **Driving the economy**

Provide jobs, encourage investment, connect to the wider economy and enable innovation.

### **Growing cultural and creative tourism**

With new hotels coming on stream and an increased restaurant offering, Colchester will have the facilities to support a growth in business and leisure visitors who are attracted to a vibrant and buzzy town, centred on St Botolph's Quarter and the existing offering.

### **Improving life in the community**

By demonstrating the value and role of culture at the heart of improving and strengthening communities through health, education, social cohesion.

### **Creating more opportunities for talented young people**

From the power of the arts to improve and transform primary and secondary education through to helping retain highly-skilled graduates in town, a connected and co-ordinated cultural offering can help turn the town into a hub for creative talent of all ages.

firstsite is set to be a nationally significant centre for contemporary visual arts. Designed by award-winning architect Rafael Vinoly and selected from a worldwide competition entry of over 100 submissions, the crescent-shaped building, clad with a unique golden alloy, presents a creative space and a landmark destination.

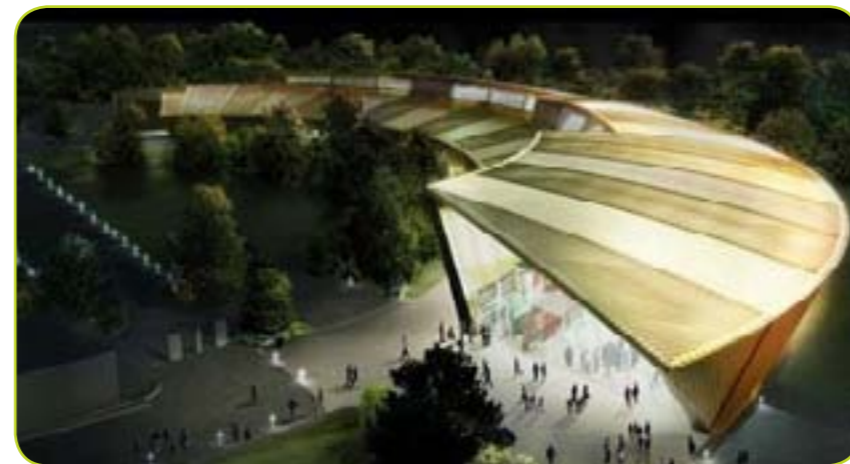
Designed from the start as much more than just an art gallery, it will have a wide-ranging, transformative role as a hub for growing and boosting the creative economy. At 3,200 square metres, firstsite's new home will rank among the largest contemporary art venues in the UK.

The building will include:

- ◇ Flexible presentation spaces for exhibitions of contemporary visual arts
- ◇ Daytime café/evening restaurant with terrace overlooking a new public park
- ◇ Shop selling gifts and souvenirs
- ◇ Artists' spaces for project work and artists-in-residence

- ◇ Purpose-built learning studios for workshops, school groups, community activity
- ◇ 200-seat auditorium with full conference facilities
- ◇ Meeting areas and a range of meeting rooms for hire

firstsite needs to be seen in the context of the Arts Council England's plan for 'hubs', driving forward the creative economy across the East. The intention is that through partnership between leading cultural institutions, higher and further education and creative businesses, there will be a change in the success of towns.



firstsite is very much the catalyst for a broader regeneration of the St Botolph's area through the development of a creative quarter.

This will include an enhanced public realm and an improved setting of previously hidden heritage features, as well as new hotels and better leisure and retail in an area which has needed rejuvenation for many years.



The Centre for Creative Business, planned for the Old Police Station, will offer co-located workspaces for rental by creative businesses including graphic designers, web designers, artists and musicians. It will offer a programme of events and support for the creative community.



Colchester has the strongest creative economy of anywhere in Essex. Mapping shows that there are 1,303 creative businesses accounting for 18 per cent of all businesses in the borough. These businesses employ 5,647 employees or



8 per cent of all employees. The average size of creative businesses is small with only four to five employees.

Nationally, the creative industries account for approximately 7 per cent of the economy as a whole – with the sector delivering growth of 6.2 per cent over the decade ending 2008 which was twice that of other sectors (Work Foundation figures). This shows that, relatively speaking, Colchester is a well-performing town in terms of its creative economy but that there is considerable room for growth.

In particular, creative industries in Colchester are relatively hidden, with no high-profile centre or hub beyond that emerging at 15 Queen Street. This means that their engagement and profile with the wider economy is not as strong as it could be. Equally, we know that many creative businesses are run from rural locations – where broadband access is still an issue.

Colchester's connections and relative proximity to London mean it could and should be attracting businesses wishing to relocate for lifestyle, cost or other factors. However, currently the town has limited recognition factors or infrastructure to attract creative businesses. Graduates from the university or institute who may wish to stay in the town to develop creative businesses lack the support or opportunities that a dedicated business centre or facility could provide.

### Borough ambitions for the creative industries

- ◇ To be a highly sought-after location in East Anglia for inward investing or locating of cultural and creative industries and the best place to start a new business
- ◇ Strong linkages between digital creative media and the visual arts sub-sector
- ◇ More residents to work within the sector and many more receiving education
- ◇ Marketing and promotion of Colchester through cultural and creative industries
- ◇ There is a need for higher-skilled, higher-waged, knowledge economy across the Haven Gateway

The creative industries include the following sectors: advertising, architecture, art and antiques, computer games, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio.

### Strengths

- ◇ A highly qualified workforce
- ◇ Reasonable density of businesses
- ◇ Flexible workforce
- ◇ Proximity to London
- ◇ Low premises cost in comparison to London
- ◇ FE/HE institutions producing graduates
- ◇ Highest number of creative industries in Greater Essex
- ◇ 15 Queen Street

### Weaknesses

- ◇ Shortage of skills
- ◇ Low local profile
- ◇ Lack of dedicated space for artists and designer-makers
- ◇ Restricted networking and clustering
- ◇ Proximity to London
- ◇ Inadequate/expensive broadband
- ◇ Lack of progression routes
- ◇ Lack of support for community and new start organisations

## The vision for culture in Colchester

In five years Colchester will:

- ◇ Continue to have a strong, resilient cultural infrastructure based on a set of core cultural and heritage institutions
- ◇ Be recognised locally and more widely as a town where culture is valued and appreciated for the range of benefits it brings to everyone
- ◇ Place culture at the heart of helping to tackle the core social and economic challenges faced by the borough



- ◇ Continually grow the market for culture through a strategic approach to engaging new and existing audiences through new technology and new types of engagement
- ◇ Have cultural activity happening in every community, with a special focus on those areas with the greatest needs
- ◇ Be a destination town, attracting visitors to its strong and connected leisure, shopping and cultural programme
- ◇ Be a great place to develop a creative career or business, with schools, further and higher education, cultural organisations and private businesses working together in the development of progression routes and programmes of support
- ◇ Have a vibrant, buzzy cultural quarter feeding off and into the success of firstsite

This will happen because:

- ◇ The key players in the town – cultural and heritage organisations, educational providers, public sector and private businesses – will work together on a shared vision
- ◇ There will be a co-ordinated approach to investment from the town, county and Arts Council England
- ◇ There will be a shared strategic approach to delivering community activity from the major cultural and heritage providers
- ◇ Programmes of activity will connect cultural activity to leisure and shopping at key times of the year
- ◇ There will be high-quality public realm and programmes of outdoor activity in St Botolph's Quarter

## The vision for culture in Colchester

- ◇ Culture will not just happen in institutions, but in the spaces between, through collaboration and across sectors
- ◇ Cultural will connect in as many ways as possible to as many people it can
- ◇ Delivering high quality experiences and excellence will remain central



The challenge for culture in Colchester over the next five years is three-fold:

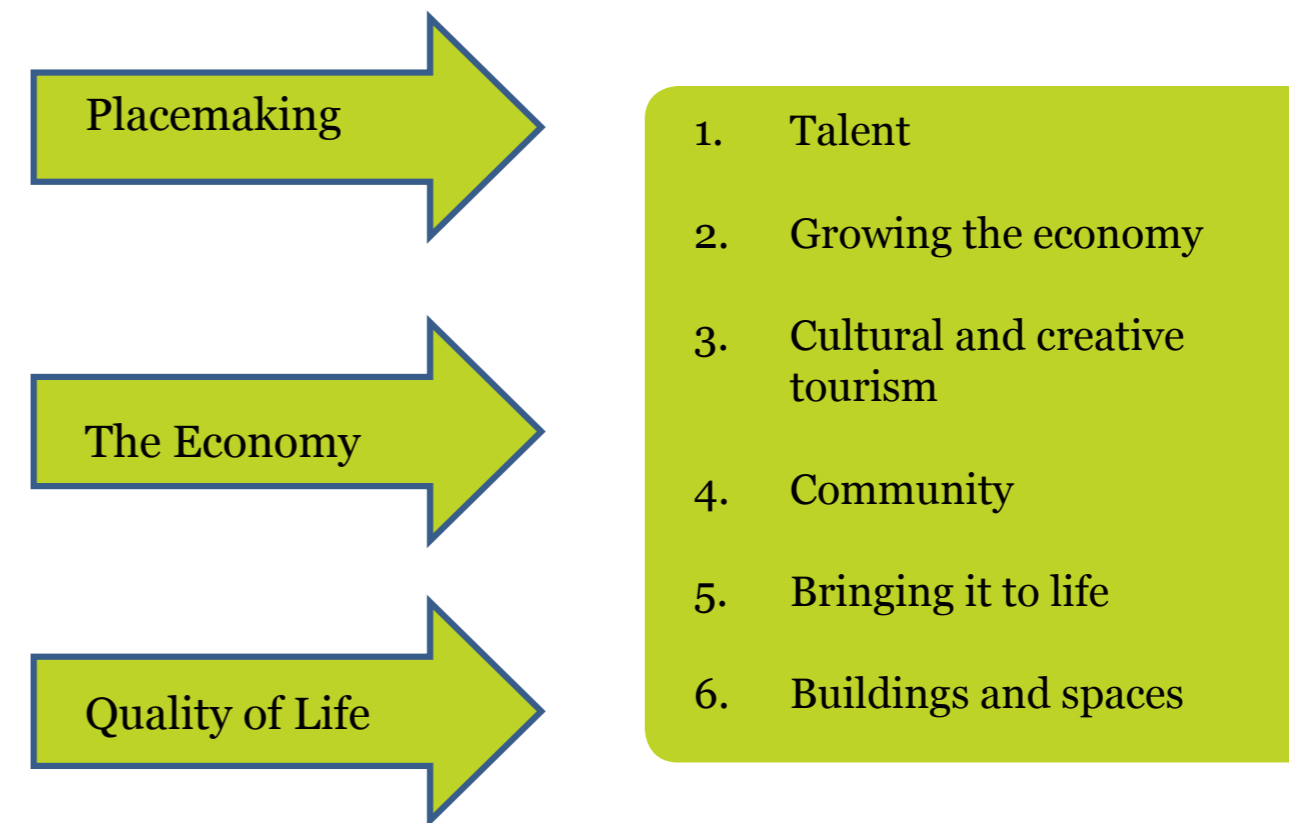
- ◇ To develop new and deeper partnerships between existing cultural providers, education, business and public sector delivery partners. This will help the town to develop a more resilient, better performing and better connected cultural offering
- ◇ To put culture in the mainstream of strategy and planning in Colchester. This means ensuring that the potential of culture to add value and to deliver across a broad range of agendas including economic development, inward investment, improving quality of life and tackling systemic issues such as deprivation, worklessness and social inequality is taken seriously and is actively pursued
- ◇ To connect more deeply and more broadly with people in the town and regionally. A sharper focus on growing the overall market for culture, widening access to availability of culture,

opening up institutions and connecting formal and informal cultural activity

Culture and creativity in Colchester are critical components in ensuring that the overall vision for the town - as a place people want to work, live and visit - is to be realised. The vision for culture in the town is totally focused on how this becomes a reality. Without culture and creativity being more integral to the town this can never become a reality.

If Colchester is to fulfil its potential it will be in part down to the jobs, reputation building, physical improvement and more that culture and creativity bring. The new firstsite development and St Botolph's Quarter will achieve a considerable amount by themselves as they come on stream this year. However, without realising the opportunity that they bring more widely for the town, they will not deliver the long-lasting sustainable impact that creating Colchester as a genuine hub for creativity will.

The following three themes of **Placemaking**, **the Economy** and **Quality of Life** are the big picture themes where culture and creativity can contribute most to the borough and its ambitions for the future.



The six drivers of Talent, Growing the Economy, Cultural and Creative Tourism, Community, Bringing it to Life and Buildings and Spaces are the (often overlapping) programme and investment areas through which the big picture themes will be realised.

### The Vision

To put Colchester on the map, regionally and nationally, through making the most of what makes it unique, its assets and distinctiveness.

To transform perceptions of the town, internally and externally as a great place to live in, work in and visit.

To develop key tourism messages for the town that tell its multiple stories and draw connections between the historic and contemporary.

To make Colchester a destination for leisure and business visitors attracting inward investment.

Above all, to make Colchester a coherent and attractive town, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

#### Driver 1 - Community

**Challenge:** To provide everyone in the community with access to relevant cultural experiences and activities. To find interesting collaborations with creative industries and health, education and community development agencies.

**Opportunities:** Targeted and focused community activity based on need, joint audience development, accurate customer insight, engagement.

#### Driver 2 - Cultural and creative tourism

**Challenge:** To use culture and creativity to drive the growth of Colchester as a destination for business and tourism.

**Opportunities:** Create an identity for Colchester with a narrative spanning heritage and the contemporary and encourage the sector to work together on appropriate packages and offers.

### The Vision

To create the strongest cultural and creative economy in Essex.

To create new, highly-skilled, well-paid jobs in creative and cultural industries.

To connect the creative and wider economy, leading to more innovation and productivity.

A more connected knowledge economy – with the triple helix of public sector, business and research functioning together.

An entrepreneurial economy – with support for freelancers and those starting their careers and hoping to grow businesses.

A more productive economy maximising its FE/HE, research and international connections.

#### Driver 3 - Growing the creative economy

**Challenge:** To build on existing strengths and turn Colchester into a real centre for cultural and creative industries with strong ties to the wider economy of the region and sub-region.

**Opportunities:** Local businesses, creative business incubation centre, university and institute, Essex County Council, strengthening emerging networks.

#### Driver 4: Talent

**Challenge:** To make Colchester a real hub for creative talent, with partners from culture, education and business operating together to provide opportunities and pathways from 14 to 24.

**Opportunities:** Talent campus, apprenticeships, showcasing, networks.

## The vision:

To improve the quality of life for the whole community, through providing the kind of amenity and experiences that we demand from 21st century towns.

To strengthen and build communities through placing culture at the heart of building stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods with better health, education and social outcomes.

Through developing an open approach to culture – which enables greater participation and engagement for the whole community.

Through making the most of the town's heritage offer by telling the many stories of Colchester.

## Driver 5 - Space and public realm

**Challenge:** To create a high quality and coherent public realm linking the town's assets and spaces. In particular, connecting the heritage and contemporary.

**Opportunities:** New public spaces, distinctiveness of spaces, signposting, enhancement of town walls.

## Driver 6 - Bringing it to life and programming

**Challenge:** To make Colchester a vibrant, buzzy and animated town filled with diverse performance and activity 365 days a year. To create a diverse and stimulating night-time offering in the town centre. To ensure that cultural activity relates to the needs of the whole community.

**Opportunities:** New public space, festivals, pop-up and DIY culture, use of digital infrastructure, day and night-time leisure and cultural opportunities for all.

## Institutions/Infrastructure/Business

firstsite, Castle Museum, Arts Centre, Mercury Theatre, Signals, Cuckoo, University

## Institutions/University/Private Business

Joint working and resource sharing, programming, marketing, audience development, connecting at cross agendas

## Programme level

For example, themed activity and events spanning institutions, joint festival and event activity, animation strategy, cultural tourism programme, regional presence

## Space level

For example, street and public space programme, connecting institutions, wayfinding and storage, coherence

## Underpinned by:

## Co-ordinated and consistent investment and leadership

From Essex County Council, Colchester Borough Council, Arts Council England

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Creative talent task group</b>	A group which brings together cultural organisations, secondary schools, FE/HE, public sector and private business	Identify progression routes Programmes of creative apprenticeships, internships and work experience Support for creative entrepreneurs and micro businesses	University, Institute, schools, cultural organisations, enterprise officer, Arts Council England, schools		Chairing admin projects potentially resourced by funding bids

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Provide new range of creative workspaces within St Botolph's Quarter</b>	Studios for artists and designers, office space, temporary uses, refurbished Creative Business Centre	Providing workspace, helping create jobs, supporting and growing businesses, providing programming for public space and helping to realise the full potential of firstsite to deliver regeneration and economic growth	firstsite, 15 Queen Street, Meanwhile Space, Colchester Borough Council, European Union, Arts Council, Haven Gateway Partnership		Management arrangements

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>New specialist markets with a creative theme</b>		Commercial opportunities, new markets, supply chain development	Led by Colchester Borough Council partners including Chamber of Commerce, CBIC, University		Economic development strategy

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Cultural and creative tourism task group</b>	Develop and prioritise the cultural tourism narratives, packages and incentives.	Develops a coherent positioning of Colchester as a destination for cultural and creative tourists maximising impact of firstsite opening	Cultural and heritage providers, hoteliers, hospitality, Visitor Information Services		

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>2012 Chinese exhibition of imperial artefacts at the Castle</b>	Major exhibition of Chinese objects	Will be a high-profile event for the town, creating new connections with China and boosting visitor numbers	Led by Castle Museum, partners include other cultural providers, Visitor Information Services	18 months	Exhibition funded by the Museums service. Other providers and partners could link in resources

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>St Anne's Pilot</b>	Deliver joint working project in St Anne's and evaluate	Demonstrates effectiveness of a strategic approach to community activity	firstsite, Arts Centre, Mercury Theatre	Ongoing	Funded

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Young Cultural Ambassadors Scheme</b>	Forum connecting young people to the mainstream of culture in Colchester	Will help ensure that young people get the cultural offering they want	Community groups, cultural organisations		Some admin support needed

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Support for the grassroots</b>	Integrating key grass roots organisations with the mainstream cultural and heritage offering	Provides support for Colchester's growing grass roots scene while enabling cultural providers to tap into the new market	Led by Mercury? Keep Colchester Cool, Creative Co-op, cultural providers	2011 onwards	Potential to bid for programme funding. Could channel existing resources
<b>Christmas cultural programme</b>	Pilot a cultural programme at Christmas, including a programme of lighting commissions	Will connect culture to leisure and shopping at this key time of year. Widening the audience for culture.	Led by Colchester Borough Council, with support from cultural providers		Potential to access private sponsorship
<b>Cultural Wednesdays</b>	Develop a twilight offer (5pm to 8pm) on Wednesdays connecting with late store opening	Connecting culture and leisure, providing increased footfall for the town	Led by Colchester Borough Council, retailers, hospitality, cultural providers	2011 onwards	Encourage cultural providers to trial alternative production and performance times and 'extra'

# Delivery Plan: Buildings and spaces

Action	Description	What difference will it make?	Partners	Timeframe	Resource implication
<b>Support for a festival</b>	Explore the leadership management structure and resources needed for a cultural festival.	An annual festival which connects the mainstream to the grassroots would broaden the audience for culture.	Led by Colchester Borough Council	2012 onwards	Administration resource
<b>Castle re-interpretation, redisplay and reopening</b>	Castle closes for a year for reinterpretation.	Will bring new life to the castle and take its displays up to 21st century expectations.	Led by Castle Museum	2013 onwards	Funded
<b>Governance and management of St Botolph's Quarter</b>		Creative sector input, ownership and commitment, new business model, ongoing sustainability	Meanwhile Space		Financial resources potentially available

This research builds on a number of studies including the 2003-13 Cultural Strategy, Colchester 2020, The Economic Development Strategy 2010-2015, Creative Collaborations, The Colchester Borough Investment Plan 2010-2014, Haven Gateway Sustainable Growth Strategy 2011-2014.



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