



## Colchester: A rich cultural heritage

The oldest recorded town in Britain, Colchester was the home of Queen Boadicea, boasts a Norman castle and was the site of a famous siege during the Civil War.

Today, it has a fine cultural presence including the widely-acclaimed Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre, the Castle Museum and its Roman town walls. And now it has firstsite, a leading venue for contemporary visual arts which is set to be recognised at an international level.

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.

## The barriers to success

Research carried out by Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy in conjunction with a range of stakeholders shows there are five main reasons why culture and creativity are not widely perceived to bring positive benefits to the town:

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

Many believe that the town's 'big issues' take precedence over culture - such as economic development, job creation and health inequality. This is despite the vital role the creative industries can play in tackling these issues.

**Invisibility of the creative economy:** While creative businesses form 18.3 per cent of the total number of companies, Colchester does not have a high profile regionally or nationally in this field.

**Absence of a joined up approach:** There is currently no co-ordinated programme for growing the cultural offering in Colchester, such as links between the creative and wider economy.

**Lack of leadership and vision:** Colchester does not benefit from a shared vision and set of priorities for culture and creativity. There is an insufficient collaborative approach between culture, business and the council.

**The story isn't told:** There is a perceived failure in Colchester of making people aware of all it has to offer, particularly its rich history. For example, there is concern over the lack of attention given to the town walls which should be a major focal point for tourists.



## Making the most of our cultural and creative assets

There are five main opportunity areas to consider:

**Making Colchester a better place to work, live and visit** through providing the kind of cultural and entertainment amenities and experiences people expect and value in a 21st century town.



**Driving the economy** through providing creative jobs, encouraging inward investment, connecting to the wider economy and enabling innovation.

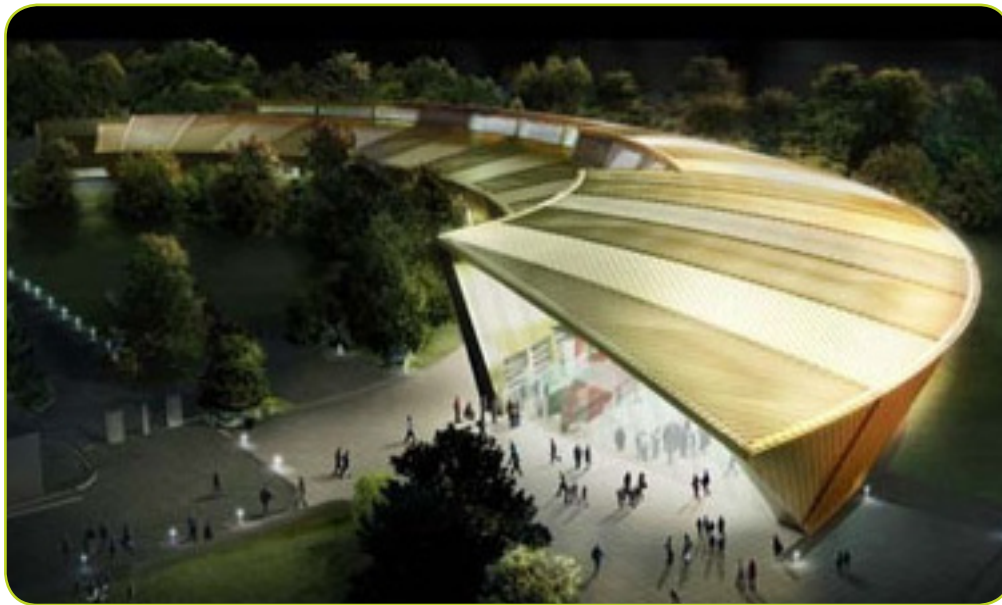
**Growing cultural and creative tourism** by supporting a growth in visitors to the new St Botolph's Quarter and existing offering thanks to new restaurants and hotels, as well as offering cultural tourism packages.

**Improving life in the community** through demonstrating the value and role of culture at the heart of improving neighbourhoods through health, education and social cohesion.

**Creating opportunities for talented young people** - from using the power of the arts to improve and transform primary and secondary education to helping to retain highly-skilled graduates in town. A co-ordinated offering could help turn the town into a hub for talent of all ages.

## The importance of firstsite and St Botolph's Quarter

In Colchester, 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.



## A vision for Colchester

By taking advantage of the cultural and creative opportunities on offer, in five years Colchester will:

- ◇ Continue to have a strong, resilient cultural infrastructure based on a set of core institutions



- ◇ Be recognised locally and nationally as a town where culture is valued and appreciated for the benefits it brings to the masses
- ◇ Place culture at the heart of tackling social and economic challenges
- ◇ Grow the market for culture by engaging new and existing audiences through technology and engagement
- ◇ Provide cultural activity 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 place where a creative career or business can be developed with education, cultural and private groups working together
- ◇ Have a vibrant, buzzy cultural quarter feeding off and into the success of firstsite

This vision for a Creative Colchester can be fulfilled through partnership working between the key players in the town - cultural and heritage organisations, educational providers, the public sector and private organisations. There are three themes that will need to be considered:

### **Placemaking**

Putting Colchester on the map regionally and nationally by making the most of its distinctiveness; transforming perceptions of the town and developing a set of narratives to tell its historical stories; making the town a destination for leisure and business visitors and attracting inward investment.

### **The economy**

Creating the strongest cultural and creative economy in Essex; introducing new highly-skilled, well-paid jobs in creative and cultural industries; connecting the creative and wider economy to lead to more innovation and productivity; driving a more connected, productive economy.

### **Quality of life**

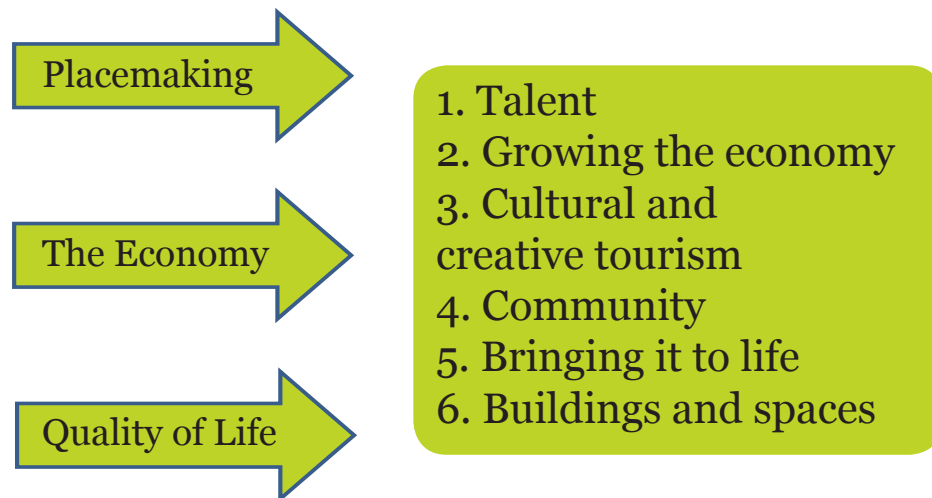
Providing the amenities and experiences that we expect from Colchester, strengthening and building communities through placing culture at the heart of stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods with better health, education and social outcomes.



# How do we do this?

These themes - **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.



A stakeholder engagement event is being held at firstsite on 11 November to launch the Creative Colchester strategy.

The event will workshop the five-year action plan based on the six thematic areas of delivery. This aims to ensure that cultural, creative business, education and tourism sector partners talk together about what cross-sector delivery can and should look like. The Haven Gateway has awarded £25,000 to kick-start delivery of this action plan.

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.

