

Colchester cultural strategy



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Mercury Theatre - Building Exterior Photo by Rhianna Howard

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Foreword

'By 2030, Britain's First City will be a bustling, creative place. Inclusive, accessible and affordable, its cultural life will offer something for everyone.'

Towns and cities have a way of forgetting their pasts. So eager for the future, they hurry their histories into museums and onto plaques. Everything becomes flattened and remodelled. Colchester is distinct in how its past lives alongside the present. Its ancient legacy – Roman infrastructure and Iron Age sites – are in lockstep with the dazzling contemporary cultural venues. By 2030, Britain's First City will be a bustling, creative place. Inclusive, accessible and affordable, its cultural life will offer something for everyone. Innovation will equal preservation. Residents and visitors will feel emboldened by the progress of this inimitable historic place.

My children live in an entirely new world to the one I grew up in. The lives of my parents were largely similar to their own parents. Change was always gradual, tentative. Furniture, like ideas, were handed down. My generation were concerned mostly with social issues, the fight for racial justice and sexual liberation. Music needed to be radical. Journalism, like novels, had to reflect the chaos and mischief of the times. This is the generation of the 1960s and the start of British counterculture. The young people of today have more to do.

They must adapt to a warming planet. Grapple with new technologies; digital currencies, a new internet and artificial intelligence. They will need to thwart these super billionaires and their unchecked power, and manage a political climate more divisive than I have ever known. So-called progressiveness has never seemed so lost.

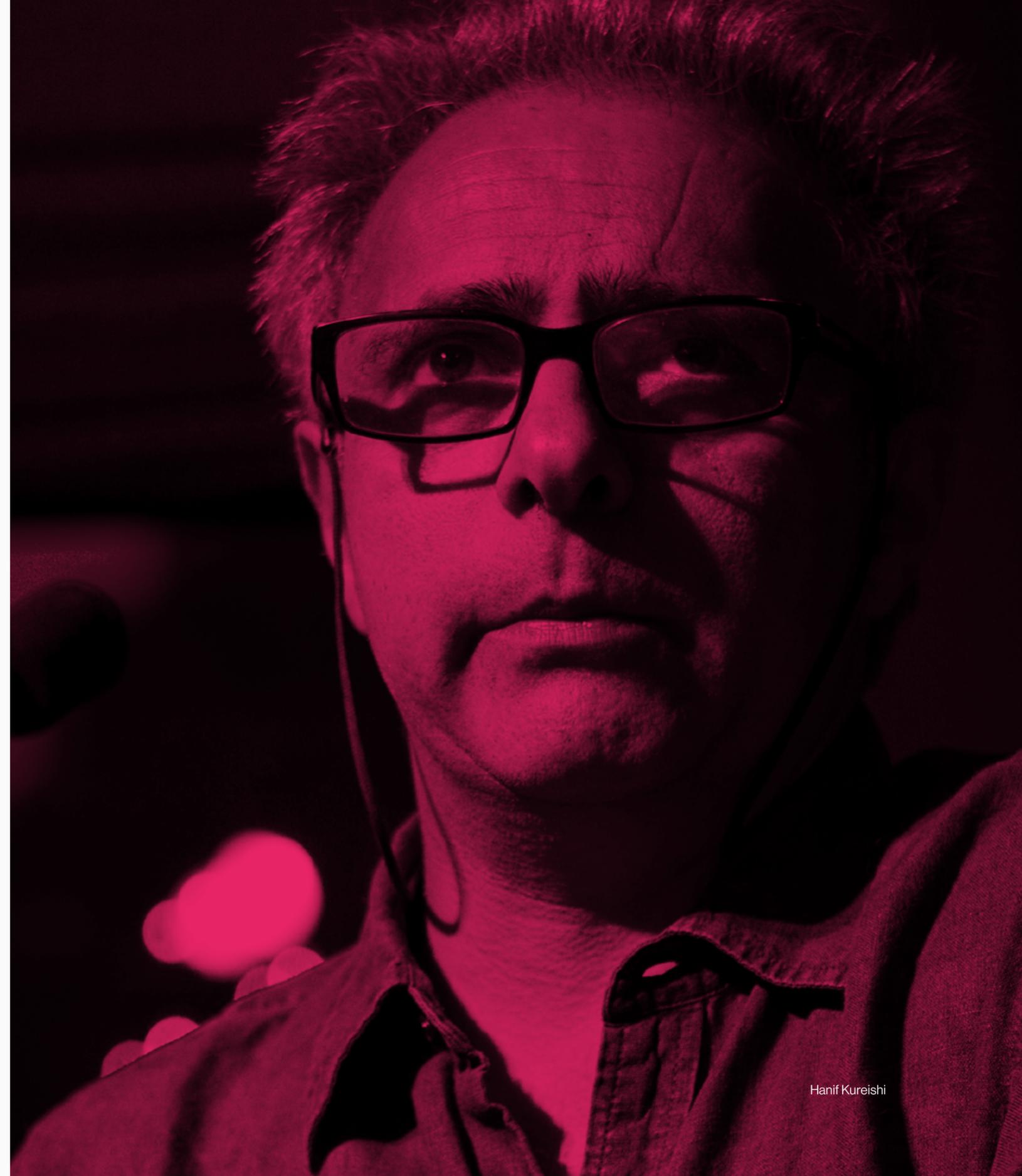
And yet when it comes to culture, British culture, we are not divided at all. We are united in our admiration for the multiracial England football team, the artistry of Anish Kapoor, the literary brilliance of Zadie Smith. As a nation, we sit down together to watch Line of Duty over West Indian or Chinese food. In the 70s, we made sense of the world through the music of The Beatles and Bowie - boys from Liverpool and Bromley, suburbs and forgotten cities, whose songs spoke to all of us. Now, kids are reading Orwell again, his quotes and musings remodelled for the Instagram age. Christopher Hitchens, the late polemist, has found new form on YouTube, where his wounding and brilliant debates are consumed by the latest critical thinkers.

Diversity is what makes British culture great, and good ideas and dazzling art have always been a refuge in times of crisis. A dialogue between generations, culture binds our thoughts to a shared language. It gives form to aimless days. And it brings our anxieties and desires into sharp detail, allowing us to cope with them better. When worrying about the troubles ahead of us, we should take comfort in that we already have so much in common. Culture is the widening of experience, a bridge between people. Albert Camus said it was our gift to the future.

Towns, cities and nations are nothing without the art they produce. We must rage against the forces that seek to oppress creativity. Each generation has a story to tell, and it's up to our institutions to embolden new voices. It's only through singing, dancing and writing – exchanging ideas and building on old ones – that can we face a new future confidently.

Hanif Kureishi CBE

Hanif is a celebrated film director, playwright, screenwriter and novelist. He contributed to the project of creating a new Cultural Strategy for Colchester in his capacity as an Associate of Counterculture.





Executive summary



Colchester stands at a moment of significant opportunity. Firstsite was recently named Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021; the Mercury Theatre has re-opened after a major capital investment; there is a renewed bid for City status and the Town Deal will deliver £18.2 of new inward investment. The contribution of culture to realising the full benefits of these opportunities to local communities – particularly as the Borough begins to emerge from the pandemic – is enormous. Bringing together these opportunities into a cohesive strategy that residents, local authorities and partners can sign up to and get behind is crucial to long-term success.

The people of Colchester have great pride in their cultural assets and creative industries. However, they also recognise that more could be done to celebrate the borough and its communities through culture. People told us that they would like to see more recognition of local history, and more outdoor activities which make use of important spaces such as Castle Park to host screenings, performances and events.

Many of the stakeholders consulted in the development of this strategy identified cross-cutting themes and priorities. Collaboration, resource sharing, a clear cultural identity, greater use of the public realm, greater access to and representation within culture, and a shared vision for the Colchester area were the most common issues arising.

Its population has grown rapidly in recent years and its cultural offer and reputation have strengthened the perception of Colchester as a place where great art is made and presented for residents and visitors alike. It has much to sing about but will need to find a way of making its collective cultural voice work much harder to distinguish itself, capitalise on its strengths and build culture into its ambitions for 2030; making its many assets work more cohesively to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts. This will be particularly important as the town emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document sets out those opportunities in the form of a new and ambitious ten-year Cultural Strategy. A strategy that recognises the contribution of all dimensions of culture across the Borough: from beautiful green spaces to buildings and objects of exceptional historical importance; from established and well regarded museums, libraries and arts organisations to grassroots community and freelance activity; alongside Colchester's growing creative industries. All are part of Colchester's unique cultural ecology and all will play their part in realising the opportunities ahead for the Borough. The strategy is not starting from scratch, it builds on the solid foundations laid by the previous Creative Colchester strategy.



Firstsite 10th anniversary, 2021. Photo by Jayne Lloyd

Holiday Fun 2021, Firstsite. Photo by Jayne Lloyd



Commissioned by Colchester Borough Council, developed by Counterculture Partnership LLP and informed by extensive public and stakeholder feedback, this strategy provides a vision and working framework for the cultural life of the Borough until 2030, highlighting specific actions aligned with priorities of the Council, national funding bodies, and the people of Colchester. Its aim is to provide a clear roadmap that all stakeholders can get behind.

Four key themes have been identified as a result of the research and in-depth consultation as priority areas of activity for this Cultural Strategy:

- Building a **stronger, more cohesive and collaborative cultural sector**;
- Ensuring culture in Colchester is **relevant and accessible** to residents;
- **Nurturing creative talent** across Colchester;
- Supporting the **innovation, growth and resilience** of the sector.

Taken together, these provide a cohesive framework for delivering Colchester's Cultural Strategy for the rest of the decade that can be led and supported by the cultural sector itself in conjunction with the local authority, Arts Council England and other partners and stakeholders.

Professional development is central to this Cultural Strategy to 2030. The NPOs in Colchester already perform a vital role in providing leadership in the cultural sector and in supporting the wider creative industries by purchasing services and through collaborative working. Developments such as a new shared apprenticeship scheme across the venues in the Borough, investment in the cultural work force through training, and other opportunities for learning, will develop talent and continue to refresh and revitalise the local cultural sector.

Culture plays an important role in Colchester's economy, creating jobs, attracting external funding and investment, driving tourism and making the Borough a more attractive place for people to live and businesses to relocate to. Organisations across Colchester have recognised the huge potential for culture to contribute to improving residents' health and wellbeing, and to fostering community inclusion. Exciting cross sector partnerships are already forming around these objectives. The environment and the climate crisis are the defining issues of the time, and cultural organisations are among the leaders locally in seeking to reduce their environmental impact, and in raising awareness of these issues through their programming. The next decade offers opportunities to grow that positive impact of culture on the local economy, health and wellbeing and the environment.

A long-term aspiration is further recognition of Colchester's great cultural value; and the achievement of making its many assets work together cohesively to develop a thriving, sustainable and innovative cultural sector. Colchester will play a key role in any future regional bid for UK City of Culture.



© Simply C Photography - Mercury Theatre Colchester Essex

Background



Methodology and scope

This strategy was commissioned by Colchester Borough Council and a range of partners in 2021 and developed by Counterculture Partnership LLP, the UK's leading cultural consultancy with significant experience of working with clients to build ideas, strategies, partnerships and programmes at local, and national levels. The strategy grows out of the previous Creative Colchester strategy from 2010, which laid strong foundations which have helped culture in Colchester to thrive over the past decade. The focus of this strategy is on developing the cultural life of the Borough to 2030.

This strategy encompasses the entire Borough of Colchester: from Dedham in the north to Mersea in the south; from Wivenhoe in the east to Tiptree in the west; and all the towns, villages and rural communities in-between.

Research and consultation was conducted over a period of six months. By engaging with a diverse range of voices – individual creators, voluntary and national portfolio organisations, education, sports and leisure bodies, local businesses and the local authority - we sought to understand what makes the town and borough culturally distinct; where the challenges and opportunities lie; and what residents value in terms of culture. Through in-depth, in-person interviews with 45 key stakeholders, and consultation with around 1,000 residents through online feedback and a public event attended by over 200 people, the opinions, perceptions and ideas of the people of Colchester inform this strategy.

Geography and demography

The Borough of Colchester includes many areas of stunning natural beauty from Mersea Island to the Colne Valley and the Dedham Vale AONB, as well as managed green spaces like Castle Park and Highwoods Country Park.

Colchester is one of the fastest growing local authority areas in the country. In mid-2020, Colchester's population was estimated to stand at 197,200, a growth of 1.2% on the previous year (compared to national population growth of 0.57%). As the population continues to grow it is important that the future cultural offer actively reflects the diversity of its audiences.

Its largest town and economic and cultural hub, Colchester, has a population of over 120,000. There are many surrounding small towns and villages of which the largest are Stanway, Tiptree, West Mersea and Wivenhoe. The countryside areas of the borough are mainly agricultural.



The Borough is home to a diversity of communities and the population continues to grow with increased investment in housing and infrastructure:

- Over 70 languages are spoken in the Borough;
- 19% of residents are under 16 years old, with 17.3% being over 65;
- A growing population of around 197,000 (mid-2020), an increase of 1.2% on the previous year;
- A higher education student population in excess of 15,000 from more than 130 countries.

Alongside this growth, there are some areas where improvement is needed. Culture has a key role to play in supporting these communities and addressing inequalities:

- Almost 15% of children in Colchester are in low income families;
- Life expectancy is 8.6 years lower for men and 8.0 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of Colchester than in the least deprived areas;
- Colchester is ranked 5th most deprived area in Essex on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Greenstead is identified as being in the top 10% of most deprived wards in the country.



Figure 1: Map of the Borough of Colchester. Source: ONS.

Definitions of culture

This strategy is closely aligned with local and regional policy priorities and with current Arts Council England (ACE) investment principles of Ambition and Quality; Dynamism; Environmental Responsibility; Inclusivity and Relevance.

The scope and meaning of the term 'culture' vary from place to place, time to time, and between individuals and communities. Arts Council England (ACE) provides the following definition:

*“**Culture**’ means many things to many people and is often used to refer to food, religion and other forms of heritage... we use it to mean all those areas of activity associated with the artforms and organisations in which Arts Council England invests: **collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre and the visual arts.**”*

Arts Council England. (2020). Let’s Create.





The opportunities for culture in Colchester

© CBC Jumbo



An overview of Colchester's existing cultural and creative life

Colchester is a place of richness and manifold possibilities: the beauty of its natural surroundings; its rich history of industry, art and nursery rhymes; its wealth of heritage and contemporary culture; the diversity and quality of creative talent and entrepreneurship; and the ambition of its residents and the organisations which serve them.

Creativity and culture are in its DNA: from Constable to blur, the people of Colchester continue to innovate, establishing spaces for communities to gather and experience culture in all its forms. Its independent businesses, education institutions, sports facilities, green spaces, and the diversity of its communities all combine to create a place of compelling opportunity and purpose. Working together, the sector will develop an exciting cultural identity and shared sense of purpose which reflects and celebrates the diversity of the Borough and its residents.

Specifically, some of the most significant and established cultural and heritage assets currently within the Borough include:

- **Creative Education** – University of Essex Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies and Colchester School of Art (Colchester Institute);
- **Heritage sites** – including Colchester Castle, Roman Circus and the oldest town wall in the country, Layer Marney Tower, Chappel Viaduct, Holy Trinity Church, St Botolph's Priory, Jumbo water tower, Gosbecks Archaeological Park;
- **Museums and art galleries** – including Firstsite, the Natural History Museum, the Munnings Art Museum in Dedham, Colchester Castle Museum, Hollytrees Museum, East Anglian Railway Museum, We Are The Minorities, Art Exchange (University of Essex);
- **Live music and events** – including those on offer from Colchester Arts Centre, Charter Hall, Castle Park, St Botolph's Church, Colchester Community Stadium, the Town Hall, Roman River Festival and independent venues across the Borough;

- **Theatre** – including the Mercury Theatre, Headgate Theatre, Lakeside Theatre and Colchester Arts Centre;
- **Environment and nature** – the beaches of Mersea, Castle Park, Highwoods, Dedham Vale AONB, Fingringhoe Wick and Abberton Reservoir Nature Discovery Parks;
- **Signals Essex Media Centre;**
- **Major visitor attractions** – Colchester Zoo and Colchester Castle;
- **Libraries** – seven libraries in the Borough, including Colchester (the second busiest in Essex);
- **Cinema** - Curzon, Odeon, Firstsite;
- **Artist studio space** – Queen Street Bus Depot development, Cuckoo Farm Studios, SPACE.

Colchester is home to four well-established and nationally-recognised Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs): Colchester and Ipswich Museums, Colchester Arts Centre, Firstsite and Mercury Theatre. It has the strongest arts infrastructure in Essex and compares favourably to most similarly-sized local authority areas nationally. There are also many thriving voluntary arts and community organisations in Colchester, creating a significant volume and diversity of grass roots cultural activity.

The cultural infrastructure is underpinned by high quality HE and FE partners, the University of Essex and the Colchester Institute.

The University of Essex offers innovative undergraduate and postgraduate courses informed by world-leading research ranging from curating, creative writing, drama and film studies through to computer games, artificial intelligence and robotics. It's one of the top universities in the UK for working with business to put research into action. The Colchester campus hosts a theatre and art gallery offering an annual programme of public talks and performances.

Colchester Institute offers FE and HE courses including Fine Art, Performing Arts, Film and TV Production, Interactive Media and Games and Digital Media Creative Enterprise.

Culture in the Borough plays a significant role in bringing diverse communities together, providing opportunities for people to find expression and connection through shared experiences. As the population grows, culture by its nature adapts and responds to the changing demographic, ensuring that the Borough and its services remain relevant to its communities and continue to provide opportunities which engage and invigorate.

Colchester Events (part of Colchester Borough Council's trading subsidiary Colchester Amphora Trading) plays a key role by bringing mass attendance cultural events such as concerts and festivals to Castle Park and other venues, entertaining residents, attracting visitors and supporting the town centre day and night-time economy.

The Borough of Colchester is rich with voluntary arts, heritage and community organisations covering an exceptionally wide range of areas of interest. These groups are run by committed volunteers and the activity they create make a major contribution to the cultural life of the area.

Colchester Borough has a very strong list of cultural assets with better provision of museums, galleries and performing arts venues than most similarly sized boroughs across the UK. Improvements to and better availability of some venues has been identified as an issue by promoters and voluntary groups. There are potential gaps around cultural facilities outside of the town centre which are picked up in the Cultural Mapping in a separate document.





Case study: Roman River Festival

“Colchester is changing massively.... There’s huge potential for culture.”

Orlando Jopling

Roman River Festival, an annual festival of music and performance was established in 2000. Orlando Jopling has been the Artistic Director there for 12 years. The festival initially started as a music day, followed by a concert. It has now grown to a series of concerts in the spring, a summer event and a Festival in the autumn. The programme encompasses jazz and world music and spoken word, and dance, but has classical music at its core. The festival attracts audiences from Colchester and across Essex, drawn by the world class music, performed in non-traditional spaces across the borough.

“Colchester has always had a thriving music scene compared to other towns. But with no concert hall in the town, it has been difficult to present professional musicians in a concert series. We have tried to make a feature of this and present work in interesting spaces, like a meeting hall behind a pub.” **Orlando Jopling**

The festival has plans to expand, with a Summer Opera Festival in development for 2022. Orlando sees collaboration and partnership working as being the key to creating more opportunities for emerging talent in Colchester to showcase their work. He admits that capacity has hindered these opportunities in the past, but is hopeful that this will change going forward. His ultimate dream is that Colchester has its own concert hall one day, adding to the existing world class venues for visual arts and performance in the borough.

“The festival is trying to break down barriers. At its core is classical music, we want to involve everyone in the community.” **Orlando Jopling**



Trinity Works - Photo by HAT Projects

Creative industries

The creative industries are defined by UK Government as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.”

Analysis of latest Office for National Statistics data (2019) reveals that around 4,000 people work in the Borough’s creative industries. The largest subsector by headcount is Publishing, employing over 1000 people locally. This is closely followed by IT, Software and Computer Services with a workforce of over 900. Other subsectors of note include Advertising and Marketing (490 employees in 2019), Architecture (350), Film, TV, Video, Radio and Photography (315), Museums, Galleries and Libraries (275) and Music, Performing and Visual Arts (350).

Local Creative hubs include Cuckoo Farm Studios celebrating their 30th anniversary in 2022 and SPACE Colchester, the first out-of-London studios opened in 2017 by international workspace provider, SPACE. Located in Colchester Old Police Station, a listed building in the heart of the town’s Cultural Quarter, it provides 12,000 ft2 of creative studios and co-working space, along with workshops, training programmes and showcasing facilities for the creative and digital industries. SPACE’s Creative Practitioner Support Programme is run from the Colchester hub, offering opportunities for peer-to-peer networking and mentoring. The burgeoning Creative Quarter provides a physical locus for the creative industries in the town.

The creative industries have been further strengthened by support from the South East Economic Partnership (SELEP) which has funded a number of number of initiatives, including sector support and capital projects such as the Creative and Digital Grow Space in Queen Street. The creative industry is a key employment sector in the town and there is currently a shortage of larger spaces for businesses to grow into as they expand. The principal aims of the project are the development of workspace and economic growth, as well as an opportunity to continue to establish the Eastern part of the town centre as a focal point for creative industries.

The Creative Colchester partnership brings together creative businesses, arts leaders, FE/HE providers and Local Authority representatives, who work together on developing a strategic vision to grow Colchester’s cultural and digital economy. It provides a forum for people in the creative, cultural and digital sectors in Colchester to promote jobs, opportunities and events in the area including an online searchable directory.

In addition, Colchester is recognised nationally as a hub for creativity: by SELEP as a Creative, Cultural and Digital Hub for North Essex, by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) as a creative cluster as well as being recognised in the government’s Industrial Strategy Sector Deal for the Creative Industries.



History, heritage and natural assets

Colchester was the first city and the original capital of Roman Britain. Rich in heritage, it is home to sites, buildings and objects of exceptional historical importance: from prehistory, through the Roman era for which the town is best known, the Middle Ages and Civil War to today. Nationally important historical events, including the Boudican revolt and Civil War Siege make Colchester's heritage both unique and compelling.

Colchester's history doesn't end at the town walls: with the suburbs shaped by vast Iron Age dyke systems and burial mounds; as well as major archaeological sites of interest that include the only Roman Circus found in Britain; and Gosbecks, an archaeological park that is home to the foundations of one of the largest Roman theatres and temple complexes found in the country.

Colchester Castle is among England's most important heritage sites and one of the most popular visitor attractions in the East of England. The largest Norman Keep in Europe and constructed on the foundations of the Temple of Claudius built when Colchester was the first Roman capital of Britain, the Castle Museum today reveals many fascinating layers of history to visitors. Archaeological collections of international quality covering 2,500 years of history are beautifully showcased, including of the most important Roman finds in Britain. 70% of the Castle's c.100,000 annual visitors are tourists and the Visitor Information Centre, based in Hollytrees Museum, arranges a wide variety of tours around the town. The Council continues to develop interpretation for the many points of historic interest, although coherency in accessing many of these sites poses a problem due to the way in which modern Colchester has grown around them.

The importance of the Visitor Information Centre – physically and online will continue to be vital to the town as a visitor attraction, contributing to its economy and profile. So too will be the continued engagement of local people in their heritage, from interventions such as lighting of the standing ruins, Roman remains exhibited in the streets and further investigation of the sites – academic, construction led archaeology and even community excavations.

Going forward digital platforms are also key to engaging local people in their heritage, and to raising the profile of Colchester and exploiting its rich history to attract visitors. Colchester Museums partnership with the historian Dan Snow's History Hit podcast and online TV channel is an example of how large audiences can be engaged in this way.

There are many other key heritage sites across the Borough, including: St Michael & All Angels Church, a celebrated 12th century apsidal church with magnificent colour medieval wall frescoes in Copford Green; the Tiptree Tea Room, Shop & Museum which shows the industrial history of this the renowned jam makers, Wilkin & Sons; and Layer Marney Tower, tallest Tudor Gatehouse in England.

Central to Colchester's history is its role as a garrison and military centre, and continuing today in its capacity as home of the Parachute Regiment. Other key historical themes include Colchester as a place for immigration, notably with Flemish protestants in the sixteenth century, a period in which large numbers of skilled craftspeople from lowland Europe made their way to Essex, seeking refuge from persecution and the opportunity to ply their creative trades. It has also been a place for radical thought, exemplified by the priest John Ball who was a leader in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. This tradition of immigration continues today, with Nepalese, Syrian and Afghan families being welcomed to Colchester and supported through community and creative organisations such as Refugee Action Colchester and Firstsite.

Colchester is reputed to be home to some of the best known English nursery rhymes: 'Old King Cole' (a legendary ancient King of Britain), 'Humpty Dumpty' (thought by some to be the nickname of a Royalist sniper shot down from the church of St Mary-at-the-Walls during the Civil War siege of Colchester, and by others to be a cannon on top of the church), and 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' (written by Jane Taylor who lived in the town's Dutch Quarter in the early C19th).





Case study: the Munnings Art Museum

The Munnings Art Museum is an independent museum based in the former home of the artist Sir Alfred Munnings (1878-1959). Sir Alfred was best known for his paintings of horses, but his work also depicts landscapes and scenes of rural life. As well as exhibiting a collection of his paintings and preparatory studies, the museum presents an annual programme of events for equestrian and plein air painters, publishes books and carries out art historical research.

Jenny Hand, Director, is keen to expand the museum's reach and raise the profile of Sir Alfred's work. Whilst it has been difficult to connect to organisations in the borough due to the museum's physical location in North Essex and its remit, Jenny sees greater partnership working as being key to strengthening tourism in the region, retaining local audiences, and to making the best use of limited resources.

"It would be good to co-ordinate and thrash out ideas...Try to find solutions – what do artists need, so organisations can best use their resources. Beginner and professional (artists), what are they working on, what do they want to produce?"

The museum is currently developing plans for the next six years, which include large scale exhibitions, widening accessibility to attract younger visitors and events that support mental health and well-being.



The Great Big Art Exhibition, Firstsite, 2021. Photo by Jayne Lloyd

Achievements and investments in the past decade

This Cultural Strategy marks the continuation of an ambitious journey which was well under way even prior to the Creative Colchester Strategy of ten years ago. In many cases made possible by the direct investment into Colchester by funders such as Arts Council England, Essex County Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Achievements over the past decade include:

- The opening of the Firstsite £22.45m building in 2011 as a new centre for contemporary visual arts, designed by internationally acclaimed architect, Rafael Viñoly. Its growing national and international profile as testified by the recent award of the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021. The organisation's success in recent years and exemplary work with communities offers a platform for further reputation building for Colchester in the decade ahead;
- Significant investment of £3.2 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2011 to support the transformation of the exhibition space at Colchester Castle;
- The recent Mercury Rising development, with investment of £14.1 million funding has enabled the theatre to re-open with state-of-the-art facilities and a diverse programme of work. The theatre's continuing commitment to the

development of young people and the future workforce of the cultural sector through the Mercury Creatives programme means it is ideally placed to support the cultivation of new talent within the Borough;

- Refurbishment of Colchester Arts Centre and new technical equipment;
- The growth of the creative industries with an increasing number of creative and tech businesses choosing to set up in the Borough. Recent data from 2018 estimates around 4,000 people are employed locally in the creative industries in 753 businesses. Developments such as SPACE and Trinity Maker Space have all developed in recent years, showing how the town's buildings can be repurposed to drive creative industries in the town;
- Micro grants to arts and cultural events taking place outside the town centre in communities across the Borough;
- Lighting and interpretation of key sections of Colchester's Roman Walls - Britain's longest and oldest Town Walls;
- Sky TV ad and supporting campaigns promoting Colchester as a heritage and cultural tourism destination to a mass audience across the south east of England.

Looking ahead: future opportunities and challenges for culture

Looking ahead, dealing with and recovering from the impact of Covid 19 will be an enormous challenge for local authorities at a time when budgets are already under pressure. The Borough is beginning to emerge from the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with cultural venues re-opening, alongside the wider retail and leisure offer. Very real consequences of the pandemic within local communities become clearer and provide a spotlight on the inequalities that impact communities, all at a time when local authority budgets are stretched to capacity and at risk of further reduction.

Thanks to the Government's Cultural Recovery Fund, the borough has benefitted from over £2,750,000 to ensure the ongoing viability and sustainability of the sector and to improve the physical infrastructure of a number of the borough's cultural assets. Building a resilient sector, focussing on the wellbeing benefits of culture, and strengthening local cultural leadership so that the sector is less dependent on local government support and leadership is likely to be imperative.

Culture in the Borough has a huge contribution to make to wider health and wellbeing, bringing people together who have been socially isolated and providing accessible opportunities to engage in a variety of arts activities for people of all ages as part of wider recovery paths.

This is a time of challenge but great opportunity where creative communities can and have come together throughout the pandemic, focussed on their strengths and realised their impact on the wider determinants of Health and Wellbeing. This is a platform to build a new future from. There is much good practice to build on already across Colchester and the borough's cultural leaders can continue to develop their own good practice in collaboration with colleagues across the UK and internationally.

The new Town Deal for Colchester presents significant opportunities for culture to play its part, particularly around the following initiatives:

- **Transformed Youth Facilities** – improving both universal and targeted provision to support young people's engagement and aspiration. Artists and cultural organisations across the borough have an important role to play in offering high quality, stimulating and creative programmes for young people;
- **Digital connectivity** – bringing 5G and its benefits to the Borough. Given Colchester's proximity to London, this presents significant opportunities for new creative businesses to base themselves in the town. Cultural organisations themselves can benefit from improved connectivity, building their digital offer on the back of recent lockdown innovations;

- **Public realm developments** – in the front of the Mercury Theatre and St Nicholas Square. Engaging arts and cultural events and programmes can animate these improved public spaces, as will new public art commissions;
- **New Gateway locations** – in Vineyard Street, creating more high quality affordable homes alongside wider commercial, cultural and social activities;
- **Heart of Greenstead** – which offers arts and cultural organisations a fresh opportunity to engage at a deep local level with one of the most deprived wards in the country;
- **Preserving and Improving Key historic buildings** – through the long-term development of the 'Jumbo' water tower and the improvements to Trinity Church.

Other key developments include the Business Improvement District's programme of public realm improvements and the Victor Batte-Lay Foundation's long terms plans for The Minorities.

Case study: Firstsite Holiday Fun

Firstsite is a contemporary art gallery in Colchester and is the largest public gallery in the East Anglia region. Over the last ten years Firstsite has gained a strong, critical reputation, presenting ambitious work to be enjoyed by all in a fun and inclusive environment – culminating in the gallery being named the prestigious ‘Art Fund Museum of the Year’ in 2021.

Holiday Fun came about when Rachel Walton, Co-Founder of African Families in the UK (AFiUK) CIC highlighted the challenges some families were facing during the school holidays because their children could not access free school meals during these breaks. The team at Firstsite, led by Director, Sally Shaw, and Programme Manager for Learning and Education, Sue Hogan, designed Holiday Fun to offer support to families in Colchester, providing an inclusive and fun space where families can enjoy nutritious food and have fun and socialise together.

There are 40,000 children and young people living in Colchester. 25% are living in poverty. These children typically receive a free school meal during term-time and can go hungry during school holidays without this provision. The Programme is designed around the 5 ways to wellbeing to give each of these children the perfect day out and help prevent social isolation and nutritional deficit. Families can attend every part of the Holiday Fun programme for free. They can take part in creative activities, sports and movement sessions, and enjoy a fresh cooked meal – all at the art gallery.

Firstsite has been running the Holiday Fun programme since summer 2017 in every school holiday. Over this time, they have provided over 12,000 meals and supported over 1,200 families. In some cases, families return as much as 15–20 times during a summer break. This can mean providing in the region of 100 free meals for one family.

‘We are actively working with Holiday Fun attendees to understand how the project can have the biggest impact and help more people to feel the benefits of being creative, enjoying art and having fun. Ultimately that is what Holiday Fun, and Firstsite, is about - bringing people together in a safe and comfortable environment where everyone can relax, be themselves and have a good time.’

Rachel Skillen, Head of Audience and Communications

Firstsite is now being recognised as an innovative model of integrated care in a community setting and the programme is being recognised nationally as model of excellence for how the gallery of the future can meaningfully engage local communities, and generating new insights into national and global issues such as food poverty and inequality.



A new vision and priorities for culture in Colchester



Firstsite 10th anniversary, 2021. Photo by Jayne Lloyd





The following four areas have been identified as a result of public and stakeholder feedback as priorities by the end of the decade. Each is considered further in the next section with relevant actions in Appendix A:

- **Collaboration and Cultural Identity;**
- **Relevance and Access;**
- **Talent Development;**
- **Innovation, Growth and Resilience.**

Collaboration and cultural Identity

Colchester Borough is rich in cultural capital. With diverse grass roots organisations, community groups, independent artists and makers, four nationally recognised arts organisations, the University, the Garrison, its built and historic heritage, its natural resources and so much more, the area packs a punch. With so much to offer it can be challenging to determine where to put the emphasis, what makes the area unique and how organisations and communities can work together to help create a clear cultural identity for Colchester.

People in Colchester have a natural affinity with culture. Those working in the sector have immense expertise, passion and commitment to their communities. The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that organisations have adapted how they work, taken more risks, tried new things and engaged with their audiences in different ways. The challenge going forward will be to explore how cultural and community leaders can share their learning, reconnect and continue to build new ways of collaborating to increase their impact, relevance and sustainability.

Strengthened partnerships across arts organisations, education, tourism, sports, business and other key stakeholders will help to unlock possibilities and will strengthen and diversify the cultural offer. Particular opportunities to contribute towards achieving the full benefits of the Town Deal investment mean that strengthening the cultural partnerships and advocating for the place of culture in these exciting new developments is crucial.

New housing and the subsequent development of new communities also present opportunities to use culture and creative activity to include people and reinforce placemaking and a sense of local identity.

A particular priority, identified through consultation, is for closer collaboration between the borough's four NPOs and the wider cultural and voluntary sectors, business, education and local authority. This could deliver operating efficiencies for the organisations, a more coherent public offer, and help to leverage more national funding to the area. More joined-up working across the sector, with rotational representation at meetings, could also reduce doubling up and save resource.

Colchester Borough Council's VisitColchester website, developed over 20 years and covering the surrounding area as well as the town, is a ready-made platform for pulling together and promoting cultural events centrally alongside the wider tourism offer. Venues and event organisers can already upload their events for free, and data is shared with regional and national tourism agencies to enhance promotion. Raising awareness of and widening access to this functionality, plus further development of the Business Improvement District's InColchester website, dedicated to promoting Colchester town centre, will provide more opportunities to reach and grow the audiences for cultural events and activities. Both sites have incorporated the TXGB ticketing platform which allows events to be marketed across multiple websites.



The Great Big Art Exhibition, Firstsite, 2021. Photo by Jayne Lloyd



There are a number of successful partnership forums operating in Colchester that benefit the cultural sector, including One Colchester, We Are Colchester, Community 360, the BID, LCEP (Local Cultural Education Partnership) and Creative Colchester. These existing collaborations reflect the increased need for the cultural and creative sector to take ownership of its development and to drive change as shared endeavour rather than with a top-down approach. Making the arts, heritage, creative industries, public and private sectors work even more cohesively together to improve the cultural life in Colchester will be critical to the Borough's future success. There are useful models for highly effective partnership working across the country, including examples where additional external funding has been secured, that could provide useful insights for Colchester.

In addition, a new local supplier framework, similar to those used by the Council, could be established so that arts organisations in Colchester could more easily access local businesses and suppliers, whilst also speeding up their own procurement processes. Incentives could be created to recruit locally, or to encourage businesses to invest in local training and hiring. Freelancers, who are vital to the creative industry in Colchester, could also be championed and promoted via the framework.

There are currently many popular events and festivals in the Borough of Colchester but none that give the wide variety of organisations, local businesses and community groups an opportunity to fully collaborate. The size, location, cultural and natural assets of Colchester mean that it is well positioned to create a dynamic programme of site-specific cultural events, which engage the community, draw people to the Borough and helps create a sense of shared purpose, ambition, and recognition of Colchester's value in society.

The actions proposed for **Collaboration and Cultural Identity** include:

- Build on existing sectoral and cross sector partnership working and collaboration;
- Support a supplier framework championing local businesses and freelancers;
- Develop a programme of collaborative site specific events involving multiple partners.

See Appendix 6 for further details



Relevance and access

Colchester is diverse in its population, geography and cultural offer, which extends from spoken word, comedy, contemporary performance and exhibitions to high quality crafts and design. Organisations continue to put audiences and communities at the heart of their work, as exemplified by Firstsite being awarded the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021.

The majority of cultural hubs are in and around the town centre making it a vibrant place to visit, to live and to work. The surrounding borough is beautiful, rural and coastal; a mix of picturesque villages, small close-knit communities, developing residential areas, and places of historical significance. As with many towns and rural communities in the UK, challenges exist in relation to public transport, access to infrastructure, and access to high quality local cultural experiences. Improving the balance between the town centre and rural parts of Colchester will be important.

A significant proportion of the heritage of the Colchester focuses around its Roman, medieval, migratory, and industrial past. Its heritage is important and exemplifies the vibrant history and human stories of the past. The annual Heritage Open Days event organised by the Council with the support of the Colchester Civic Society and the venues that open to the public, is hugely popular

part of the national scheme; not only with residents but with visitors coming from outside the area. A challenge for the future will be to ensure that Colchester continues to bring to life its historical and contemporary stories, to create resonance and connection with the people of Colchester today and to build the local heritage of the future.

While funding remains tight the Council recognises the importance to residents of cultural and creative grassroots organisations and events which support and develop local talent, reach diverse audiences and celebrate communities. The importance of and pride in the town's military history also came through strongly in the consultation and again is recognised by the Council. More creative and cultural use could be made of existing public space to encourage participation, increase access and promote wellbeing, including public art installations and animation in and outside of existing cultural venues and within new civic, commercial, and residential developments.

Addressing disparity of wealth and ensuring equitable access for diverse and disadvantaged communities to cultural engagement opportunities are key challenges for Colchester. Colchester Arts Centre hosts variety showcases for The Warm and Toasty Club, an intergenerational community group working in music, arts and

history with people over 60 and in supporting young emerging music artists. Headgate Theatre reaches the wider community with wellbeing sessions for all, and as a venue for performances by several local performance groups. Headgate Theatre also recently welcomed 4 refugee families from Kabul, sharing in their musical, artistic and cultural knowledge and experience. Other organisations such as Mercury Theatre, Firstsite and Colchester + Ipswich Museums also positively support communities including memory boxes for dementia patients, exhibitions with artworks selected by refugees and distribution of food parcels to make Colchester a place of sanctuary. Bringing new voices into the leadership and Boards of local arts organisations is crucial to ensuring that culture in Colchester is relevant and accessible, so working to diversify Board talent is a priority.

Working in partnership to develop new approaches to ticketing, attracting external funding and sponsorship, and finding new ways to collaborate and share resources will ensure that audiences remain central to the cultural offer of the Colchester area.



Colchester Museums
Development Foundation

Case study: Colchester Museums Development Foundation

Colchester Museums Development Foundation (CMDf) supports Colchester Museums to inspire and enrich our local community, through the preservation, exploration, and sharing of the town's heritage in its widest sense.

The Foundation launched as a charity in August 2021 and serves four key objectives: to enhance access, inclusion, community collaboration, and engagement with collections and research across Colchester Castle, the Natural History Museum, and Hollytrees Museum.

As Colchester Museums continues to grow and evolve, including the upcoming redevelopment of the Natural History Museum, CMDf will serve an important role as both a funder and a champion of causes that are significant to members of Colchester's community. The Foundation is driven by a dynamic team of trustees with deep roots in the local area, including access consultant Sophie Weaver, University of Essex course leader Philip Berners, Chairman of Black History Month Colchester Lawrence Walker, Vice Chairman of Friends of Ipswich Museums Denise Fiennes, and the current Portfolio Holder for Heritage in Colchester, Councillor Darius Laws.

"CMDf has gone from strength to strength in its first year. We are already seeing the positive impact of having a foundation that can amplify community voices, and act nimbly to support and prioritise projects that are important to local people. As CMDf continues to grow, so will the capacity and resilience of our Museums Service. It's an exciting time for heritage in Colchester!" **Sophie Weaver, Chair**

Case Study: Lawrence Walker, Chair, Black History Month Colchester

“Black History Month is an annual observance that celebrates and commemorates the history and the achievements of members of our Black communities.” **Lawrence Walker**

Since 2008, Black History Month Colchester has provided a voice for Black and Minority Ethnic communities annually, throughout the month of October. The project is supported by Colchester’s BAME communities and community groups, cultural venues and other local businesses and events. Highlights from the 2021 programme included talks and presentations on issues that have impacted Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities’, such as, “Stop & Search” along with further education and career and personal development workshops. The programme also delivered performances digitally and in person, highlighting the fight for racial justice and promoting local artists, entertainers, poets and guest speakers. Along with events at venues, events also took place in youth clubs and schools across Essex.

Black History Month Colchester has had a wide range of partners over the years including the Colchester Borough Council, Colchester Arts Centre, Mercury Theatre, Firstsite and others.

“Local organizations can best support artists and small companies by creating easier access to facilities and programs that will help with personal development and better access to funding support.”

Lawrence Walker

Black History Month Colchester plan to make the programme a year-round event. Plans are in development, and will see partnerships with a range of organisations in the borough, including Hollytrees Museum, Firstsite and Colchester Community Hub, as the project builds up to the October celebrations.



The actions proposed for Relevance and Access include:

- Collaborate on a shared diversity and inclusion training programme across cultural organisations;
- Help ensure cultural organisations are reflective of their communities;
- Make the most of the public realm and create opportunity for art and heritage outside of cultural venues and museums;
- Develop a Parks and Open Space Strategy maximising the opportunities for creative and cultural activities in these important spaces;
- Explore the recommendations of the 2020 Gosbecks Feasibility Study, including university collaboration, engaging local people in their heritage through Heritage Open Days, excavation open days and community excavation/ investigation;
- Sustained focus on shared marketing and publicity resources for arts, heritage and tourism, enhancing the existing work of VisitColchester and others.

See Appendix 6 for further details





Castle Park Concert

Talent development

Colchester has a wealth of knowledge and expertise at its fingertips: independent artists, makers, teachers, academics, business and community leaders and more.

Like many areas of the UK, issues around crime, antisocial behaviour and lack of connection to place can play their part in stifling the development of new and emerging talent and the fulfilment of its creative and economic potential. For young people starting out it can be difficult to enter the workspace, and finding meaningful employment and longer-term careers in the area can prove challenging.

Artists, creatives, and professionals working in the arts in Colchester have demonstrated great resilience and adaptability during the Pandemic. From independent artists and creatives, and those working to support communities through culture, access to training, development and networking opportunities will be essential to strengthen and invigorate the sector.

Going forward, it will be important that Colchester utilises its many assets to support the professional development of the cultural workforce at all levels from emerging to mid and established career.

Post-COVID, many of us are rethinking our priorities and career choices. In the future, we will most likely continue to work well

past what used to be known as 'retirement age'. Life-long learning will be key to developing and supporting a thriving workforce which reflects our society, brings diverse thoughts and experiences and continues to ensure that the sector remains relevant, sustainable and innovative.

The size ('big enough and small enough') and cultural demographic of Colchester makes it an ideal test bed to model new ways of engaging with educators, employers and potential employees, working collaboratively across culture, education and business and creating new pathways of employment: from education to vocational learning, apprenticeships, peer mentoring, flexible models of working, accessible recruitment strategies and actively engaging with a diverse range of future employees. Stimulating volunteering opportunities and shared training across cultural organisations would further enhance local talent development and provide efficient ways of operating across the sector.

A working group of Creative Colchester should be established with a focus on building better provision, access and progression routes for people of all ages and backgrounds into creative training, education and employment. This should include representation from local schools, FE and HE providers, as well as private sector training, workspace providers and creative and cultural sector employers.

Case study: Mercury Creatives

'It's been amazing to work with such a talented and committed group of creative businesses. Over the last two years being able to offer this programme has been a lifeline to many creative businesses. Projects like this are needed to help local creative businesses remain relevant, sustainable and dynamic.' **Joseph Rawlings, Mercury Creatives Project Manager**

The Mercury is one of the four Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's) in Colchester, and one of the largest regional producing theatres in the East of England. The theatre reopened in 2021 following a two-year building project, which included the refurbishment of the public spaces, technical workshops and offices, along with the addition of a café/bar, rehearsal rooms and new community and business incubation spaces.

Mercury Creatives, is a free three-year business support and mentoring programme for creative businesses and arts freelancers working in the performing arts across Essex, East Sussex, Kent and Suffolk. It is funded through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) alongside revenue funding support from Colchester Borough Council and Arts Council England. Since February 2020 114 self-employed artists and small creative businesses have benefited from the programme aimed at developing business skills and creating opportunities in the sector. The programme has been the largest single investment in skills and business development for the creative industries in the Mercury's history (£300,000).

The support on offer has included 24 hours of mentoring from performing arts professionals and creative entrepreneurs; Diagnostic needs assessments, highlighting strengths and weakness and potential for growth; upskilling workshops, showcases and events; networking opportunities and support to develop bespoke business growth plans.

Over 18 months participants taking part in Mercury Creatives have:

- Received 2,045 hours of 1 to 1 mentoring;
- Established 60 new jobs or contracts;
- Created 61 new products or services;
- Generated over £1,010,118 in new investment from commercial and non-commercial sources.

Participants of the programme have credited Mercury Creatives in building their confidence and skills, enabling them to apply for funding, pitch to investors and create new work, services and income streams (overall beneficiaries on the programme saw a 13% increase in turnover).

At present the ERDF fund will not be renewed once the programme ends in September 2022. The Mercury hopes to secure funds from others sources in order to embed Mercury Creatives into their overall talent development programme and continue to support artists and creative businesses throughout Colchester and Essex.





#JShuView22

Case Study: JShu

“Colchester is full of places to go and be creative.” **JShu**

Jordan Shults, who likes to be known as JShu, is a young photographer based in Colchester. He became interested in photography whilst at school and later studied it at A' Level. Living with autism, photography is the tool that he has chosen to help connect with others and share his unique view of the world.

JShu is drawn to photographing Colchester, and for the time being at least, it's important to him to stay local and remain rooted in the community. His work regularly features well known landmarks. He has also worked with and has been supported by many organisations across the borough. Jordan's mum Vanessa, who works closely with him, credits two individuals in particular for mentoring him, Anthony Roberts, Director, Colchester Arts Centre and Danny Hiles, and says that they have been instrumental in building his confidence as an artist. And whilst she agrees with JShu that Colchester is fantastic for Culture (free carer tickets are especially important), she sees a gap in provision for 18–25-year-olds, which JShu currently falls into.

“There's a gap in health and care after 18... Be prepared to knock on doors. Always be on the lookout for things.” **Vanessa Shults**

JShu and Vanessa are upbeat about the future, with plans to secure studio space, build his portfolio and launch a brand in the next year.

The actions proposed for Talent Development include:

- Establish an Apprenticeship scheme across cultural venues;
- Establish shared volunteer programme;
- Develop and deliver training and development programmes for early, mid and established career artists, creatives and arts professionals;
- Form a creative Colchester working group on learning and participation and workforce development.

See Appendix 6 for further details





Colchester Arts Centre - Photo by Sam Leppard

Innovation, growth and resilience

The appetite for cultural experimentation and creative entrepreneurship is strong in Colchester. The many established arts organisations in Colchester have been very successful in attracting funding and continue to develop long term funding relationships with local government, ACE, trusts and foundations. For individuals, small organisations and community groups getting a project off the ground can often be the most challenging aspect.

Seed funding can help to attract larger investment from other sources. A modest annual commitment of funding to provide small grants for arts and heritage organisations could have a large impact in leveraging additional funding and inward investment and unlocking creative and cultural opportunities and social and economic impacts. The Borough Council has previously provided successful one-off grant schemes, such as the Creative Events Fund, however, with increased pressure of local authority budgets there is a need for a new cross sector supported and financed funding model that can deliver such a scheme on a regular and sustainable basis.

The existing Our Colchester “Create” Fund - which contributes annual funding towards creative and innovative events and new project ideas that will have a positive impact in the BID area - could serve as a prototype for this, with additional funding designed to ‘dovetail’ with the “Create” Fund by targeting organisations and projects in the wider borough beyond the town centre. It is vital that such funds are made accessible to ethnically and culturally diverse groups.

Collaboration and partnership with larger institutions, sharing resources and joined-up marketing can all help to build the creative economy of the Borough and enrich its cultural offer.

Colchester is successful at attracting day trips and has the potential to develop further as a destination for overnight stays. Its built heritage, natural resources, artistic output and recent investment through the Town Deal and in local hotel businesses means that it is now ideally placed – through Visit Colchester and others - to build on this momentum. Creating a thriving evening economy, through late opening of businesses and arts venues, developing clear signage in the town centre, and developing closer links between culture and tourism, will enhance the Town and Borough’s standing as a destination of choice. Headway is already being made by the BID’s consultants, Six til Six, with the development of the Colchester Leisure Recovery Strategy (which aims to support the sector post-COVID 19).

As the Borough continues to develop and grow apace through the many new housing developments, leisure facilities and community spaces such as the Northern Gateway and Garden Community; significant opportunity arises to create spaces which respond to the needs of the community and contribute to a sense of place making. It will be important that the various local government departments and cultural organisations continue to work in collaboration with key stakeholders to align strategies and create a cohesive approach to the Borough’s development.

Case study: Frazer Merrick, sound artist

“Collaboration is really important; you try things out. Experimenting, exploring different ways of working... Often there are lots of people doing similar things. You can get more done when working together. Sharing resources.” **Frazer Merrick**

Frazer Merrick is as an artist, designer and composer who uses technology to create sound and music. Most of Frazer’s work takes place in educational settings as part of his work at Signals, the Colchester based centre for creative digital learning. Signals primarily work in schools and with community groups, using computing and robotics creatively. Frazer regularly collaborates with artists and organisations in Colchester, and was recently the sound designer on Sirens a production at the Mercury Theatre. Frazer has also exhibited work at Firstsite and at other venues nationally. He is also a co-founder of CLIP, a new music CIC (community interest company), based in Essex.

At the start of his career Frazer had the opportunity to take part in YAK (Young Artist Kommunity) at Firstsite, which he describes as a seminal moment in his development as an artist. YAK gives gallery space and resources to young artists. He also cites the Games hub, a private scheme which at the time ran in partnership with University of Essex, supporting video game start-ups, as being another important opportunity.

Up until this point Frazer had thought of himself as a composer, but after graduating university he realised there wasn’t enough of this work to sustain a full-time career. He needed to diversify. Moving to creating music and sound for video games was an unexpected but worthwhile route.

“Most of us doing the course had no connection to the university, but we got really meaningful support that gave us entry to the gaming industry.” **Frazer Merrick**

When asked what advice he would give emerging artists based in Colchester, he felt that collaboration was key, and that it was important that artists have a community that supports them. He suggested that organisations like Fringe Festival, YAK at Firstsite, and the business development schemes at the Mercury Theatre, as good examples of this.

At CLIP Frazer is developing the Photon Smasher, an instrument that turns light into music. He continues to lead workshops, exhibit, gig and compose in and around Essex. www.frazermerrick.com



The actions proposed for Growth and Resilience include:

- Build the capacity of the cultural sector in Colchester by exploring shared resources between organisations, including shared fundraising and press & marketing;
- Town wide evaluation and impact methodology - all cultural organisations in the borough to use the same format;
- Create a funding pot of small grants for cultural events and events and activity or match funding, ensuring it is accessible to ethnically and culturally-diverse groups, as well as communities across the Borough of Colchester those outside of Colchester town centre;
- Deliver Queen Street Digital Working hub capital project;
- Deliver the £18.2 million of Town Deal projects to help grow Colchester's economy and improve the quality of life for all residents;
- Redevelop Colchester Natural History Museum.

See Appendix 6 for further details





Further priorities

Beyond the key areas of focus there are a number of considerations which are important to the success of the Borough Council's vision for the cultural sector; but which may fall outside of the purview of culture:

Getting About

The town is well connected to London and the East, however, transport in the town itself and public transport in, to and from rural areas remain key issues. Parking, late night public transport, extension of park and ride service hours (to include Sunday and evenings after 7pm) and a dedicated coach park are all important aspects to consider. Signage and clear, safe pedestrian routes from the railway station, all contribute to creating a sense of welcome and belonging. Lighting and the animation of public spaces, creating attractive pathways to and through the town are key.

Environmental Sustainability and Public Health

Culture has a vital role to play in connecting people to the natural environment and leading the way in addressing issues of climate change and environmental sustainability.

Landscapes, parks and nature have an important role to play in reducing carbon emissions and tackling climate change, as well as promoting public health and wellbeing. Parks, countryside and coastal areas are a key feature of the Borough, providing a wealth of opportunity to engage communities with issues around the environment and climate change through culture. By sensitively

animating these places of natural beauty, through site-specific events, open air concerts and activities the Borough can begin to build connection linking the arts, environment, sports, tourism, health and wellbeing.

The Natural History Museum in Colchester is housed in a deconsecrated medieval church (grade II listed) in the town centre. It focusses on the natural history of North East Essex, highlighting messages about wildlife habitats, biodiversity and climate change. The Colchester + Ipswich Museum Service (CIMS) is planning to refurbish and reinvigorate the museum. A new Natural Science Museum could retain the family feel and remit to inspire people and young families to learn more about their local wildlife. This could inspire a lifelong interest in nature that could help protect the environment for the future. It is anticipated that the refreshed museum could become a centre for signposting engagement with the outdoors across the Borough.

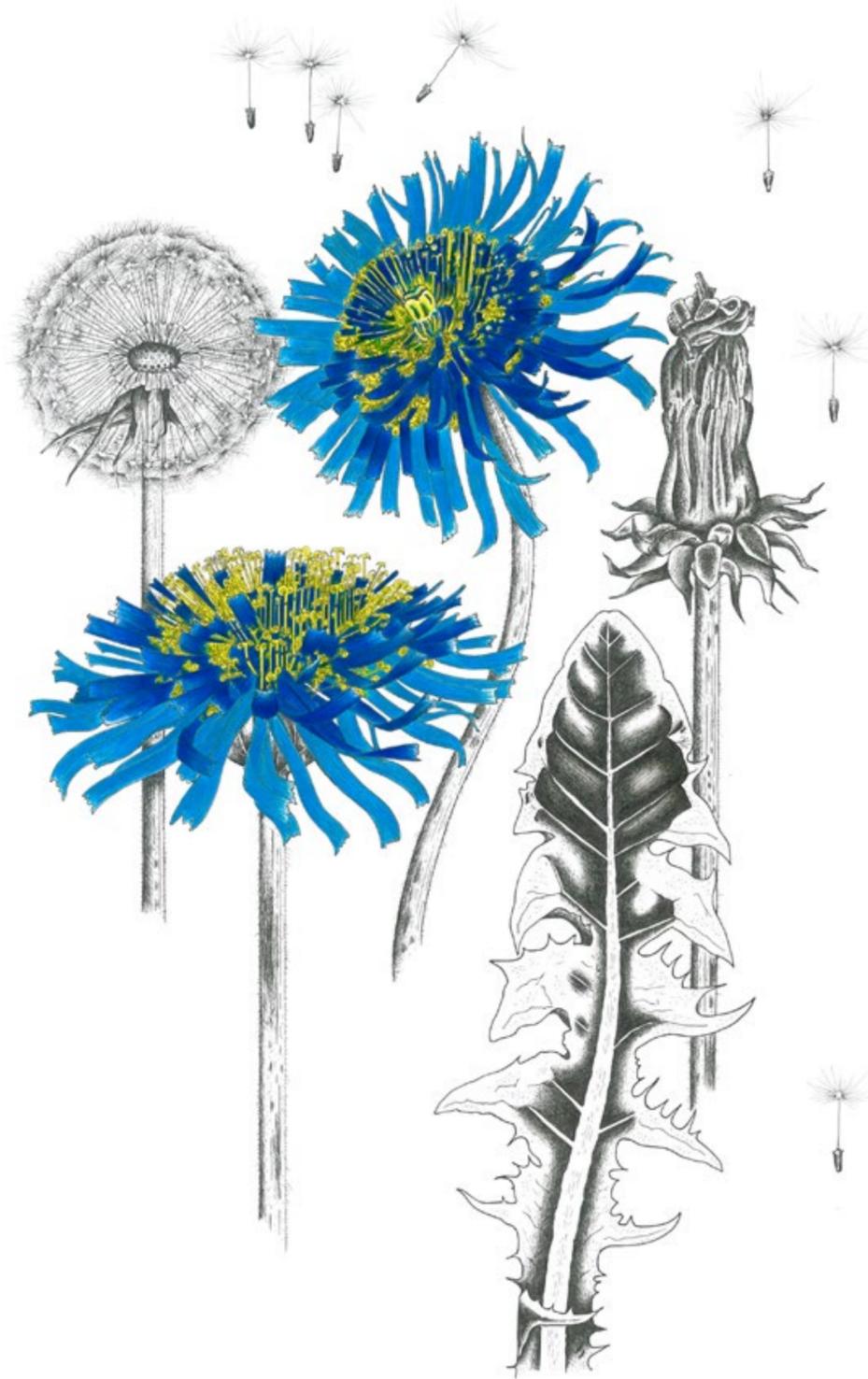
Colchester Borough Council has been committed to reducing its environmental impact since 2008, when it set a target to reduce emissions by 40% by 2020 – a target which has been achieved. The Council then declared a climate emergency in 2019, committing to achieving net zero emissions by 2030 and has published a Strategy and Climate Emergency Action Plan. The Council also established an Environment and Sustainability Panel, where individuals or organisations could have their say on the Council's work to tackle the climate emergency.

There are many organisations in the Borough working in partnership with the Council to tackle environmental issues:

- Together We Grow, a not-for-profit enterprise that works with local groups including schools and refugee groups to learn about land, food, and nature;
- Woodland and Biodiversity Project, helping with tree planting;
- Colchester Orbital, a collaborative project between the community and the Council. The Colchester Orbital is a 14–15-mile circular walking and cycling route around the edge of the town, taking advantage of, and connecting some of its loveliest green spaces and off-road pathway networks.

The Council also works with the University of Essex to ensure that its work on tackling climate change and environmental issues is informed by expert research and with Town and Parish Councils to help them reduce their emissions and environmental impact.

Cultural organisations in the Borough are already putting environmental sustainability at the heart of their working practices. Mercury Theatre, for instance, is the most sustainable building in the town centre and has shown its commitment to supporting the ambitions of the ambitious international targets to limit global temperature rises to below 2C against pre-industrial levels. By working in partnership and making the best use of green and coastal spaces, Colchester's cultural sector can lead the way in creating a more sustainable future for residents and visitors alike.



The Weed that Turned Blue by Lisa Wesley

Case study: Colchester Arts Centre - Earth Riot

Earth Riot is the name given to the creative environmental strategy created by Colchester Arts Centre.

Colchester Arts Centre is a community focused performance venue based in a beautiful converted Victorian church in the town centre. It presents a dynamic and eclectic mix of live work throughout the year. It provides a platform for local bands as well as being established on the national circuit for touring acts. It is home to a lively folk club and bristling jazz club and has hosted many famous comedians and performers at the early stages of their career.

Earth Riot is a creative and radical response to what the venue perceives as the urgency of the climate change crisis.

It has adopted and implemented many important but familiar actions:

- Zero fossil fuels burned in the energy supply chain
- All electricity garnered from renewable sources
- All gas now sourced by bio methane suppliers

- No flights undertaken for business trips and travel
- No single use plastic throughout the building including all cleaning materials

Earth Riot develops the strategy by inviting artists, architects and creatives to respond to the crisis by embedding new ideas into the fabric and allowing them to imagine the world differently. It uses “Cathedral Thinking” – imagining the world in 100 years’ time - to inform the actions of today.

Earth Riot has piloted a carbon offset project where the organisation invests in local environmental and socially focussed charities to offset the carbon it generates. Two local partnerships created for Earth Riot are Together We Grow and E Cargo Bikes.

Architects Inkpen Downie have introduced water saving toilets, using the grey water of hand washing to refill cisterns and flushing.

Artist Lisa Wesley has made friends with the plants and bugs that live in the adjacent graveyard and imagined how nature itself might evolve new species to protect itself. The luminous hedgehog, the rebellious two fingered Stink Horn mushroom and the Cheese and Onion moths are all imagined species that could inhabit a new world.



Town To Sea Trail Raven (Hythe Hill)

Appendices



A. Action plan

This action plan is the responsibility of leaders and organisations across Colchester. The local authority and Arts Council England will continue to be important stakeholders and funders of the cultural sector across Colchester but it will be equally important for the sector itself to take the lead in taking much of this strategy forward. Building that leadership capacity, supporting increased collaboration and finding new voices to diversify the sector will all be key foundations that underpin the successful delivery of this action plan.

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Priority theme: collaboration and cultural identity				
Build on existing sectoral and cross sector partnership working and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate the Cultural Compact partnership model including in depth review of successful examples elsewhere (e.g.: Sheffield Culture Collective) and take forward if a fit for Colchester. Develop and support the Colchester LCEP 	Short-term	Fundraising from a range of partner organisations	NPO's, Creative Colchester, local authorities and the wider creative sector.
Support a supplier framework championing local businesses and freelancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable arts organisations to access businesses and suppliers locally. Speed up procurement processes. Encourage businesses to invest in local training and hiring. Champions and promotes local freelancers. Enhance cost efficiency for the creative sector. 	Medium-term	Staff time	NPOs

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Develop a programme of collaborative site specific events involving multiple partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a sense of shared vision and ownership for Colchester over the long term. Has potential to link to Town Deal developments, building a sense of energy and 'buzz' within the borough Build collaboration between the sectors. Create a stronger offer which is more attractive to external funders and sponsors. Provide a nexus for communities. Contribute to the brand of Colchester as an exciting place to live in and to visit. Attract tourism, visitors and generates external income. Animate the public realm, creating a more vibrant town centre. Promote Colchester as a centre for live, accessible culture and creativity. Support the growth of local creative talent. Provide opportunity for new and emerging talent to showcase their work. 	Medium-term	Potential for ACE and other project grant funding	Creative Colchester, BID, Colchester Events (CBC), commercial sector, NPOs
Priority theme: Relevance and access				
Continue and extend work to ensure Boards and staff of major cultural organisations in the Borough are diverse and representative of the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help to ensure that cultural organisations are reflective of their communities. Ensure a range of voices are represented in programming and the production of culture. Ensure cultural programmes remain current and relevant to the communities they serve. Increase accessibility to culture for audience members and future workforce. Increase the diversity of thought, skill and background leading to more innovative culture. Align with Arts Council Investment Principles 	Ongoing	NPOs and major cultural organisations Use ACE Investment Principles resources to support	All publicly funded organisations

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Collaborate on a shared diversity and inclusion training programme across cultural organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure efficient use of scarce training budgets. Provide opportunities for sharing good practice across the Borough. Encourage new ways of working together on shared diversity initiatives. Provide opportunity to share and develop high quality training programmes and resources, which could be extended beyond diversity and inclusion. 	Short-term	NPOs and major cultural organisations' existing budgets	NPOs and major cultural organisations
Make the most of the public realm and create opportunity for art and heritage outside of cultural venues and museums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animate the external space. Help to create a safer, healthier environment. Break down barriers to engagement. Create opportunities for innovation. Aligned with planned Town Deal public realm developments and existing projects including street art installations by the BID. 	Medium-term		Creative Colchester, BID, NPOs, CBC, commercial sector
Develop a Parks and Open Space Strategy maximising the opportunities for creative and cultural activities in these important spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better use of existing resources. Celebrate one of Colchester's strengths. 	Medium-term	Existing resources	CBC
Increase the focus on Colchester's military heritage within existing museums and cultural venues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise the importance of the garrison community and its history to Colchester. Build collaboration between the Garrison and others e.g. bolstering existing displays at Colchester Castle, or working with the collection at the Military Corrective Training Centre. Recognise military heritage through thoughtful theming of public spaces – playgrounds, street names and plaques. 	Medium-term	NLHF and /or other project grants, existing exhibitions budgets	Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CBC), Garrison

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Explore the recommendations of the 2020 Gosbecks Feasibility Study, including university collaboration, engaging local people in their heritage through Heritage Open Days, excavation open days and community excavation/ investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater public engagement with Colchester's heritage assets. 	Medium-term	Grant funding; fundraising and sponsorship, existing resources	CBC, local heritage groups, HE/FE partners, funding partners, Section 106
Explore the potential for additional heritage 'interventions' outside of museums, such as the placement of a Roman mosaic under Lion Walk's pavement; finding more ways to work with developers and planning to bring important historical finds to life and interpret them, such as heritage related features in the built environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show Colchester's heritage to a wider audience. Create an opportunity to attract more residents and tourists to the borough's museums and heritage sites. Improve the public realm. Improve the built environment. 	Medium-term	Grant funding; fundraising and sponsorship, existing resources	CBC, landowners, heritage organisations, funding partners, developers
Continue the programme to enhance the interpretation of historic sites across the Borough working with and responding to communities and heritage groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widen public understanding of Colchester's heritage assets. Improve of the public realm. 	Ongoing	Heritage Grant funding, Section 106	CBC, landowners, heritage organisations, funding partners
Sustained focus on shared marketing and publicity resources for arts, heritage and tourism, enhancing the existing work of VisitColchester and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the brand of Colchester Create a shared vision for the Borough. Provide smaller organisations with the tools to promote their work. Ensure high standards of publicity. Increase opportunity for press/media exposure. Create a more sustainable approach to publicity and marketing. The BID's InColchester and the Council's VisitColchester website and other are suitable platforms for this. 	Short to medium-term		NPOs, Creative Colchester, BID, VisitColchester Marketing and publicity specialists (CBC)

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Seek to improve the availability and accessibility of ancillary music industry infrastructure (e.g., record and equipment stores), studios (rehearsal, recording) and venues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support a burgeoning music sector which is vital to a robust cultural offer. Creates opportunities to engage with music. Build on Colchester's reputation as a centre for musical creativity. Consider widening access for the music sector to music facilities operated by education providers. 	Long-term	Consider rent incentives	Creative Colchester, commercial landlords, CBC
Walking & cycling corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a safe, attractive and fast cycling link between the Town Centre, Greenstead and the University. New secure cycle parking will be created in the Town centre. Around 1000 loan bikes will be available in Greenstead, to encourage local residents to use this active mode of transport. Make a positive impact on climate change Contribute to the health and well being of the community 	Medium-term		
Deliver 5G provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give Colchester a competitive advantage, encouraging employers into the town and new businesses to be set up. Increase connectivity for residents 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Kerbless streets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve accessibility and public safety, from Head Street to Queen Street 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Replace town centre pedestrian signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve accessibility and public safety Enhance public perception of the town Contribute to the economy by helping to create a safe, attractive and accessible environment 	Short-term	Existing funding	BID

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Priority theme: Talent development				
Establish an Apprenticeship scheme across cultural venues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable apprentices to rotate across different cultural venues, increasing the quality of their experience Increase diversity of the workforce. Provide more accessible pathways to employment. Support the next generation of cultural leaders. Strengthen cultural organisations through peer learning. Provide more cultural apprenticeships, mentoring, volunteering opportunities, residencies and shared training opportunities. 	Medium-term	Scope for partnership with HE/FE providers Existing NPO resources	NPOs and heritage sites
Establish shared volunteer programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable volunteers to rotate across different cultural venues, including sports and leisure facilities. Scope for developing a Cultural Volunteering Manager. Provide opportunity to share and develop high quality resources and Codes of Standards across cultural organisations. 	Short to medium-term	Funding bids, existing NPO resources	Colchester 360, NPOs, CBC and cross sector organisations
Develop and deliver training programmes for early career artists and creatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen the workforce. Create pathways to career advancement. Strengthen cultural organisations through peer learning. 	Medium-term	Funding bids, existing resources	NPOs and heritage sites
Develop and deliver a range of training programmes and development opportunities to strengthen the cultural workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop partnerships to deliver workforce training and development opportunities to enhance the resilience and sustainability of the workforce Provide support for mid-career and established professionals Create a strong network of peer support Enhance opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange 	Medium term	External Funding and shared resources	Cultural organisations, FE and HE institutions

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Creative Colchester working group on learning and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build better provision, access and progression routes for people of all ages and backgrounds into creative training, education and employment. 	Medium-term		Creative Colchester and LCEP working with schools, FE and HE providers, private sector training, workspace providers and creative and cultural sector employers
Transformed Youth Facilities Building on existing youth provision, with a significant investment in facilities for young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide ongoing, essential community-based services and support. Deliver targeted support to vulnerable young people, provide high quality facilities for young people to enjoy and build their involvement in culture, sports and community Strengthen young people's skills and aspirations. Including the refurbishment and upgrading of the facilities in The Townhouse Youth Centre in West Stockwell Street. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Priority theme: Innovation, Growth and Resilience				
Build the capacity of the cultural sector in Colchester by exploring shared resources between organisations, including shared fundraising and press & marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance capacity for voluntary and small professional organisations. Create savings and improve effectiveness for NPOs and other larger organisations. 	Medium-term	External funding and cost-sharing between organisations	All arts and heritage organisations
Seed Funding to support innovation and implementation of new business models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage an innovative approach to developing new income streams and ways of working Increase resilience and sustainability of cultural organisations and groups 	Medium term	CBC and external funding	CBC, all arts and heritage organisations

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Build the capacity of the cultural sector in Colchester by investment in workforce development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Note: this point is further expanded in the Talent Development Section 	Medium term	External Funding and shared resources	Cultural organisations, FE and HE institutions
Town wide evaluation and impact methodology: all cultural organisations in the borough to use the same format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efficiently aggregate data on the impact of culture in Colchester. Build a stronger case to external funders for supporting arts and heritage in the borough. 	Short-term		NPOs, Creative Colchester
Create a funding pot of small grants for cultural events and activity or match funding, ensuring it is accessible to ethnically and culturally-diverse groups, as well as communities across the Borough of Colchester those outside of Colchester town centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the growth of local cultural and creative industries. Support opportunities for place making in new and established communities Provide opportunities for community led groups to develop creative projects. Increase the diversity and relevance of cultural projects. Attract external funding to the Borough. Develop new and emerging talent. Relatively low cost and high benefit. Leverage culture and creativity as a tool for delivering wider social goods such as health, wellbeing and the environment. 	Short-term	Year 1 and 2 funding from CBC, replaced by other sources in the medium to longer-term	Creative Colchester and cross sector partners
Develop and promote a programme of mass participation events at key venues, including concerts, festivals and sporting events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase cultural opportunities for residents and visitors. Boost to local economy. Raise the profile and reputation of Colchester. 	Ongoing	Investment for commercial return	Colchester Events (CBC), BID, Colchester United, promoters and event organisers

Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Continue to build the night-time economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote Colchester as an evening and overnight destination. Contribute to the local economy. Build a sustainable, holistic approach to development of the Borough. Create a safer environment. Build links to – and efficiencies with - the daytime economy. 	Long-term	Commercial development, Section 106	CBC, Essex County Council, BID
Deliver Queen Street Digital Working hub capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide high quality, local workspace on the site of the old bus station on Queen Street. Nurture local talent and reduce unsustainable patterns of traffic (through reducing the need to commute out of Colchester). Create the conditions for thriving tech, digital and creative businesses. 	Medium-term	SELEP funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Deliver Wilson Marriage Centre (Refurbishment and digital learning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a digital skills hub to support training, development, provide digital access and community activities. Provide adults across Colchester increased opportunities to re-skill and re-train so as to be better able to meet the needs of local employers. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Redevelop Colchester Natural History Museum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A modern, relevant and interactive museum exploring local Essex wildlife and habitats A hub for young families in particular to learn about the local natural world, and explore their own gardens, parks and surrounding countryside. Generate learning initiatives and healthy lifestyles for local people. 	Medium-term	NLHF funding and trusts and foundations	Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CBC)
Deliver Heart of Greenstead capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build 139 high-quality new houses (many of which will be affordable housing), a community hub and attractive public space, Combine with more effective and joined-up delivery of public services, including community and health, employment skills and enterprise infrastructure. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC

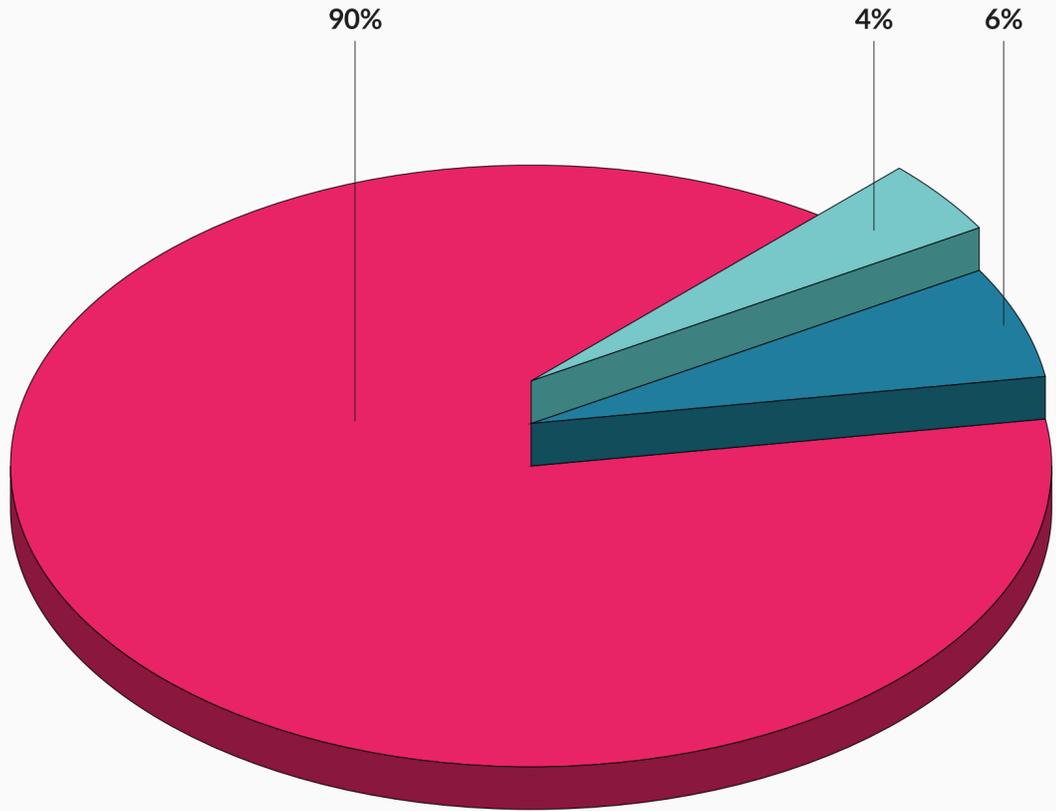
Action	Outcome	Timescale	Resources required	Owner
Deliver St Nicholas Square capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The new square in front of the old 'Jacks' building will be an attractive, welcoming space. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Deliver Jumbo capital project and develop feasibility study for future development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable some urgent repairs to the 'Jumbo' water tower to help safeguard its condition. Fund further feasibility and design work, to help the Colchester and North Essex Buildings Preservation Trust, who own the building, finalise their resubmission to Heritage Lottery Fund to adapt the building into a tourist attraction and destination. 	Short-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Deliver Balcerne Gate capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phase 1: area of public realm immediately in front of the Mercury Theatre improved. Phase 2: the public realm improved in a wider area including up to and around the 'Jumbo' water tower, and southwards along Balcerne Gardens as far as Church Street. Increase opportunities for use of the public realm Contribute to a safe and thriving day and night-time economy 	Short to medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Deliver Holy Trinity and Trinity Square capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Grade 1 listed Holy Trinity Church, Colchester's oldest standing building will be brought back as a new community hub In addition, opportunities to create an attractive small public space on the north side of the church will be explored, complementing the public realm in this important part of the Town Centre. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC
Deliver Vineyard Cultural Gateway & Essex County Hospital capital project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transform areas in the town centre to make them more attractive public spaces. Make public spaces more vibrant, attractive, sustainable and resilient. Help showcase Colchester's unique heritage. 	Medium-term	Town Deal funding	We Are Colchester/CBC

This strategy will be available in other formats on request including large print.

B. Overview of Public Survey Responses

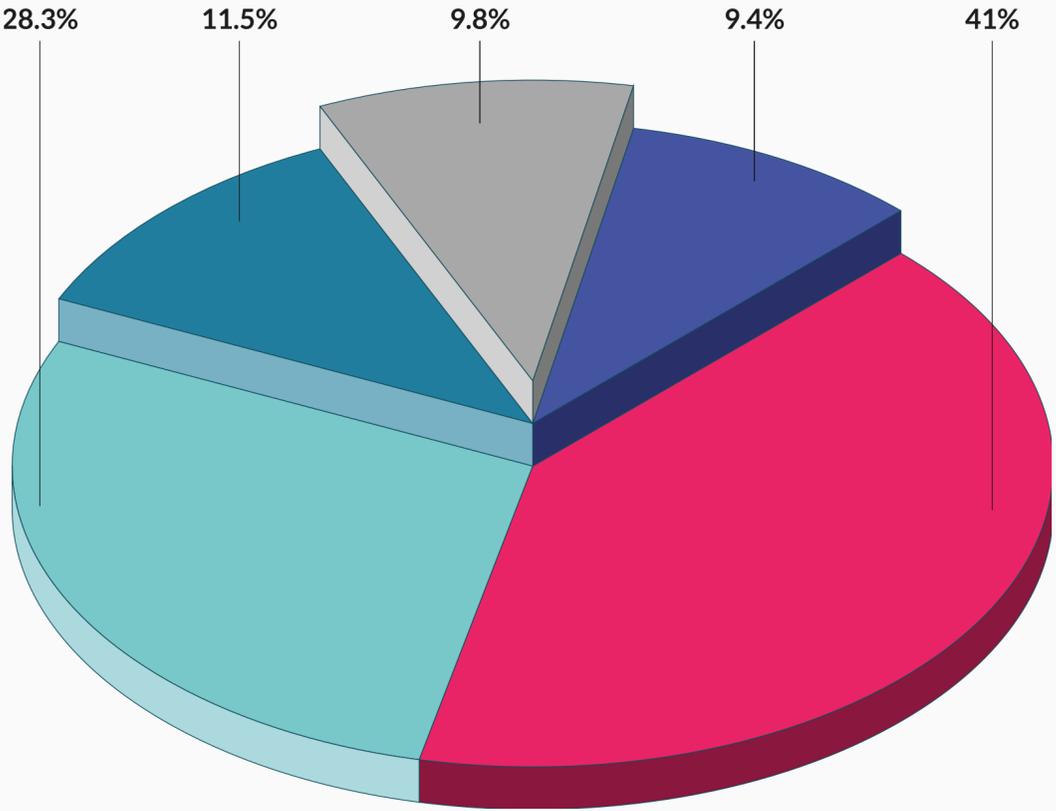
Do you live in Colchester?

- Yes, currently
- No, but used to
- No, never

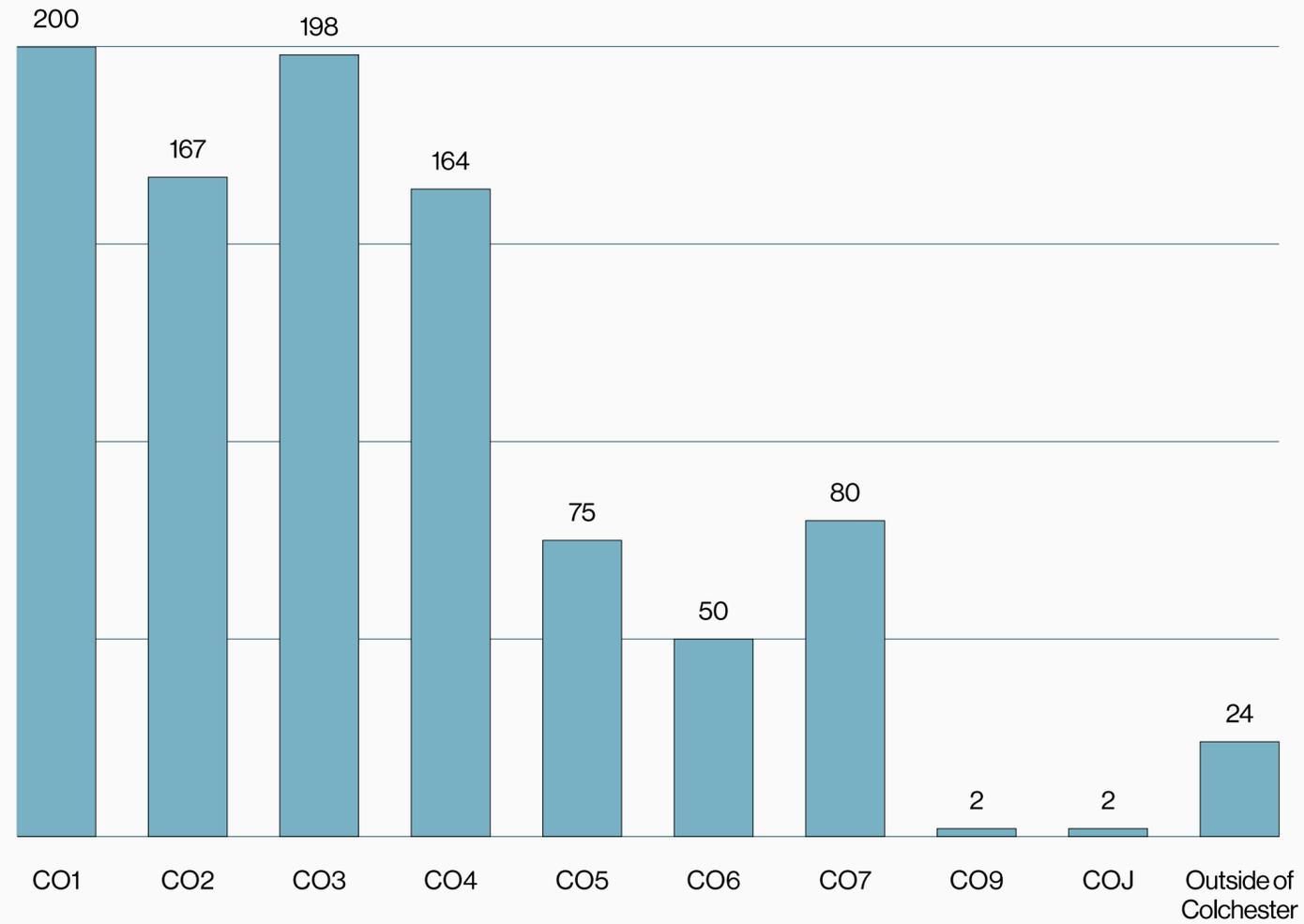


How long have you lived in Colchester?

- 25 Years or more
- 10-14 Years
- 5-9 Years
- Less than 5 years
- I don't live in Colchester

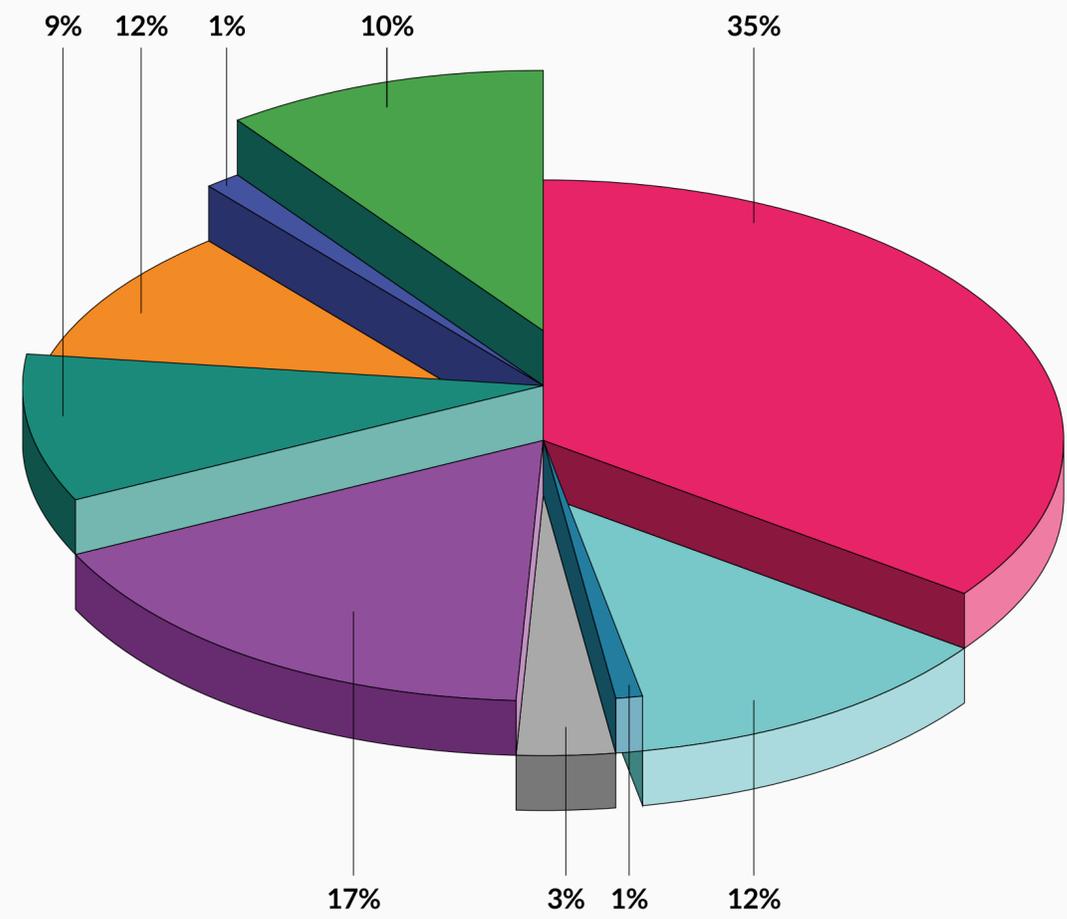


Please tell us the first 3 letters of your postcode



Before Covid-19, how did you find out about cultural events happening in Colchester?

- Social media
- Culture organisation websites
- Radio
- Posters/Leaflets
- Word of mouth
- Local newspapers
- Culture mailing lists
- Noticeboards
- Google search

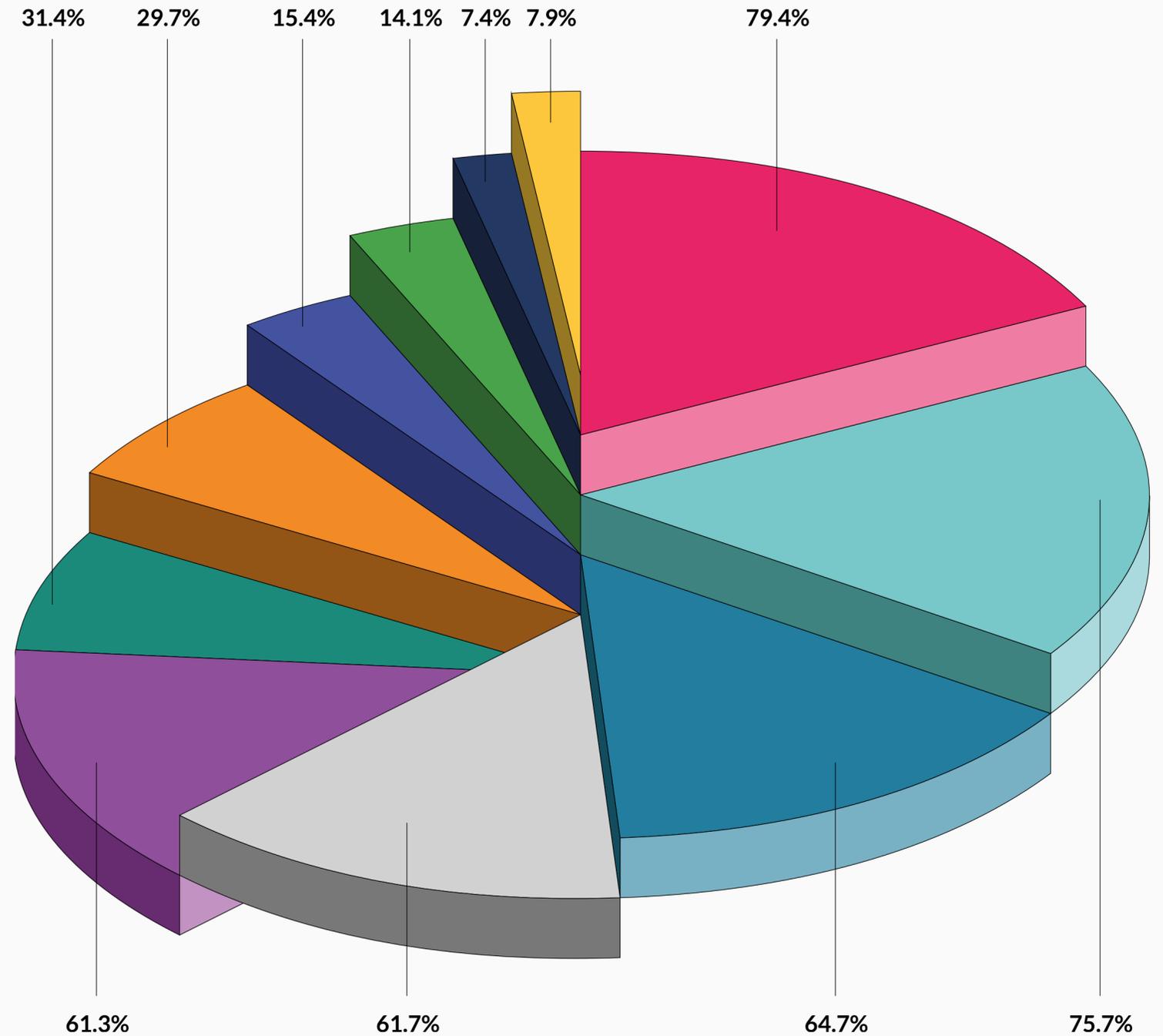


Which specific Colchester-based venues or services have you visited or engaged with in the last 3 years?

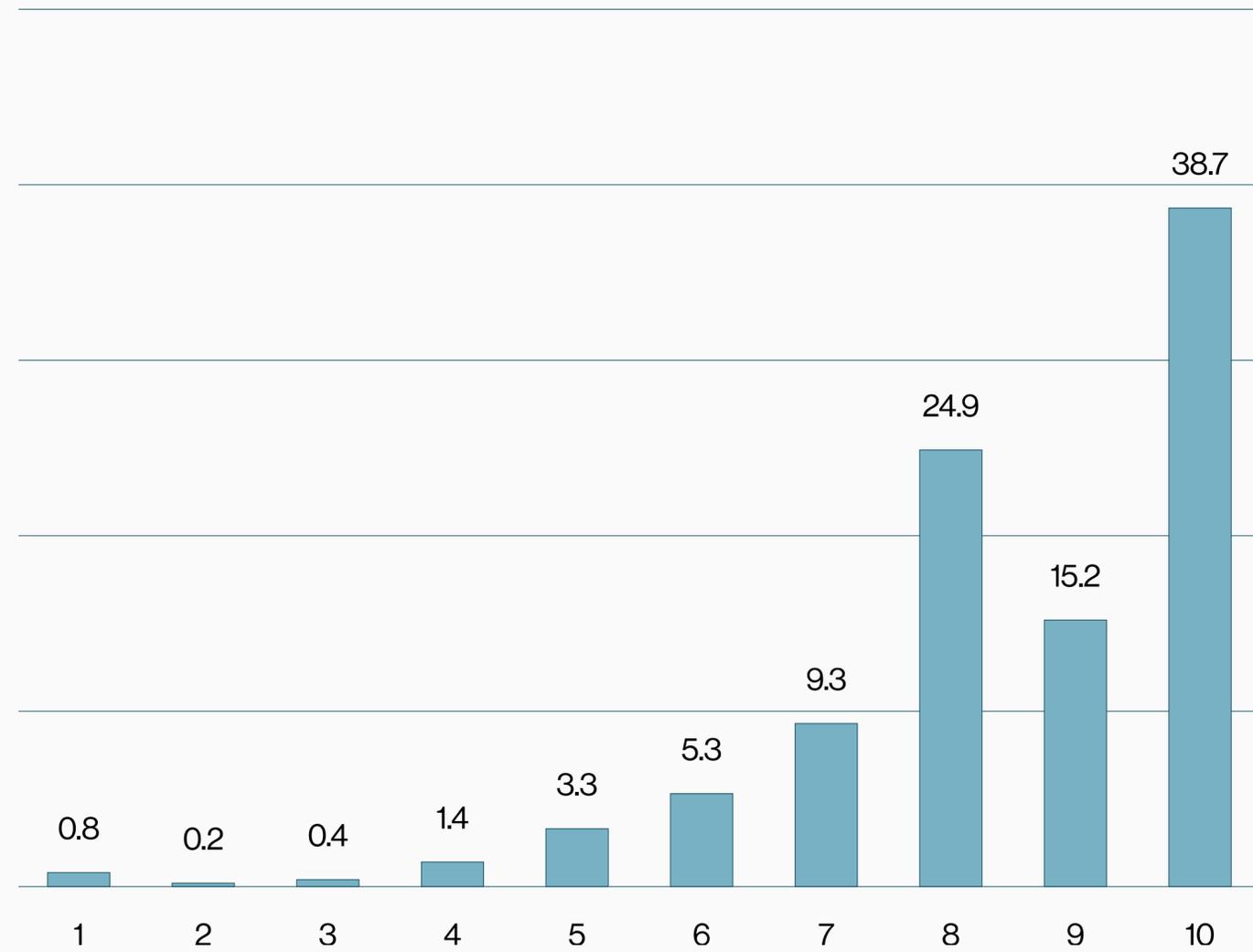
- Firstsite
- Mercury Theatre
- Colchester Arts Centre
- Minorities Galleries
- Colchester Castle
- Roman Circus Centre
- Headgate Theatre
- Munnings Art Museum
- Lakeside Theatre
- Art Exchange
- Other

'Other' responses included:

- Space
- Colchester Community Stadium
- Art Classes at Tindles
- Geedon Gallery
- Chappell Gallery
- Concerts at St Botolphs
- Lion Walk

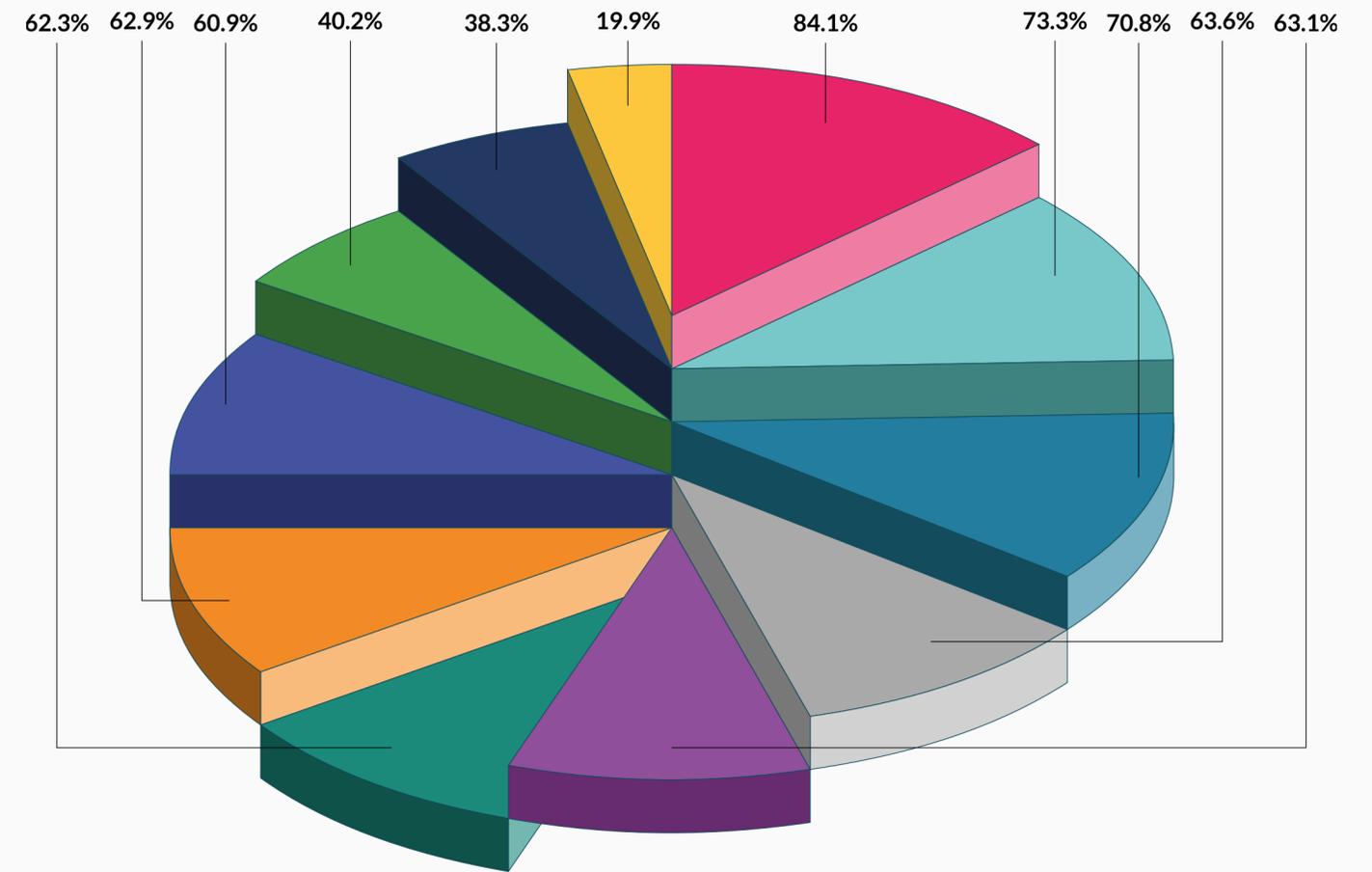


How important is creativity and culture to you, out of 10? Shown as %

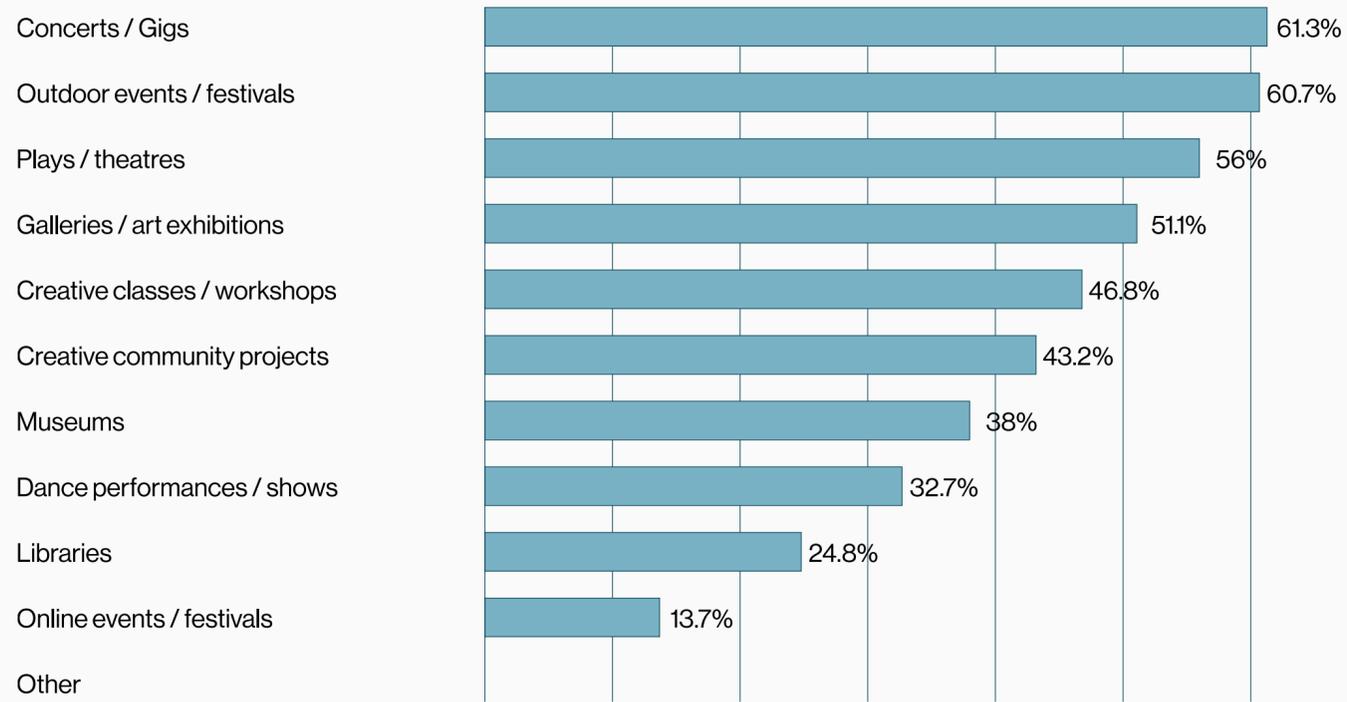


Why is culture important to you?

- Entertainment
- Inspiration
- Happiness
- Mental Health
- Socialising
- Identity
- Community
- Family
- Education/Skills
- Physical Health
- Relaxation



Which of the following activities would you like there to be more of in Colchester?



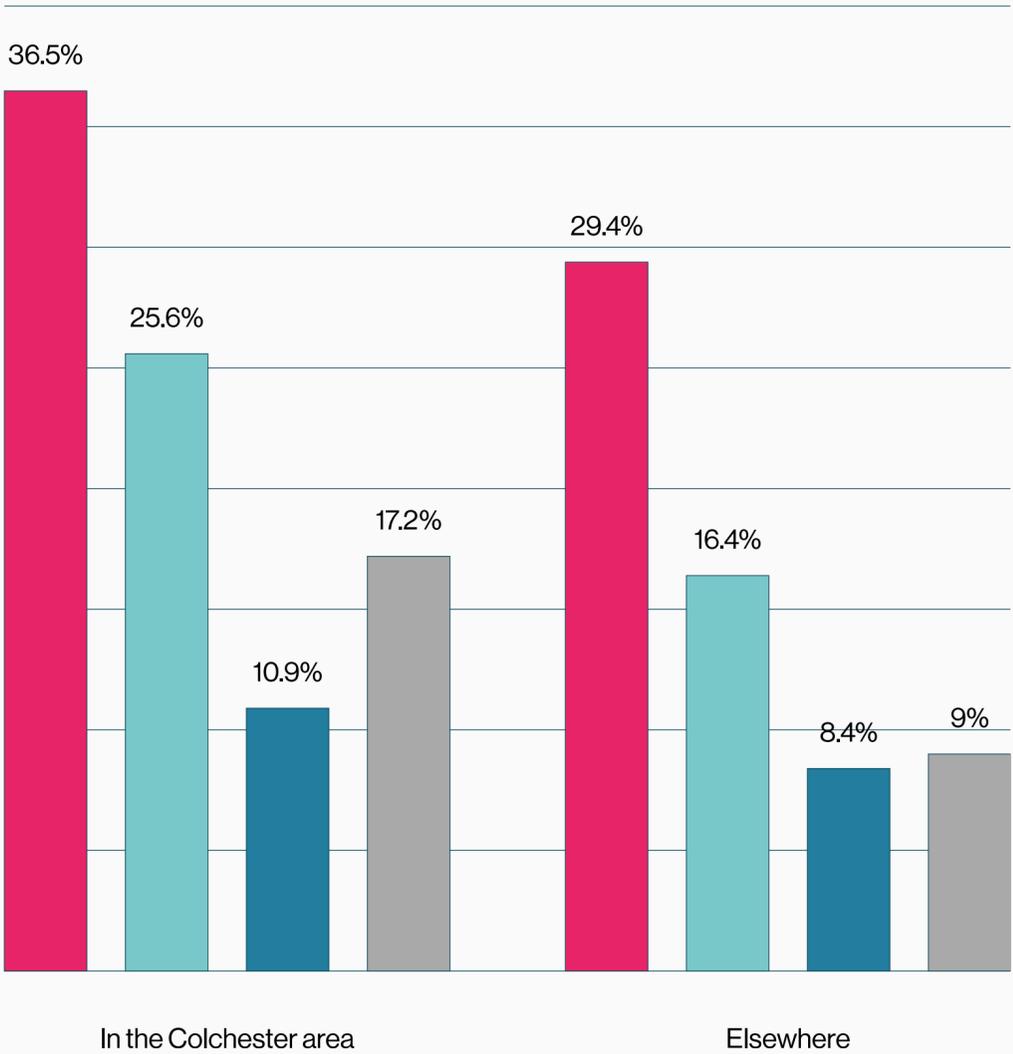
'Other' responses included:

- Better recognition of the local history
- Sporting tournaments on the big screen in Castle Park
- Street carnivals
- Free outdoor cinemas
- Street art
- Outdoor events
- West End touring performances
- Street performers - musicians, entertainers, actors in historical dress
- Ice skating rink

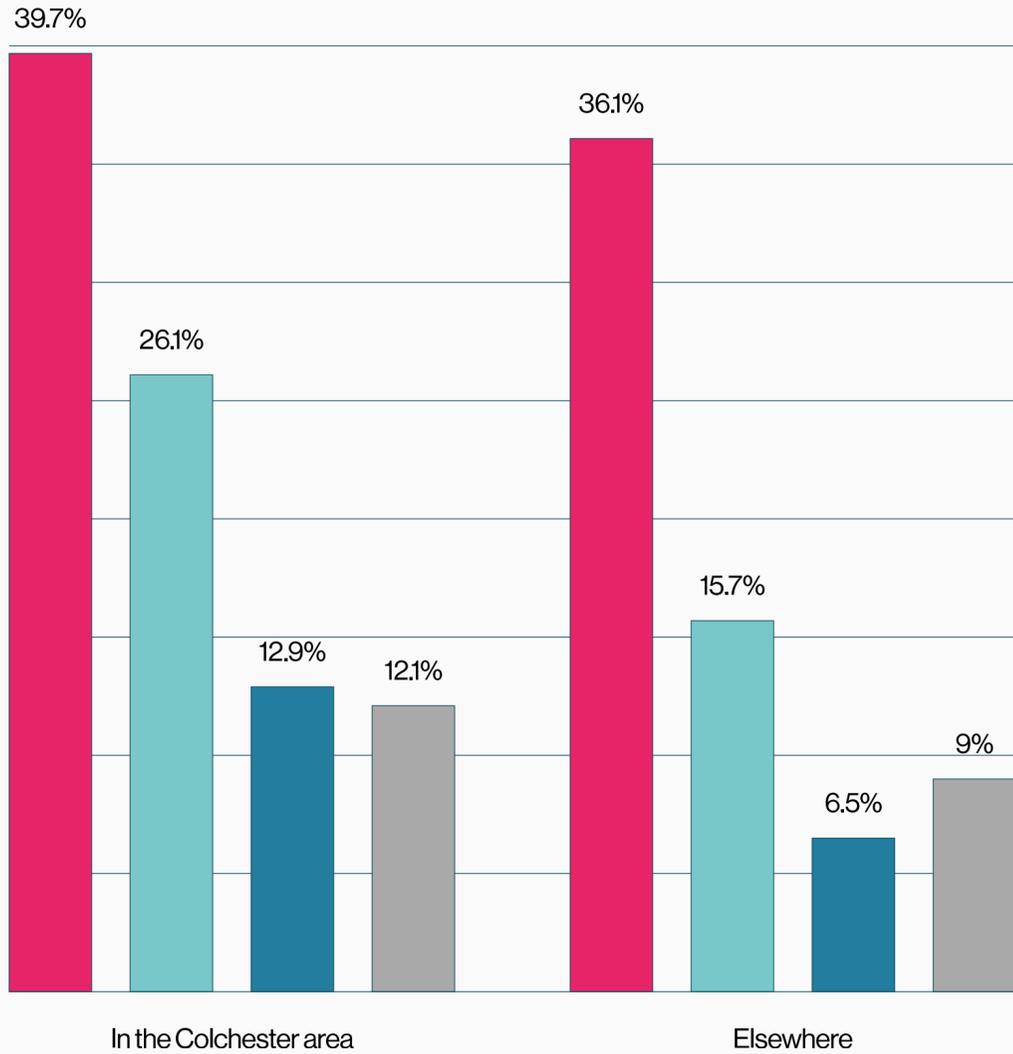
What 3 words would you hope describes Colchester's cultural offer by 2030



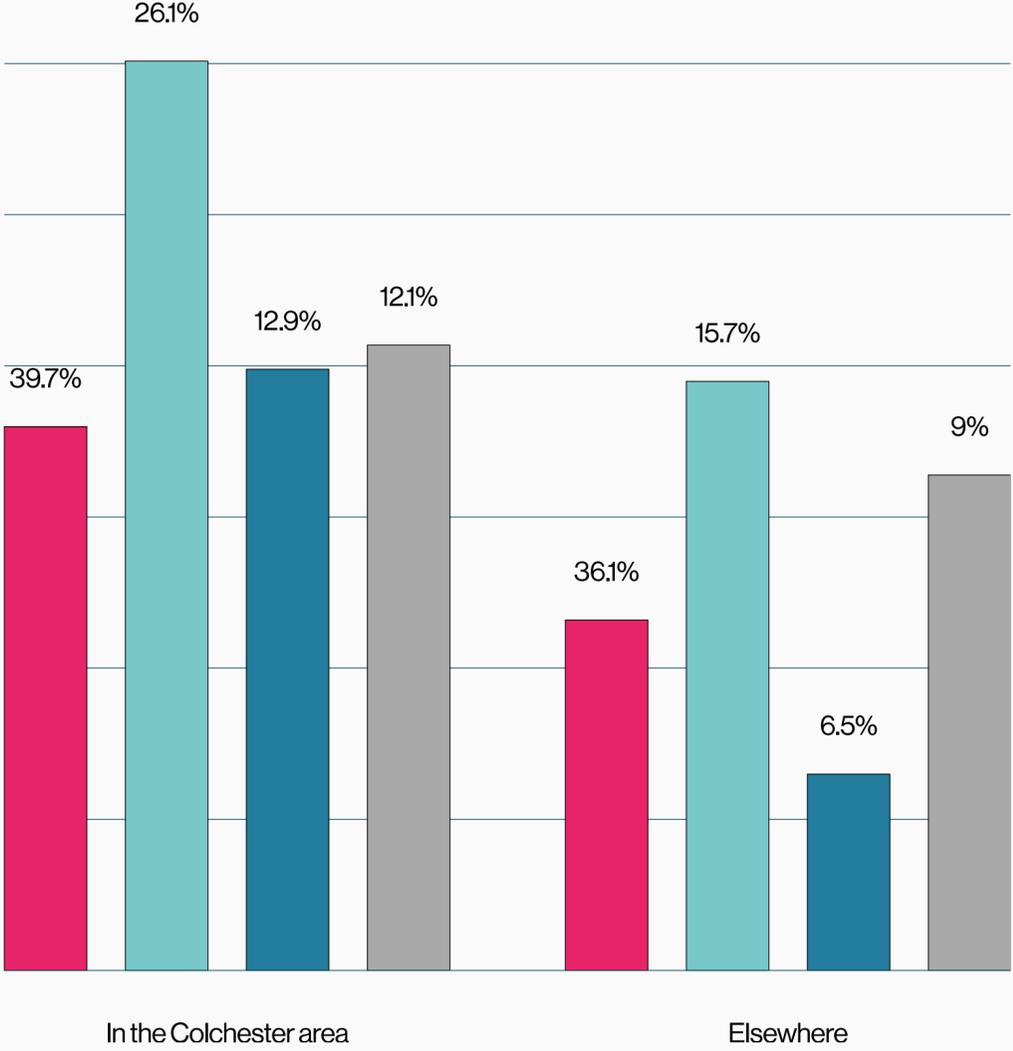
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you take part in a creative class or workshop?



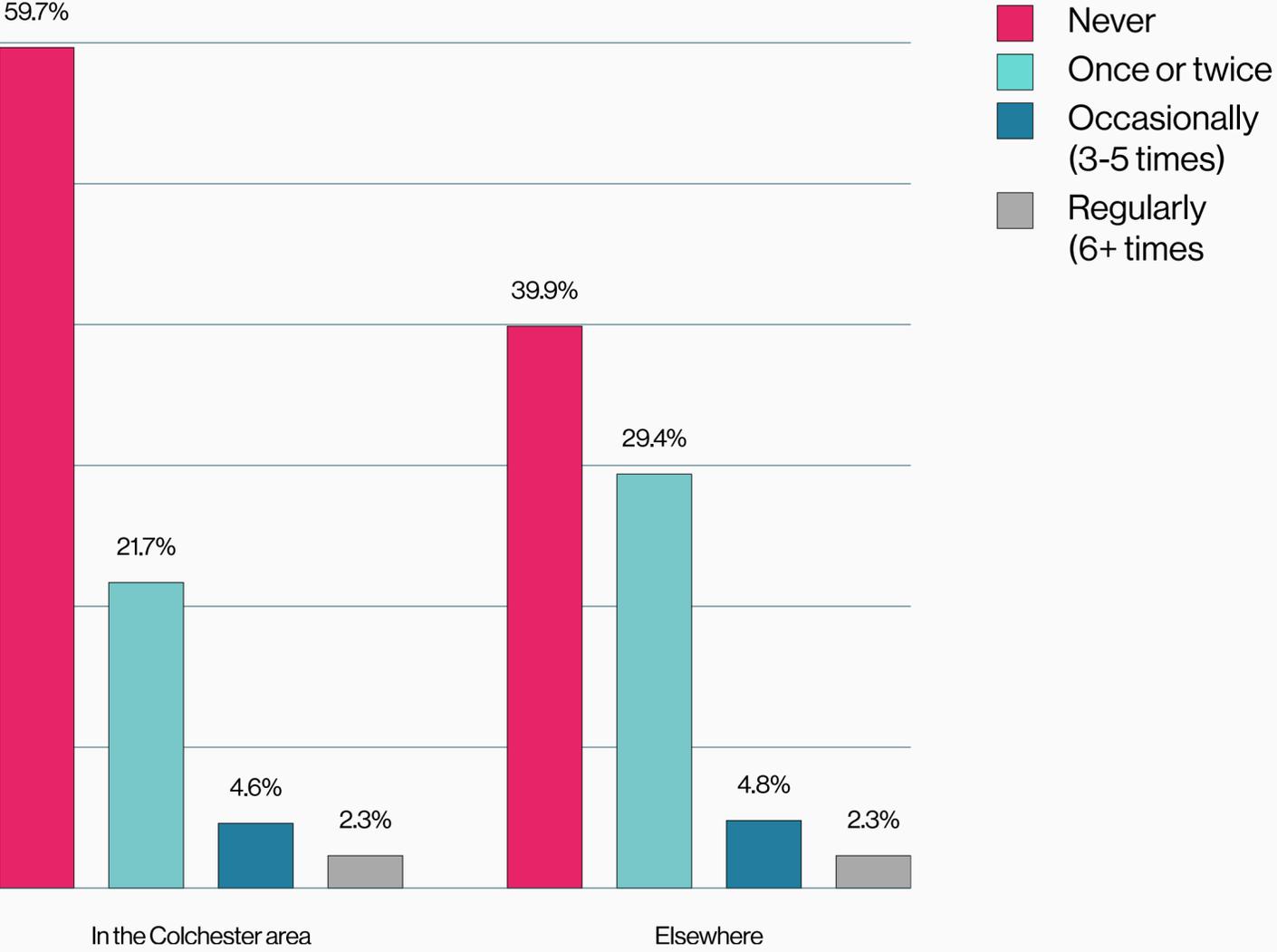
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you take part in a creative community project?



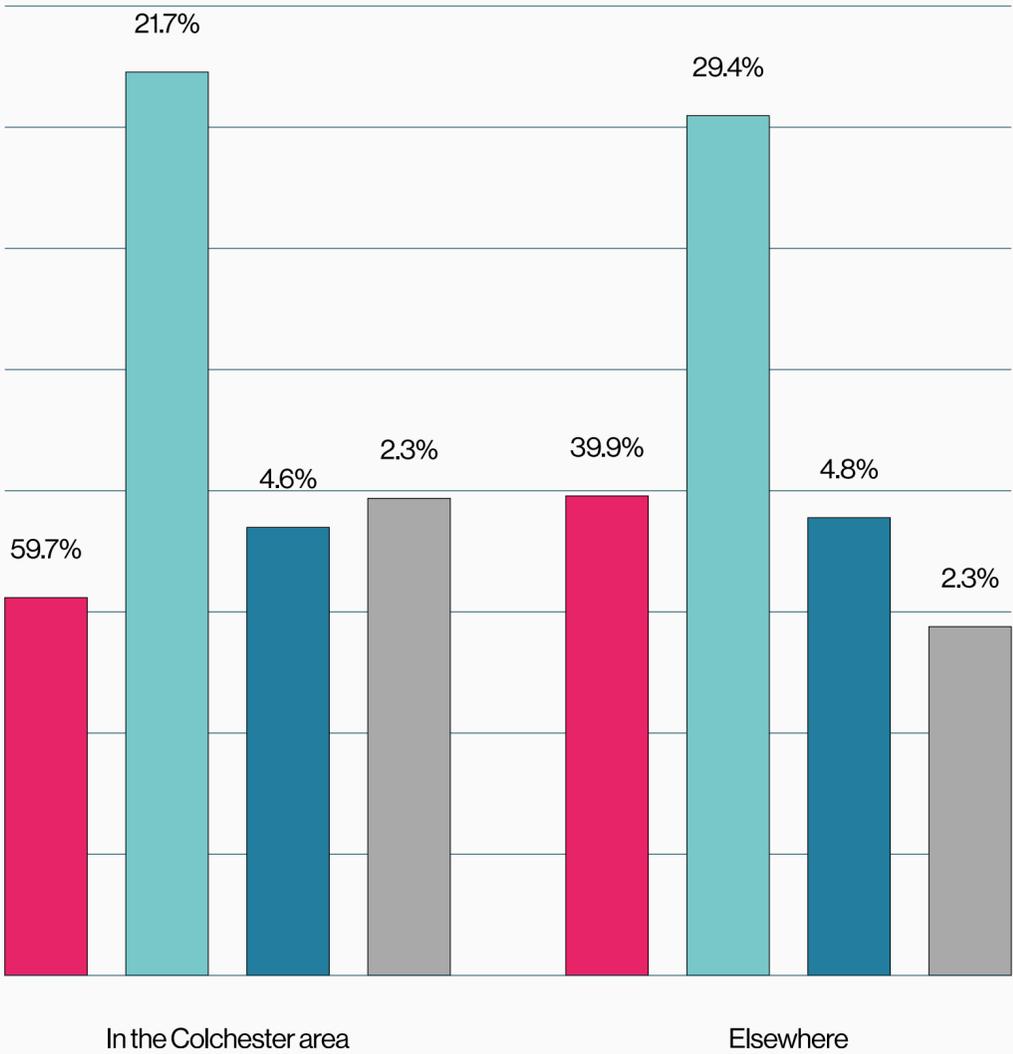
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend a concert or gig?



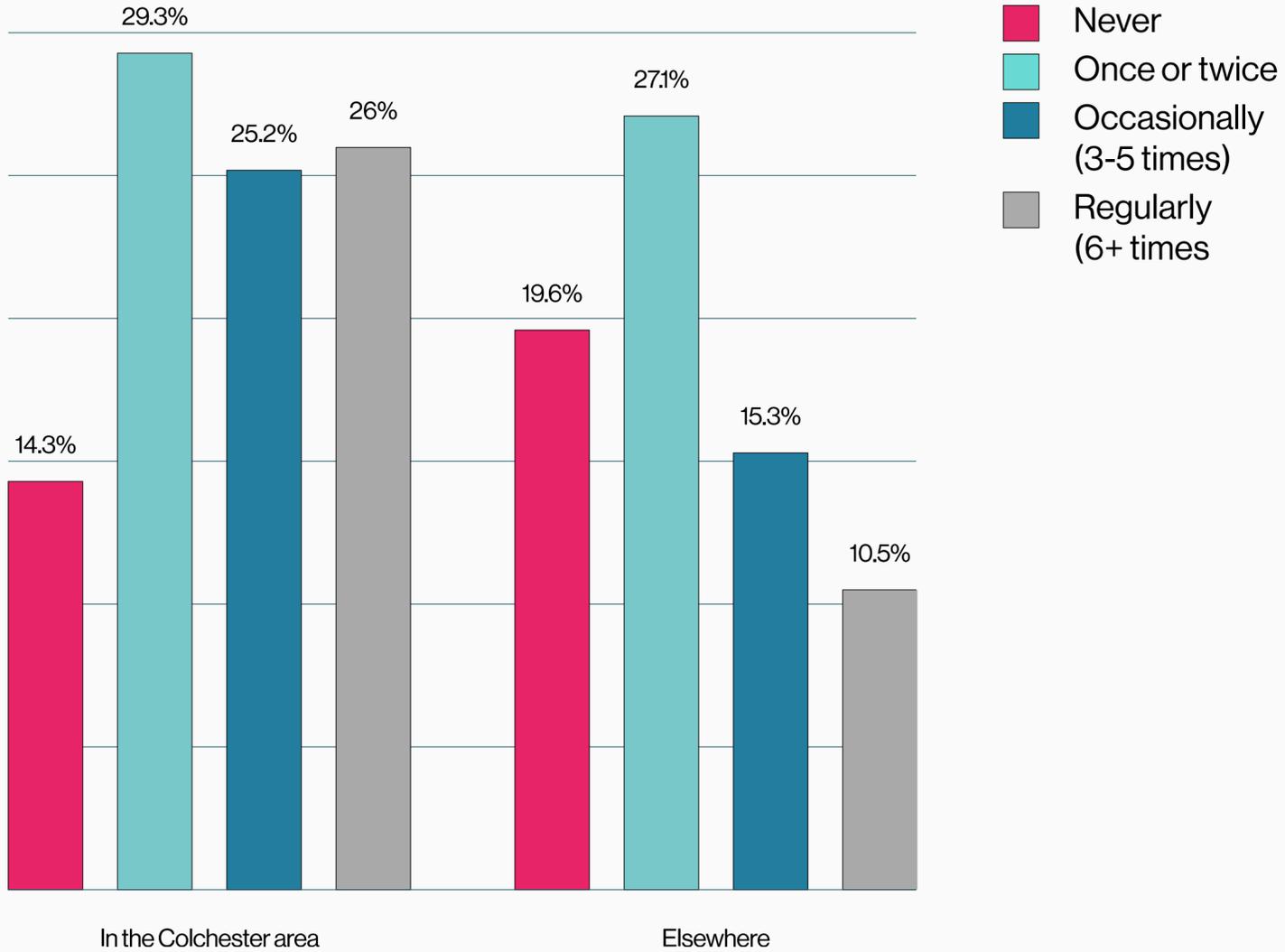
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend a dance performance?



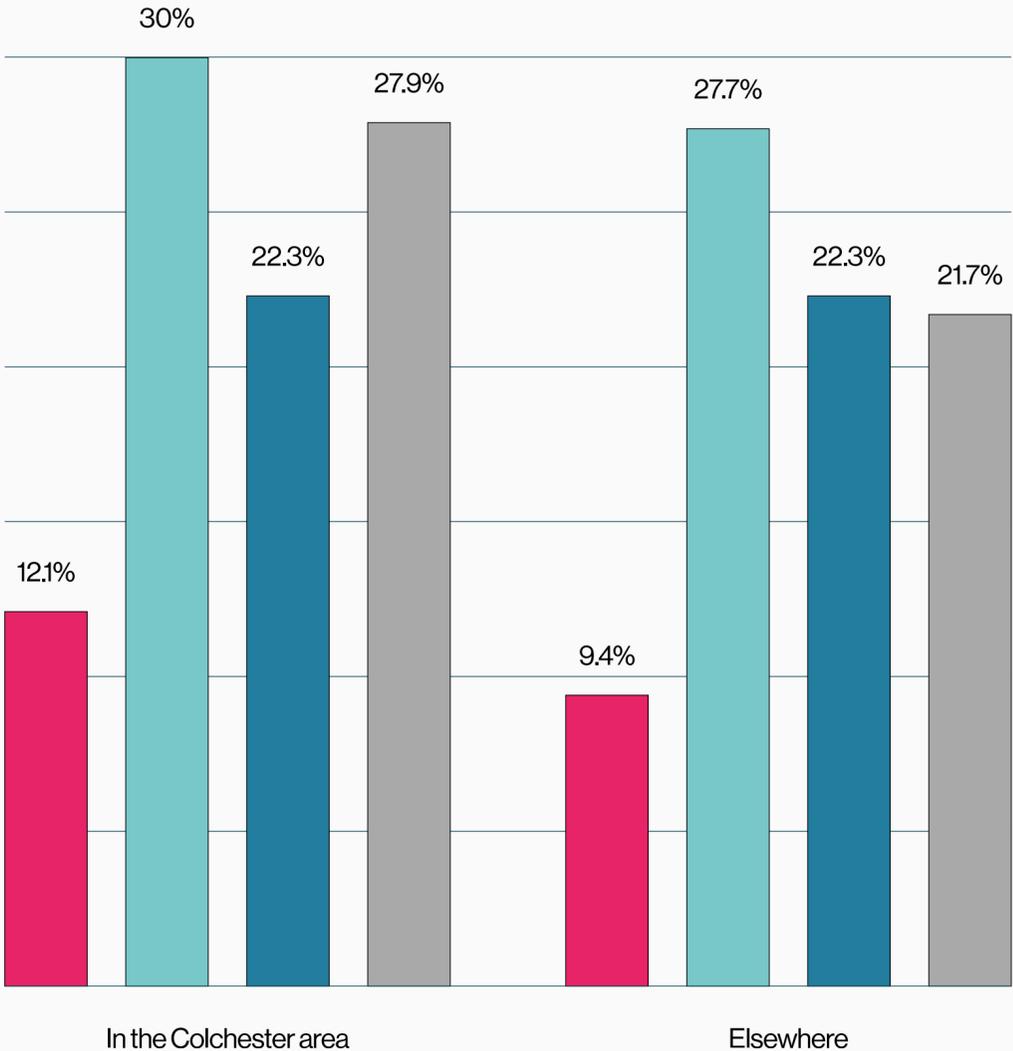
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend a play, musical or other theatrical performance?



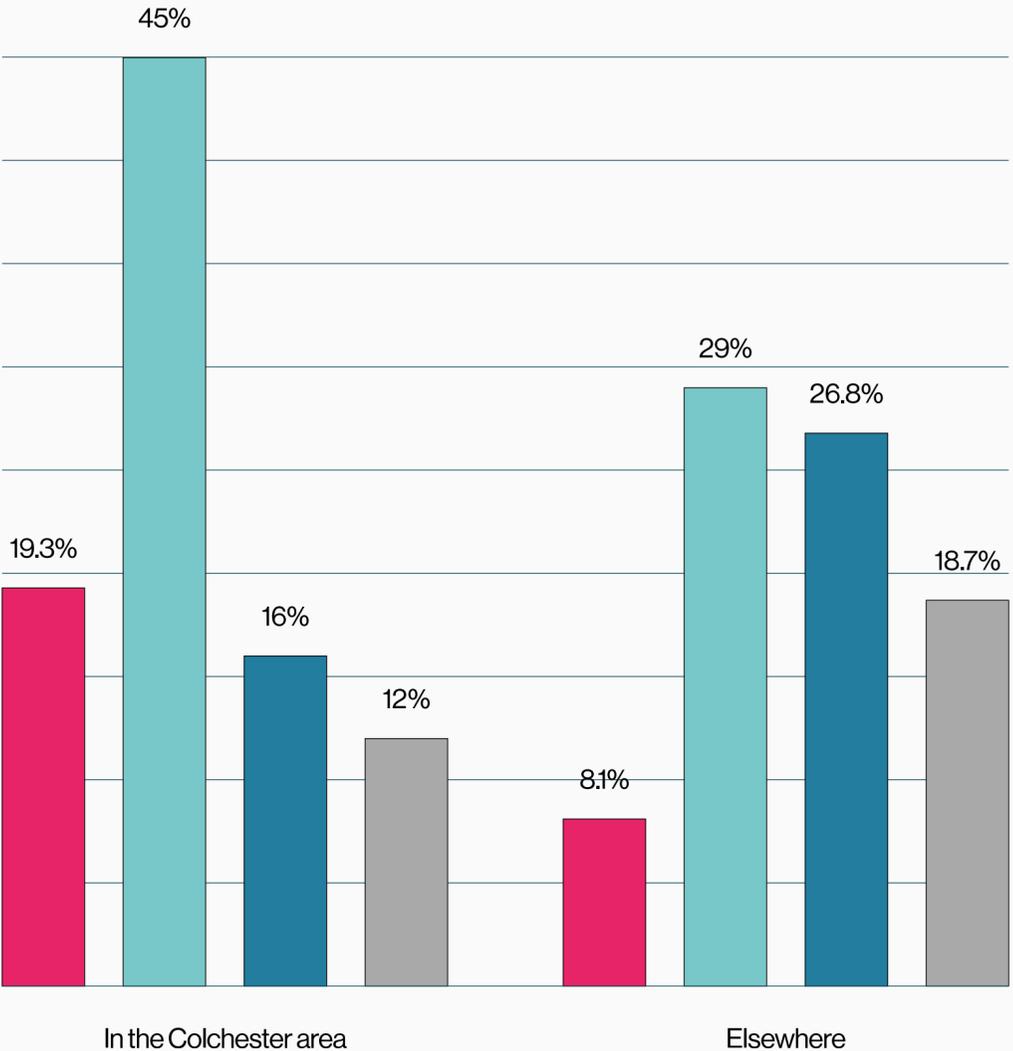
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you visit a cinema?



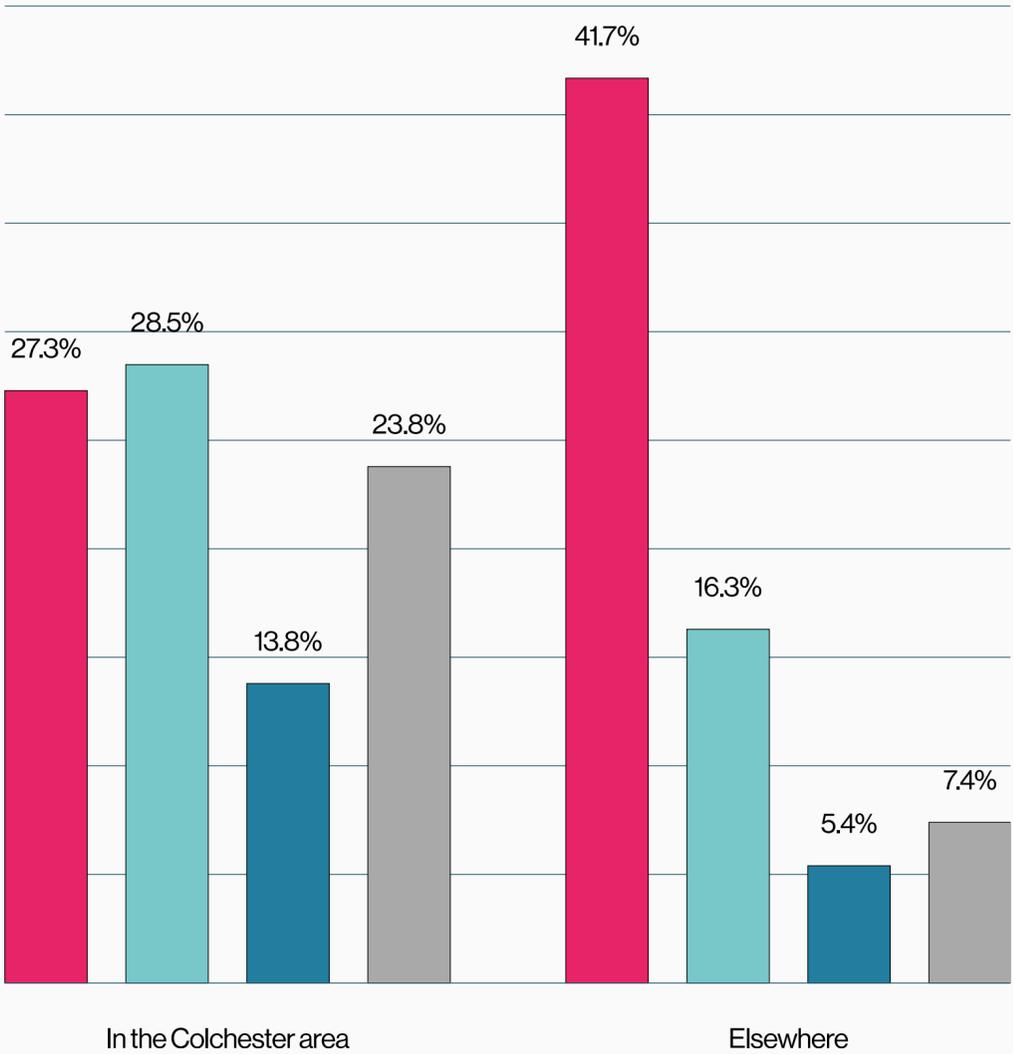
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you visit a gallery or art / craft exhibition?



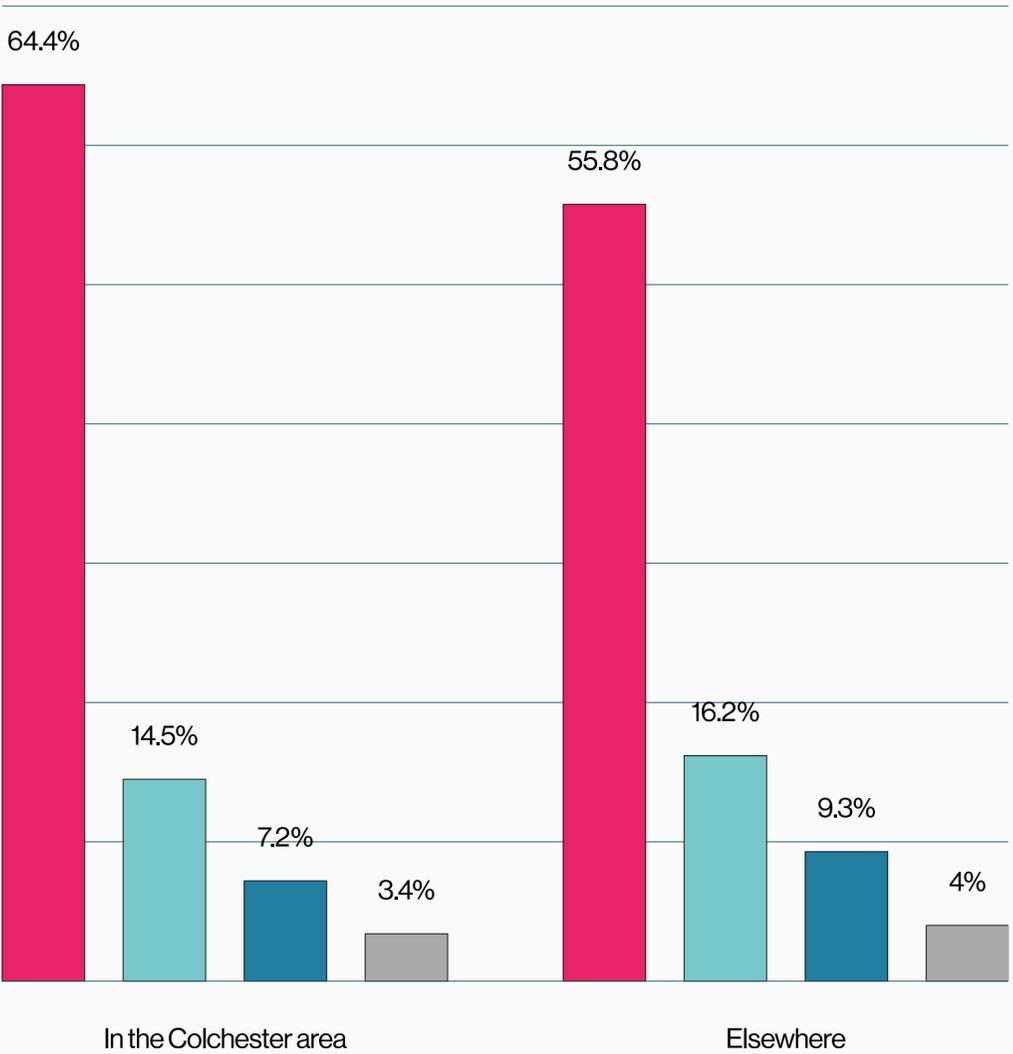
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you visit a library?



Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you visit a museum?



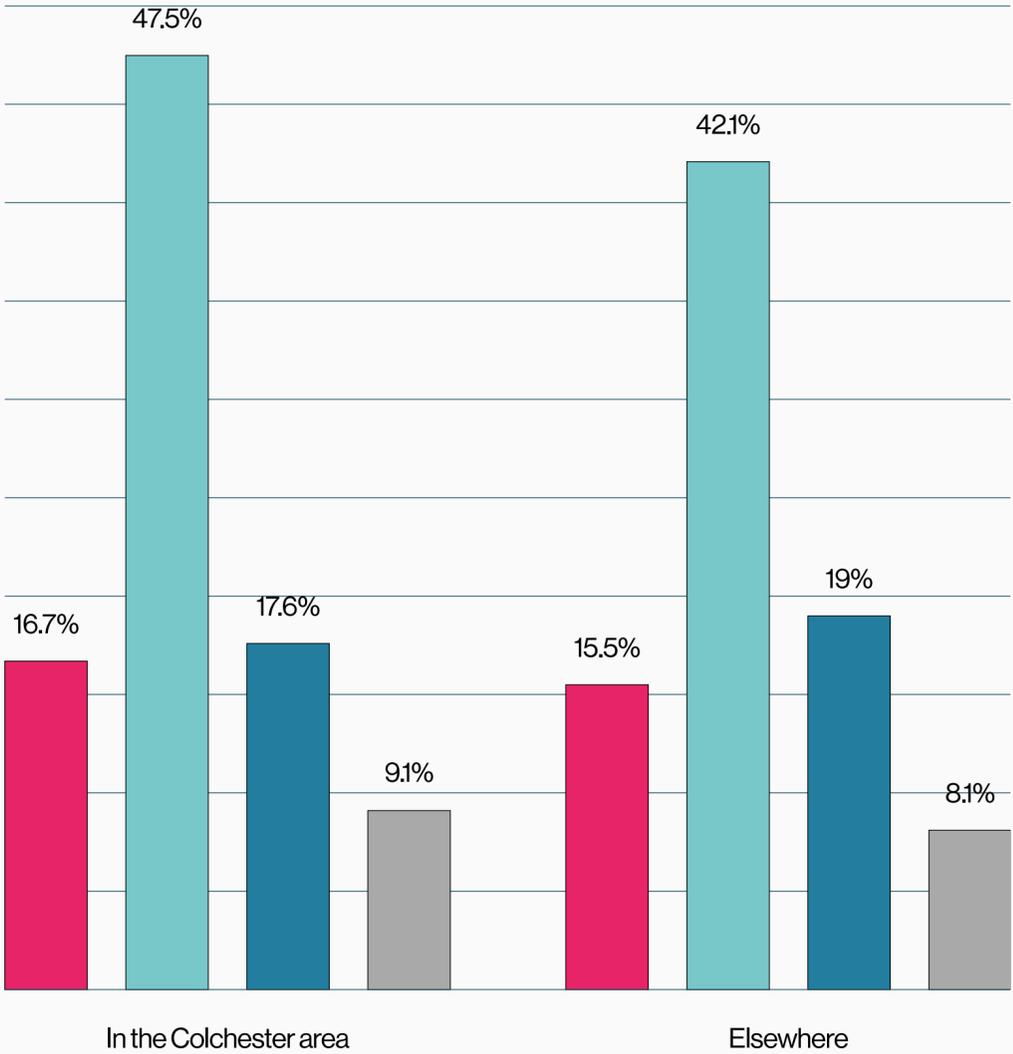
Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend an online event or festival?



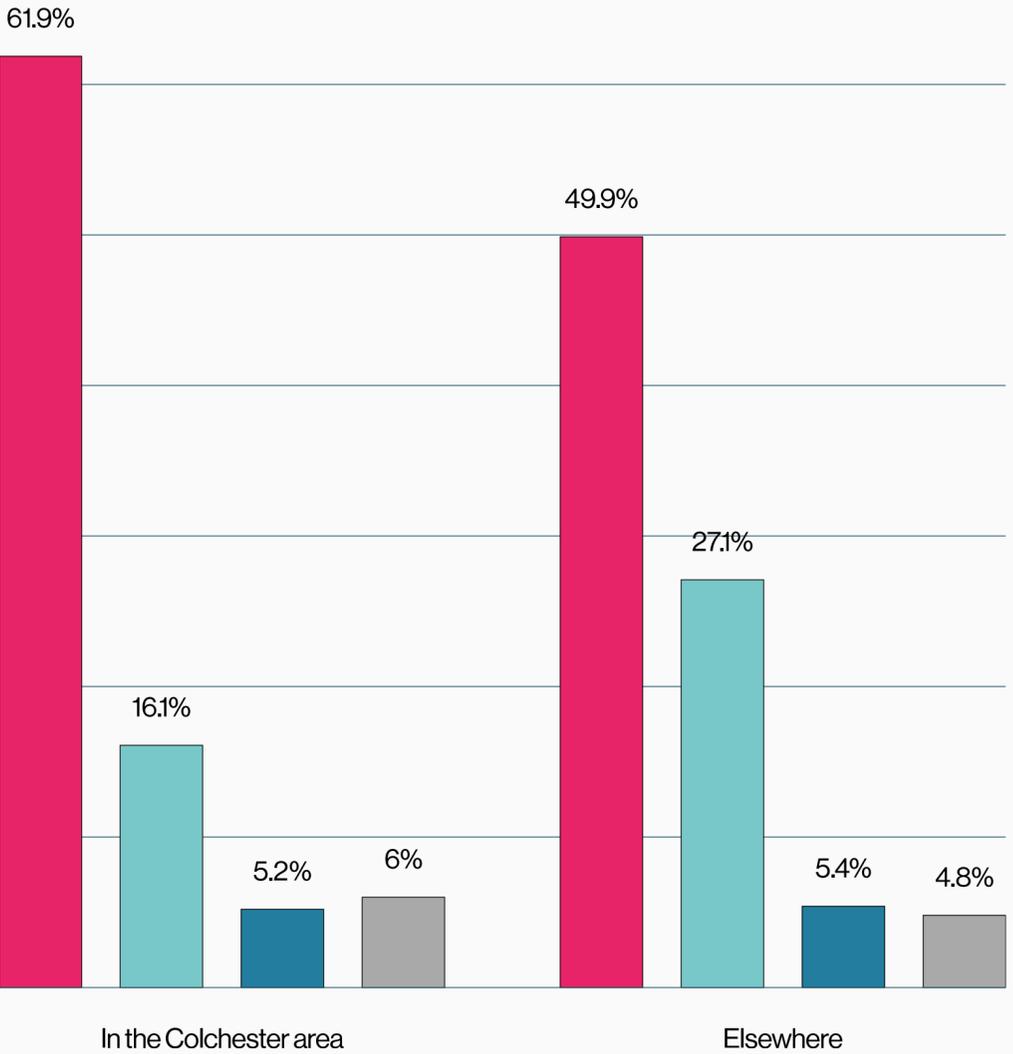
- Never
- Once or twice
- Occasionally (3-5 times)
- Regularly (6+ times)

- Never
- Once or twice
- Occasionally (3-5 times)
- Regularly (6+ times)

Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend an outdoor event or festival?

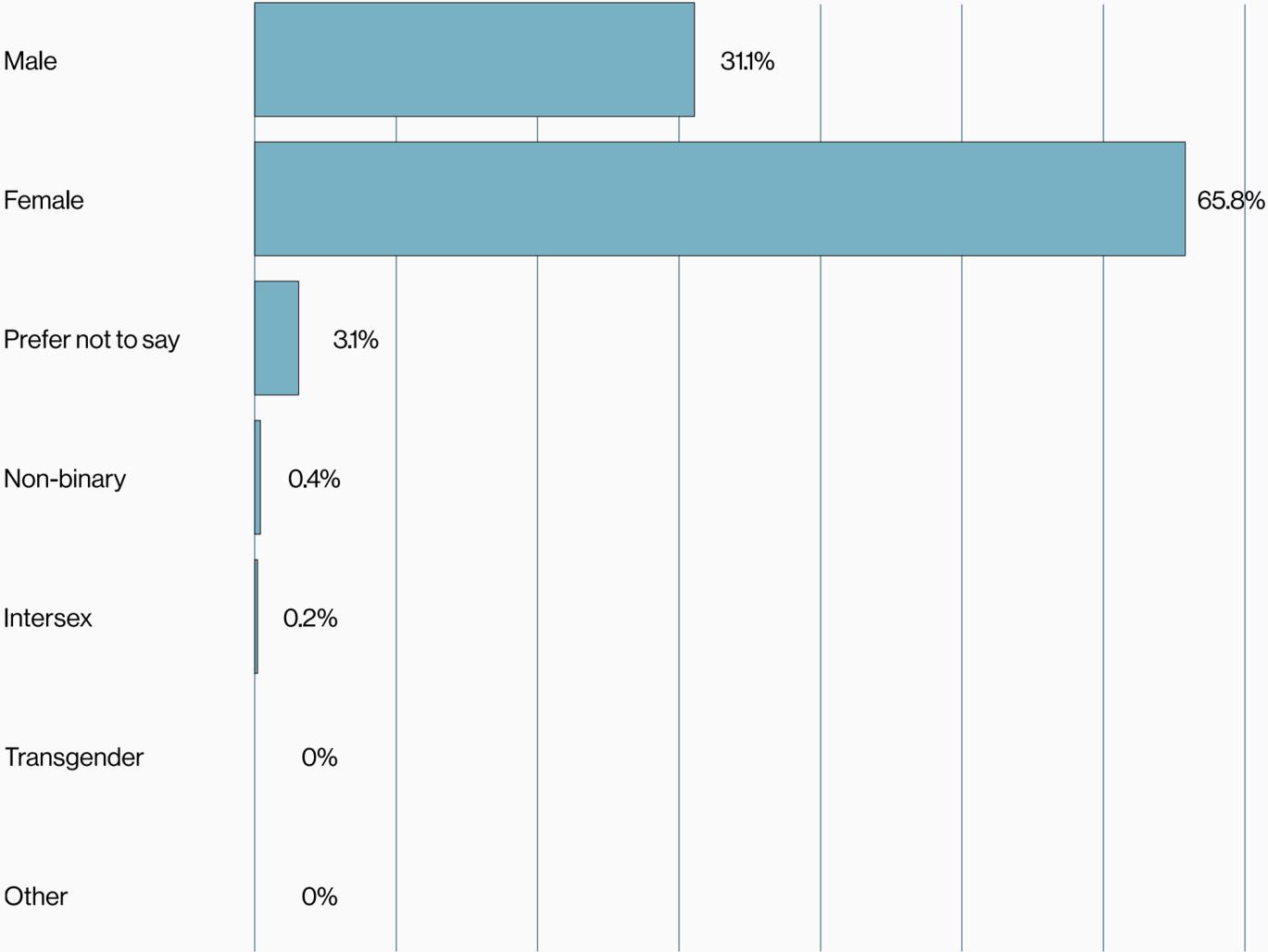


Before Covid-19, how many times a year did you attend a sporting event?

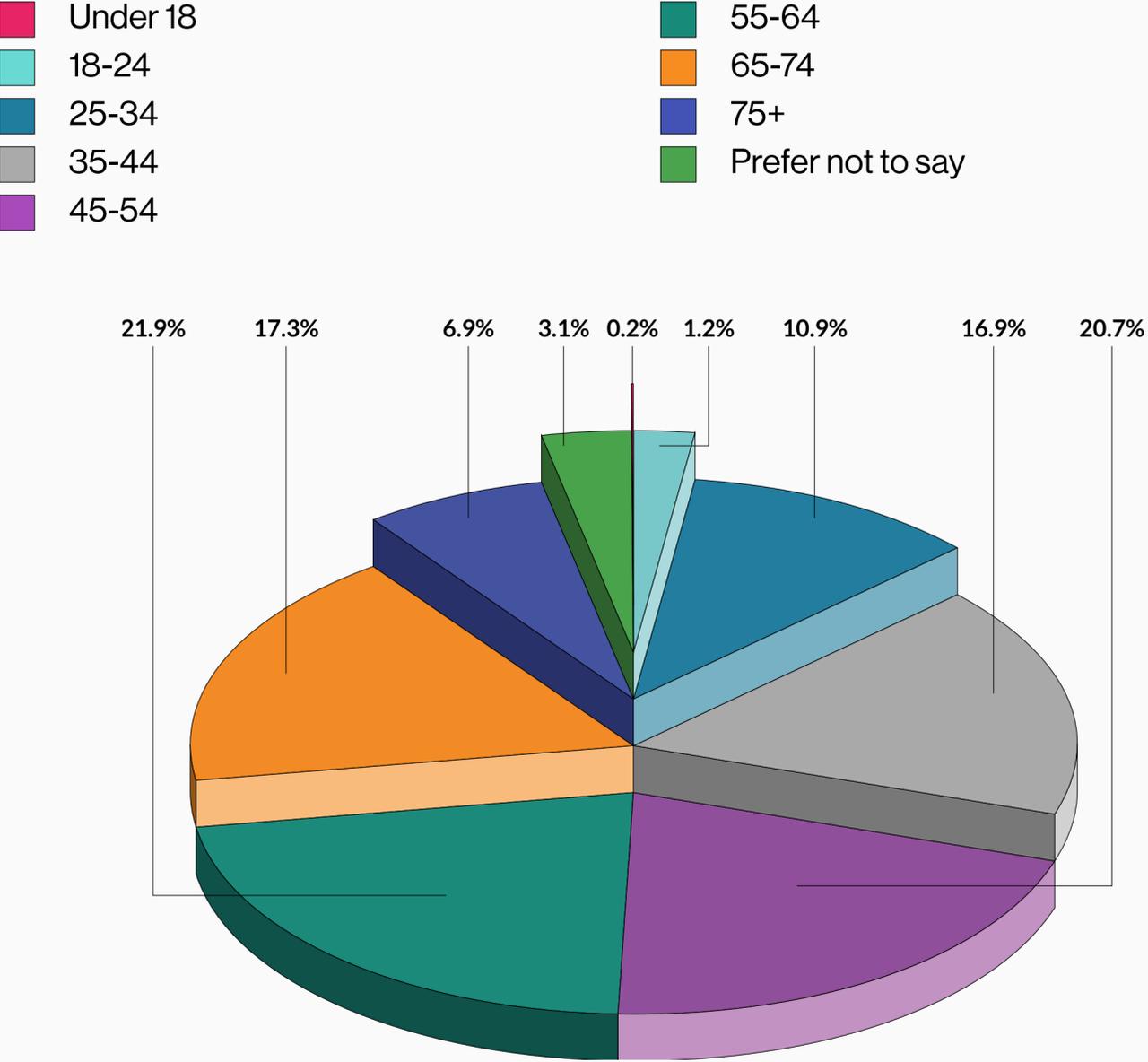


C. Public Survey Demographics

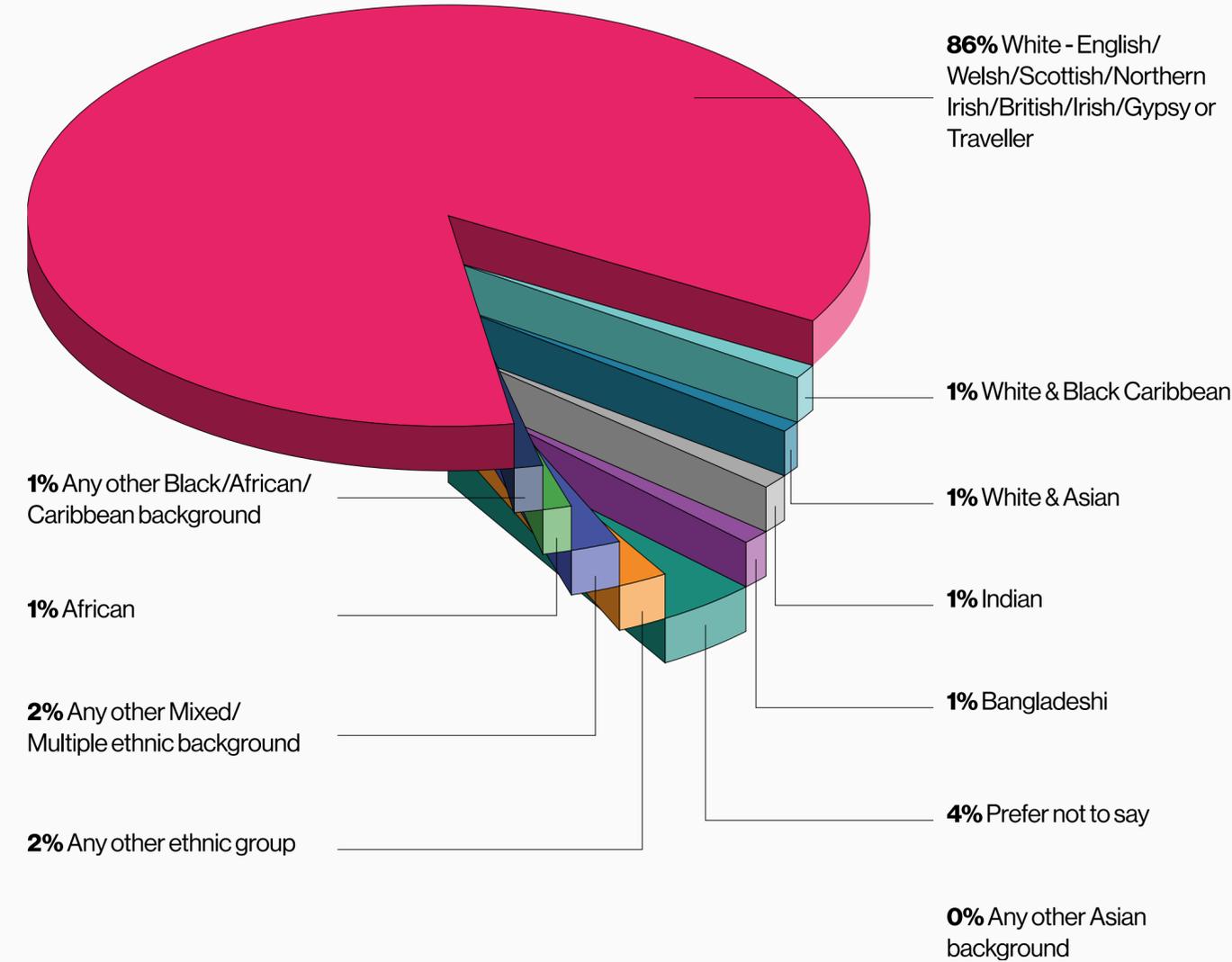
How would you describe your gender?



What is your age



Which option best describes your ethnic group?



Do you identify as D/deaf or disabled?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to say

