

Colchester Quarterly Economic Report

Issue 6: December 2010



Background information

The production of this quarterly economic report for Colchester aims to give a better understanding of the Borough's economic makeup and performance and in comparison to national and local trends.

The report also aims to inform policy-making through providing an objective understanding of Colchester's communities of interest and geography.

These quarterly reports typically examine recent data on a range of variables which include:

- Regional changes, including GDP
- The demographics of recession impacts
- Jobs advertised and sought through Jobcentre Plus
- Unemployment
- Worklessness
- Levels of 16-19 year olds Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)
- Housing market data
- News from the business and economy

In addition, each report will provide a topical focus or briefing section highlighting particular issues or economic developments.

Thanks go to Essex County Council, Connexions Integrated Youth Services and Jobcentre Plus (Essex District and Colchester offices) for providing data towards this report.

For more information or questions about this report, please contact Cheryl Pashley in the Research and Engagement team at Colchester Borough Council (01206) 505390 or email Cheryl.Pashley@colchester.gov.uk

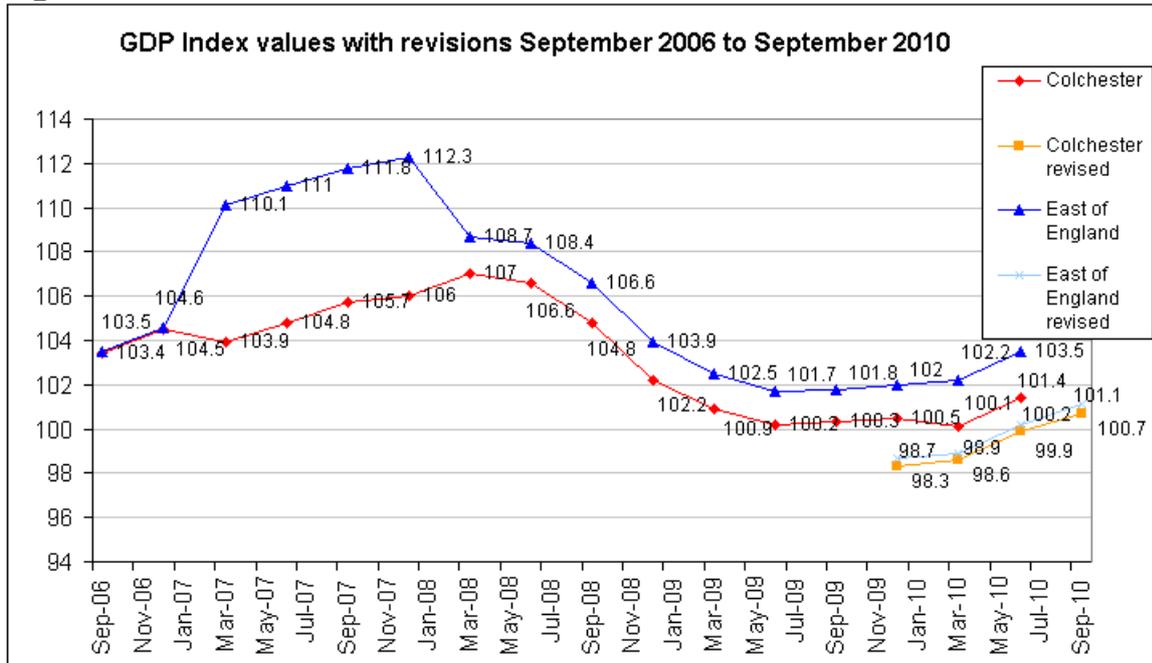
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GDP Index values

The GDP Index values are calculated with a baseline value of 100 for January 2005, and show change over time for economic output. The GDP measure used for this is output; production and value added through production of good and services.

This quarterly data produced by the ONS is preliminary, and may be subject to revision, but it does give an indicative view of change in GDP as a measure of inflation.

Figure 1

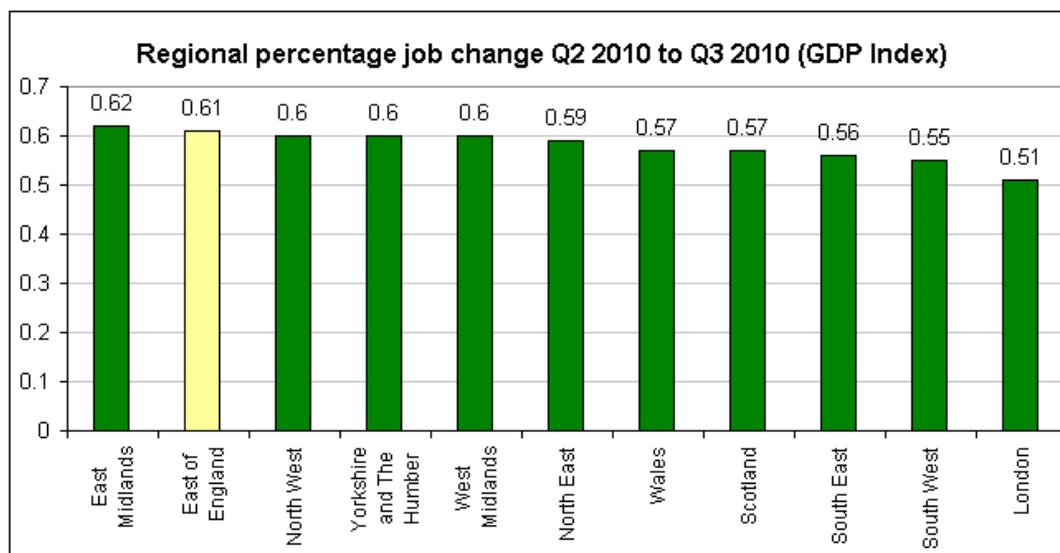


ONS regional GDP data accessed from Gavurin recession map, © Crown Copyright, 2010

- Since the last economic report, the most current data which was used has been revised. This chart includes the revised index values since December 2010, which are marginally lower in both the East of England and Colchester than previously thought.
- A higher GDP value represents greater economic output, so in December 2007 the East of England had its highest economic output at 112.3, and in April 2008 Colchester had its highest at 107.
- Although the GDP Index value for Colchester in September 2006 was very similar to the East of England, the regional GDP increased at a far higher rate between December 2006 and December 2007, with a peak value of 112.3. Colchester also saw a GDP increase for this period, but at a much steadier level, with a December 2007 value of 106.
- Between December 2007 and March 2008, the East of England saw a substantial decrease in GDP Index value, falling from 112.3 to 108.7. In the same period, Colchester GDP increased slightly from 106 to 107.

- Since March 2008, both geographical areas have seen an overall decrease in the GDP Index, in line with national recession trends. Since September 2009, this has started to recover slightly in both geographies.
- Between March 2010 and June 2010, it was previously estimated that both geographies saw their largest GDP index value increase since the recession. Colchester's value rose 0.9 points to 101.4, and the East of England value rose 1.5 points to 103.5. However, the revised figures for this now show a value of 100.2 for the East at 99.9 for Colchester.
- The most recent GDP Index for September 2009 shows a value of 100.7 for Colchester, and 101.1 for the East of England.

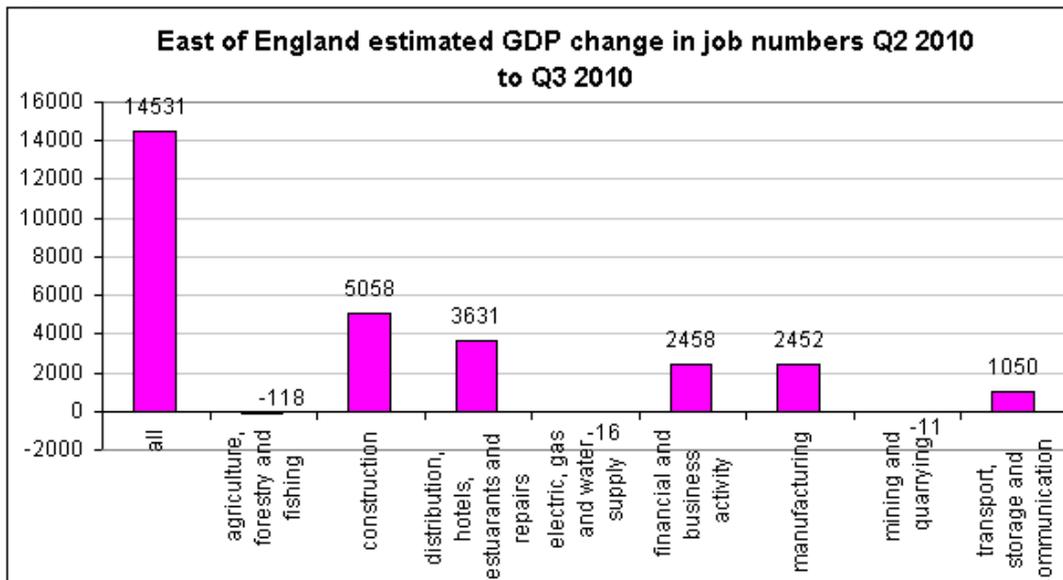
Figure 2



ONS regional GDP data accessed from Gavurin recession map, © Crown Copyright, 2010

- As was the case in the September report, the East of England had the second highest GDP increase, at 0.61% (0.94% in previous quarter) behind the East Midlands at 0.62% (0.97% in the previous quarter).
- Between quarters two and three in 2009, the East was predicted a job loss of 0.4%. The data for the third to the fourth quarters of 2009 showed a predicted job increase of 0.12%. Although very small, this showed a positive shift in the regional economy. Data for quarters one to two in 2010 showed a predicted 0.94% increase, which indicates an increase in recession recovery, which was further illustrated with this 0.61% increase from quarter two to three.

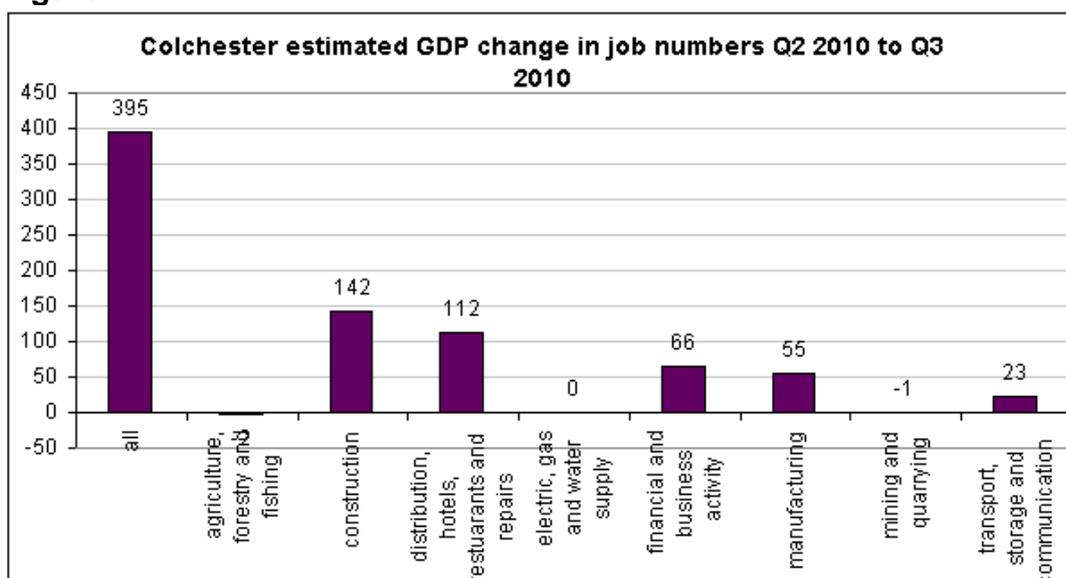
Figure 3



ONS regional GDP data accessed from Gavurin recession map, © Crown Copyright, 2010

- Based on the ONS calculations for change in GDP between the second and third quarter of 2010, figure 3 shows that the East was predicted an increase of 14,531 jobs, the highest job growth indicated in any economic report so far, with 8,705 predicted for quarters one to two. The largest increase was expected to be within the construction industry, (5,058) followed by distribution including hotels and restaurants at 3,631 jobs. Previous reports identified distribution including hotels and restaurants and followed by manufacturing as growth areas.
- Some sectors however were still estimating job losses. The largest of these was in agriculture, forestry and fishing, with a loss of 118 jobs over the East. The electric gas and water supply industries were predicted to lose a smaller 16 jobs whilst Mining and Quarrying estimated 11 job losses over the East.

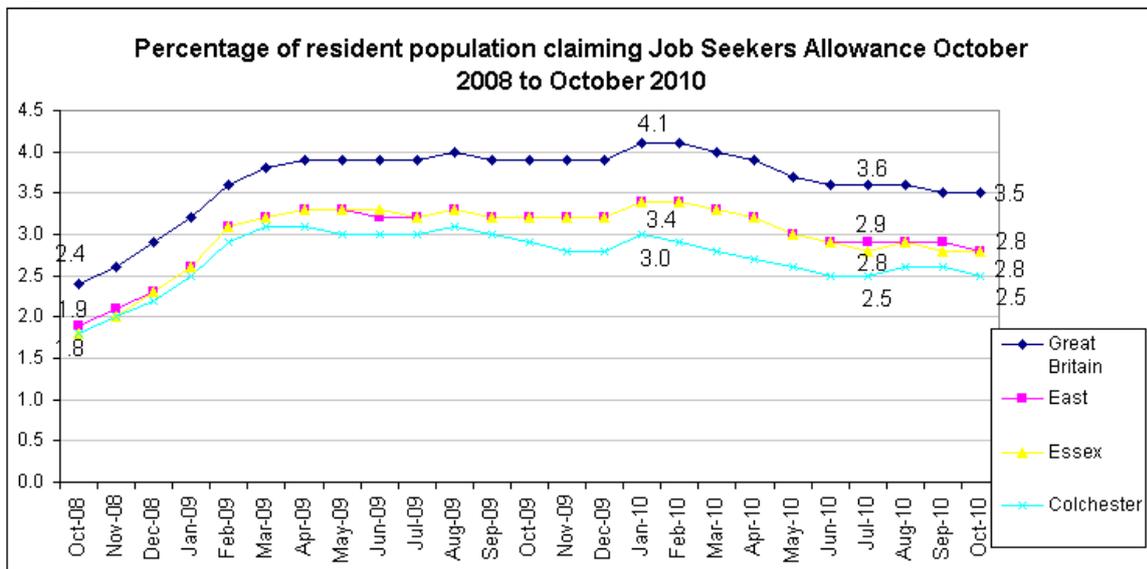
Figure 4



ONS regional GDP data accessed from Gavurin recession map, © Crown Copyright, 2010

- As figure 4 shows, based on the ONS calculations for change in GDP between the second and third quarters in 2010, Colchester was predicted a net increase of 395 jobs (compared to 604 jobs for the previous quarter). This was still a positive increase from the 2009 third to fourth quarter's prediction of 87 jobs. The largest increase was expected to be in construction, at 142 jobs (which was the top sector for growth in the previous quarter) followed by distribution including hotels and restaurants (142 jobs). Some sectors were still estimating job losses or no change, although very small, with Mining and quarrying and electricity gas and water supply, who were both predicted to lose two jobs in the previous quarter with net change of -1 and 0 jobs respectively. Agriculture, forestry and fishing estimated a net loss of two jobs.
- Transport, storage and communication, which predicted to lose 22 jobs in the previous quarter, estimated a net increase of 23 jobs this quarter. Mining and quarrying and electricity gas and water supply both predicted to lose two jobs.

Figure 5



Nomis web data ONS claimant count as a percentage of the working age population © crown copyright, 2010

- The last report showed that between January 2010 and July 2010, the Colchester JSA claimant had decreased in all areas, Colchester, with 2.5%, (the lowest value since January 2010), was lower than any of the other geographies, with Essex at 2.8%, the East at 2.9% and Great Britain at 3.6%.
- Where Colchester had very similar percentages of JSA claimants to Essex and the East in January 2008 (between 1.5% and 1.8%). Colchester's claimant level, although increased throughout the recession, has increased at a lower level than Essex or the East of England since December 2008, with highest values of 3.1% compared to 3.6% for Essex and the East.
- In October 2010, Colchester still had the lowest JSA claimant rate of the geographies, at 2.5%, although this had fluctuated between July and October 2010. Over the same months, Great Britain and the East both saw a 0.1% decrease in JSA claimant proportions to 3.5% and 2.8% respectively. Essex

also kept its figure of 2.8% of the resident population claiming Job Seekers Allowance.

Figure 6

Employment and unemployment (Apr 2009-Mar 2010)

	Colchester (numbers)	Colchester (%)	East (%)	Great Britain (%)
All people				
Economically active [†]	92,400	73.1	78.9	76.5
In employment [†]	86,800	68.5	73.5	70.3
Employees [†]	75,000	59.7	63.1	60.9
Self employed [†]	11,000	8.2	10.1	9.0
Unemployed (model-based) [§]	6,300	6.8	6.6	7.9

Source: ONS annual population survey

Sample size too small for reliable estimate

† numbers are for those aged 16 and over, % are for those aged 16-64

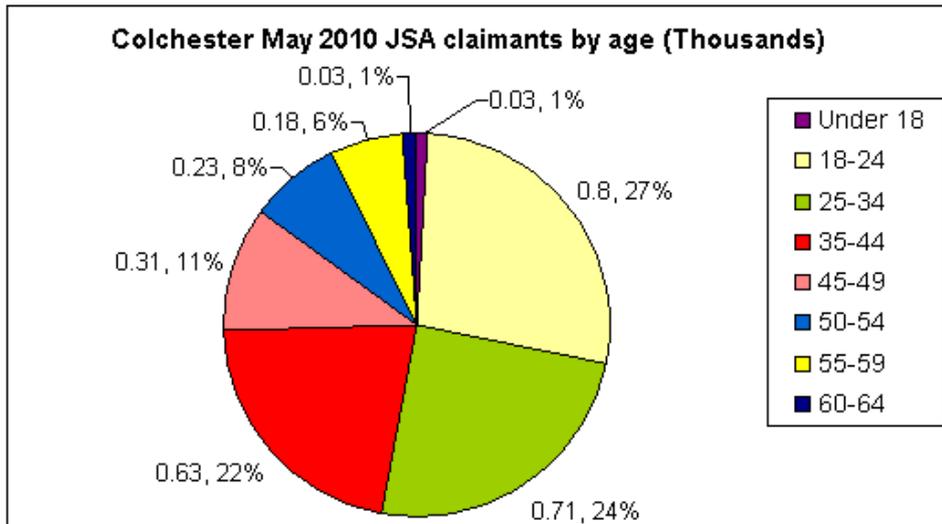
§ numbers and % are for those aged 16 and over, % is a proportion of economically active

Important note

11 Aug 2010: The population figures used to calculate residence-based proportions (rates) have changed from working age (16-59f/64m) to aged 16-64 for both males and females. This change affects rates for all dates. So rates for all dates will differ to those downloaded previously.

- The Annual Population Survey (figure 6) data estimates that between April 2009 and March 2010, 73.1% of Colchester's population were economically active, compared to a much higher figure of 76.8% from January 2009 to December 2009.
- Where in previous reports, Colchester had a greater proportion of the working age population who were economically active than nationally, this puts the rate below both the East (78.9%) and Great Britain (76.5%) People not classed as economically active will include retired people, students, some carers and those not looking for a job.
- In the economically active group, 6.8% of the working age population were estimated to be unemployed (but wanting a job) in Colchester. This was an increase from the 6.5% estimated from January to December 2009. This was still lower than the estimated 7.9% of the working age population in Great Britain, but higher than the 6.6% for the East of England.

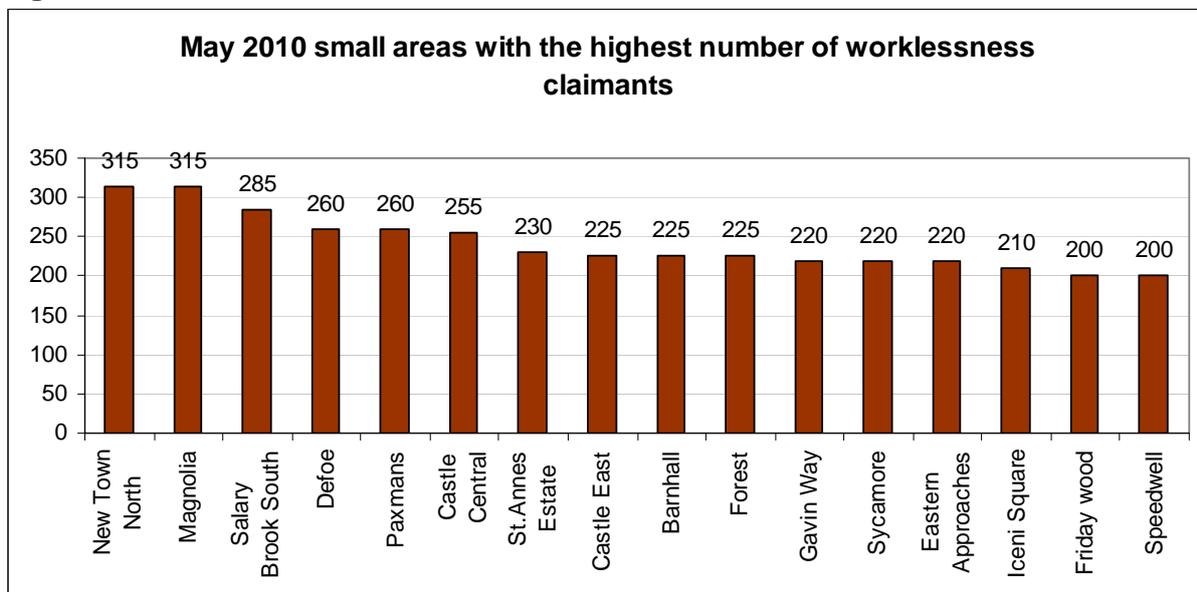
Figure 7



Data source DWP information directorate © crown copyright, 2010

- Overall in Colchester the number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants reduced from 3,250 in February 2010 to 2,910 in May 2010.
- As figure 7 shows, in May 2010, the largest numbers of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants were aged 18 to 24, at 800 claimants (27% of the working age population), this was the same as February 2010, but there was a substantial decrease from the February 2010 figure of 950 claimants (29% of the working age population). This was followed by 25 to 34 year olds, which accounted for 24% (up from 23% of the population) of February 2010 claimants (710 a reduction in numbers from 760 recorded in February 2010).

Figure 8

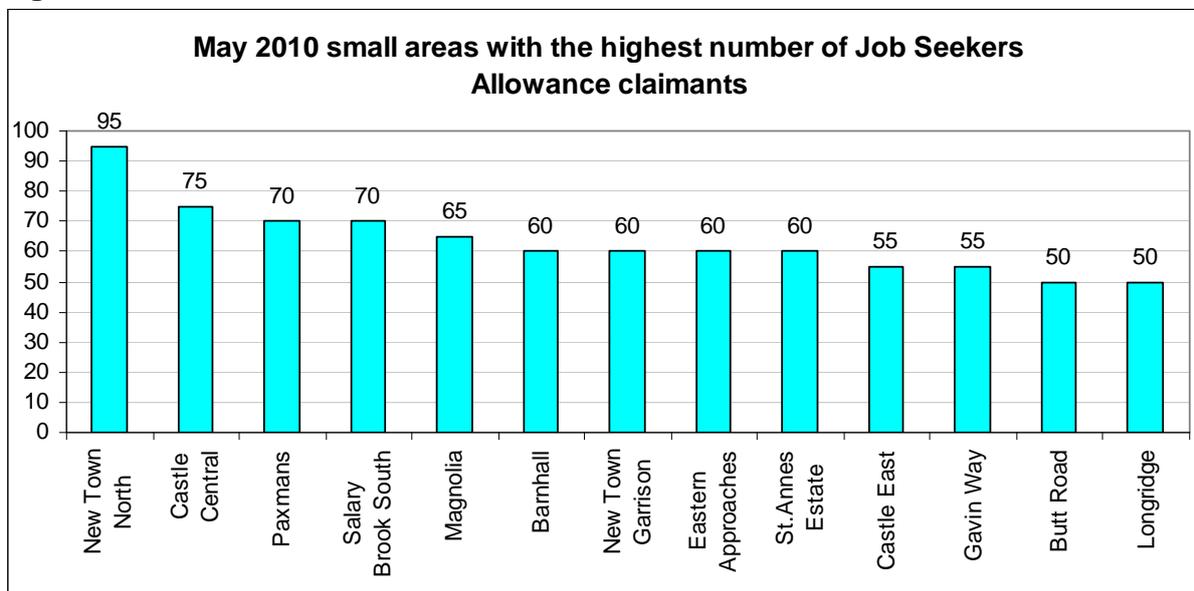


Data source DWP information directorate © crown copyright, 2010

- As figure 8 illustrates, in the May 2010 worklessness figures, there were 14 small areas with 205 or more worklessness residents, this figure decreased from 16 in February 2010.

- Between February and May 2010, nine of the small areas with over 200 claimants saw a decrease in worklessness numbers, the largest, a reduction of 20 claimants was in Sycamore. Three of the top small areas saw an increase in worklessness numbers and five small areas stayed the same. All three increases were by five claimants.

Figure 9

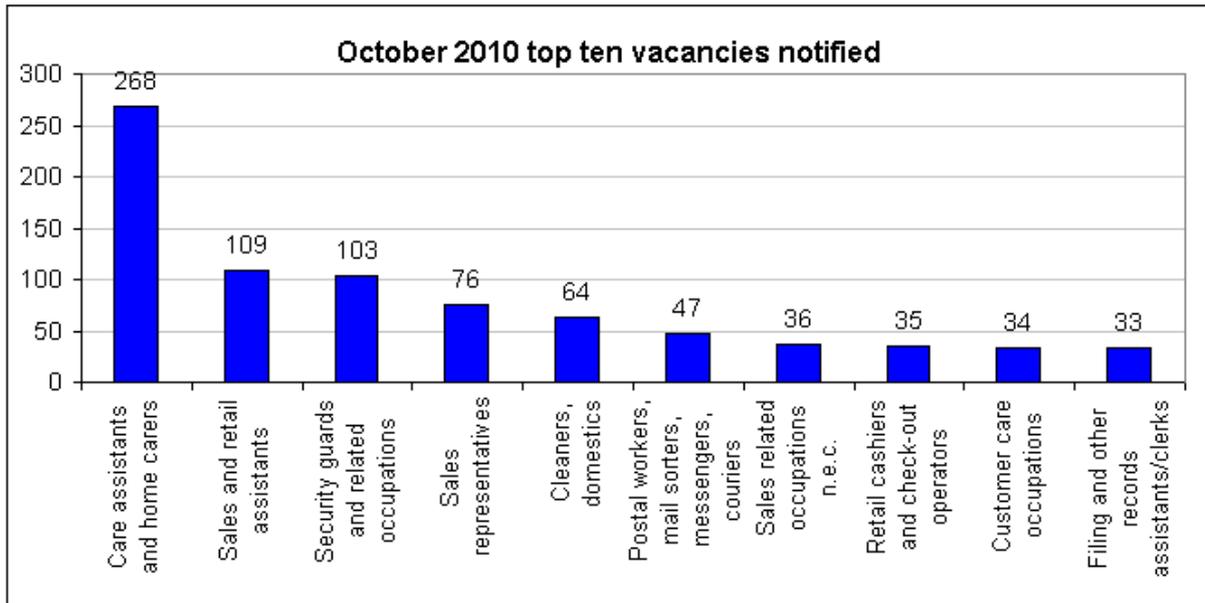


Data source DWP information directorate © crown copyright, 2010

- As figure 9 shows, in the May 2010 Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) data, there were 11 small areas in Colchester with 55 or more JSA claimants, down from 13 in February 2010 (see September report).
- Of the small areas with over 50 JSA claimants, three small areas kept the same value between February 2010 and May 2010. Ten small areas shown in the last report had a reduced number of JSA claimants, with Sycamore the largest of these with a reduction of 45 from the 70 claimants in February. Three small areas had an increased number (St Anne's, Castle Central and Salary Brook South). Three small areas appeared in the small areas with over 50 claimants which were not previously. These were Castle East, Gavin Way and Longridge.

Job Centre Plus data: Vacancies and Job Seekers

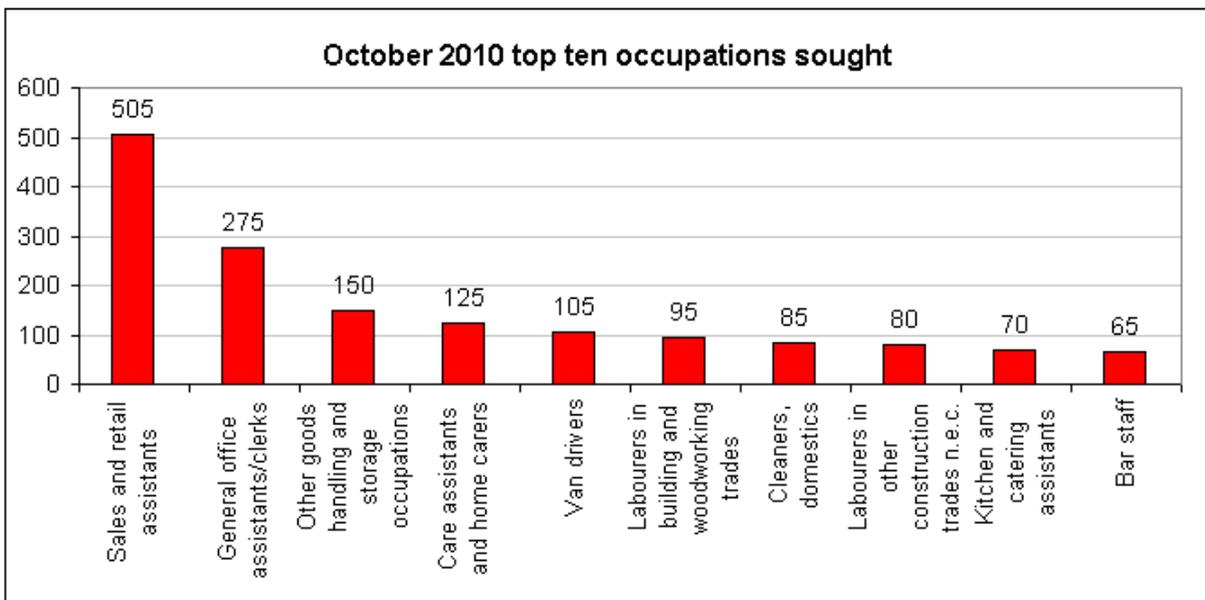
Figure 10



Data source, Job Centre Plus, Colchester branch site level vacancies, November 2010

- With 268 vacancies, care assistants and home carers had the top number of vacancies in October 2010, which was also top in the previous report with an average of 148 vacancies registered a month between May and June 2010. This was followed by sales and retail assistants with 109 vacancies and security guards with 103 vacancies. These are higher values than the previous report, and security guards did not appear on the previous top ten list. It is likely that this increase is due to seasonal vacancies being advertised for the Christmas period.

Figure 11



Data source, Job Centre Plus, Colchester branch site level vacancies, November 2010

As shown in figure 11, 505 people were searching for sales and retail assistant jobs in October. Between November 2009 and February 2010, this was also the top occupation sought, with an average of 463 people a month were. General office assistant/ clerk work, was the second most sought occupation, with 275 job seekers, and other good handling and storage work had 150 job seekers. These are the same top three occupations sought as shown in the April and September economic reports, but the numbers are slightly higher, possibly due to seasonal variation.

Figure 12

	June 2010 percentage	October 2010 vacancies	October 2010 occupation sought	October 2010 percentage*
Basildon	18.840285	1690	4315	39.165701
Braintree	40.187617	1053	2325	45.290323
Brentwood	44.583333	862	905	95.248619
Canvey Island	9.6832579	179	900	19.888889
Chelmsford	39.245852	2069	3255	63.563748
Clacton	19.022222	446	2275	19.604396
Colchester	37.076205	1532	3140	48.789809
Grays	33.632653	1075	3265	32.924962
Harlow	24.336134	1093	2775	39.387387
Harwich	11.25	176	610	28.852459
Loughton	18.511327	289	1415	20.424028
Rayleigh	29.2827	489	1155	42.337662
Southend	17.030303	1176	4760	24.705882
Witham	25.935484	421	750	56.133333

Data source, Job Centre Plus, Colchester branch site level vacancies, November 2010

- Those figures which are highlighted in figure 13 show an increase in the percentage of jobs to job seekers. Between February and June 2010, only Grays Job Centre Plus saw a decrease in the number of jobs available for the number of job seekers.
- In Colchester, the proportion of vacancies advertised through the Job Centre Plus was 48.8% of job seekers which is another large increase from June 2010 (37.1% of job seekers), which had also increased from 21.2% of the job seekers which were registered in February 2010. Of the areas shown, Colchester had the fourth highest proportion of jobs to job seekers, which is the same as the ranking in June 2010.
- Some of the increase of jobs to job seekers may be due to a rise in seasonal vacancies as we approach Christmas.
- Although this data shows the percentage of jobs to job seekers, these figures will not necessarily translate into employment, as the difference in the types of occupations sought and vacancies advertised in figures 10 and 11 shows.

16-19 year olds Not in Employment, Education or Training

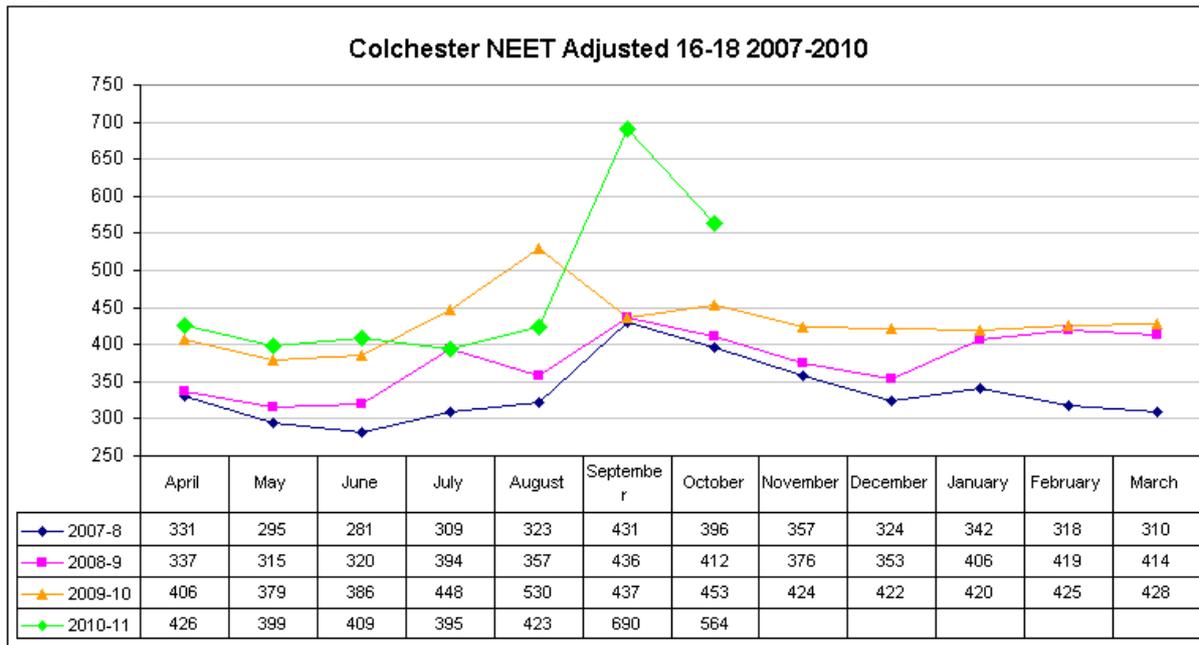
Figure 13

District	NEET % as at Oct 10	NEET Adjusted % as at Oct 09	% change Oct 09 to Oct 10	NEET Adjusted Numbers as at Oct 10	NEET Numbers as at June 10
Tendring	16.00%	13.40%	2.60%	446	377
Basildon	14.40%	13.20%	1.20%	605	492
Braintree	12.70%	11.50%	1.20%	370	245
Maldon	10.50%	10.30%	0.20%	93	76
Rochford	9.10%	11.10%	-2.00%	120	107
Essex	7.60%	7.50%	0.10%	3482	2411
Brentwood	6.70%	5.70%	1.00%	139	92
Colchester	5.90%	5.60%	0.30%	564	409
Castle Point	5.80%	4.60%	1.20%	273	155
Harlow	5.20%	5.50%	-0.30%	196	128
Chelmsford	5.00%	4.10%	0.90%	382	231
Uttlesford	4.70%	4.50%	0.20%	84	52
Epping Forest	4.10%	4.50%	-0.40%	152	63

Colchester 14 to 19 Area Planning Group (APG) NEET data set, provided by NE Area Integrated Youth Services, © Essex County Council (November 2010)

- As figure 13 shows, in October 2010, Colchester had 5.9% of its 16 to 19 year old population who were classed as NEET. This was lower than the Essex average of 7.6%, and placed Colchester sixth out of the twelve districts, but higher than the previous year where 5.6% of the relevant population were NEET.
- In terms of numbers of NEET 16 to 19 year olds, Colchester had the second highest number of the twelve districts, at 564 the same as the ranking in June 2010 at 409 NEET. Only Basildon had a higher level of NEET in October 2010 of 605.

Figure 14



Colchester 14 to 19 Area Planning Group (APG) NEET data set, provided by NE Area Integrated Youth Services, © Essex County Council (November 2010)

- For all three annual periods, the adjusted NEET figure is shown on a monthly basis in figure 14. Across the three years, the lowest adjusted NEET figures were given for the period of April 2007 to March 2008, where the highest NEET figure given was 431 in September 2007 and the lowest NEET figure was 281 in June 2007.
- Year on year the adjusted NEET figure for each month has increased, other than July and August 2010 which had a lower rate than the July and August 2009 claimants.
- The starting months of the period April 2010 to March 2011 shown on the chart above identify a higher NEET figure for Colchester than any other year, indicating that this trend may be set to continue.
- September 2010 shows by far the highest adjusted NEET figure for the last three and a half years, at 690. This could be an impact of the recession, where those who have left education have failed to find employment or further education or training opportunities. There has been much analysis which points to the younger age group being worst hit as a result of experiencing the recession, possibly due to their lack of experience and therefore ability to compete with others who are more experienced and who are out of work in the current climate. It could be that this latest figure is demonstrating this claim.
- The most recent data for October 2010 shows 564 people who are NEET in Colchester. The highest October rate for all years shown.

Figure 15

Top ten wards by percentage of Colchester Connexions NEET who are resident (October 2010)	
Ward	% of Colchester Connexions NEET
St Andrew's	14.25%
New Town	12.47%
Berechurch	10.18%
Shrub End	7.38%
St Anne's	6.36%
Harbour	5.34%
Lexden	4.83%
Castle	4.07%
Highwoods	3.56%
Stanway	3.56%

Colchester 14 to 19 Area Planning Group (APG) NEET data set, provided by NE Area Integrated Youth Services, © Essex County Council (November 2010)

- As in the August 2010 data, St Andrews had the highest percentage of Connexions NEET; however, the percentage had increased from 10.97% to 14.25%.
- Three wards had more than 10% of the total Connexions NEET figure in residence, St Andrew's, New Town and Berechurch. In August 2010 only St Andrew's and Berechurch fell into this category. New Town had 7.91% of Connexions NEET, which had almost doubled to 12.47% by October 2010.
- In August 2010, Stanway did not appear in the top ten wards for Connexions NEET, but it is ranked tenth in October 2010 figures. West Mersea appeared on the previous top ten wards for NEET figures but does not appear for the October data.

Public sector update

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) announced in November 2010 that public sector job losses will not be as high as previously thought. The OBR now expects 330,000 public sector workers to lose their jobs over the next four years, far fewer than the 490,000 it forecast in its June report. They also predicted that overall after a peak of just over 8% unemployment in 2011, the rate would fall steadily to just over 6% by 2015.

Although Colchester has a lower than national unemployment rate, public sector job losses could have a significant effect, especially as Colchester has a higher rate of the population who are employed in the public sector than there are nationally.

Census Recruitment

The Census has occurred every 10 years in England and Wales since 1801, aside from 1941 when we were at war. The last Census was in 2001 and the next will take place on **27 March 2011**.

The number of applications for Census Coordinators has gone well so far, but there are still opportunities for Census Collectors in Colchester.

Collectors will work in the field, knocking on doors and dealing face-to-face with the general public, providing assistance and encouraging any households yet to complete their questionnaire to make sure they complete and return theirs as soon as possible. Early collectors are sent out before census day to handle any general queries from the public face-to-face.

Applications for the census collectors are now live on www.censusjobs.co.uk

Sainsbury's at Colchester Stanway

Of a total of 243 additional jobs this new unit has created, 230 unemployed people (new to or re-entering the job market) gained jobs as a result of a scheme developed by Colchester Borough Council and Job Centre Plus and Sainsbury's. The planning process was used to negotiate working on targeting recruitment at the store for the unemployed using a Section 106 agreement. The scheme included courses, interviews and work trails to select candidates. Those who were not successful were given advice and training to make them more employable and aware of what they need to return to work.

Town centre economy

The BBC recently published a study into the decline of the high street, including an analysis of the types of business experiencing both growth and decline.

They found that although the UK economy continued to grow, according to the latest figures, consumer spending has slowed and retailers across the country are still feeling the effects of the recession. The BBC commissioned the research into the number of vacant shops in England, Wales and Scotland. Results suggest changing consumer habits, as well as the economic downturn, are transforming the face of our High Streets, with the largest occurring increase in supermarkets and discount stores and the largest decrease occurring in off licenses and travel agents (see Figure 16 below) This is national level data, and different trends may show at a lower level.

Figure 16

Retail outlets 2009-2010 % change



[†] data from Sep 09-Sep 10, other data from Jun 09-Jun 10

Data from BBC Changing High Street report accessed 6th December at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11915437>

Skills and Opportunities Event- November 24th 2010

This was the second Skills and Opportunity event that CBC has held in partnership with Job Centre Plus. The aim of the event is to provide residents looking for work with the opportunity to find out about training, careers advice and volunteering opportunities available to them, and all under one roof.

Eighteen Agencies took part, including Next Step, Colchester Institute, Adult Community College, Business Link, COLBEA plus other specialist organisations involved in helping people back into work.

More than 200 people attended and there was very positive feedback from both agencies and residents, with an average of around 30 enquiries each; with a high percentage of follow-up enquires. Considering the fact that we needed to close the door for almost an hour, due to the sit-in by students protesting, this was very satisfactory. Another event, on a slightly smaller scale is being planned for New Town in March 2011.

Targeting Unemployment

Colchester Borough Council and Job Centre Plus are aware that some residents looking for work, particularly those recently made redundant, will not be accessing Job Centre Plus services. With this in mind, we are targeting areas where there is a higher than average increase in unemployment with a letter offering one to one advice. So far, we have delivered 300-400 letters in each of the following areas: New Town North, Highwoods and Barnhall and have had responses from 12 residents, who we have been able to help, or signpost to appropriate services. We will be repeating this targeting in Berechurch North in January and Paxman in February. For more information please contact Sandra Culham on 01206 282966.

Benefits reform

On the 11th November the BBC reported on the Benefits System reform. Below is an extract taken from an online article on the 3rd December 2010 at;

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11734972>.

Work and Pensions Secretary set up plan to scrap out-of-work benefits and replace them with a Universal Credit. Here are the key points:

The key points

- Replaces working tax credit, child tax credit, housing benefit, income support, jobseekers' allowance and income related allowances
- Low paid workers to keep more of what they earn
- Benefits cut for three months if job offers refused
- People can move in and out of work without losing benefits
- Starts for new claimants in 2013
- Will take up to 10 years to come fully into effect
- £2.1bn start up costs
- Meant to save money in the long run through reducing fraud and error

How will it work?

Claimants will receive a basic personal amount with additional sums for disability, caring costs, housing costs and children, with single people and couples getting different rates and, as now, the under 25s receiving less. Unlike now, people will not have to claim separately for different benefits. The amount claimants receive will also be calculated closer to "real time", with adjustments potentially made monthly rather than annually.

Making work pay

As earnings rise, Universal Credit will be withdrawn at a rate of around 65p for every £1 of wages earned - higher than is presently the case.

How claims will be made

Claims "will normally be made through the internet". Most claims will be dealt with automatically, leaving staff to focus on cases where there is a risk of fraud or error. The government say they expect "most subsequent contact between recipients and the delivery agency will also be conducted online". Claimants will be expected to manage their claims as they would an online bank account. They will also have to report significant changes of circumstances online.

Refusing to take work

Failure to accept a reasonable job offer, failure to apply for a job or failure to attend "Mandatory Work Activity" will result in Jobseekers Allowance being stopped for at least three months. In the most "extreme" cases, "where benefit recipients have serially and deliberately breached conditions" benefits will be cut for three years - and claimants may not have access to hardship for the whole of that period to make up the shortfall.

Benefits cheats

"In the case of recipients who are convicted of criminal fraud, in addition to any sentence imposed by the court, the offender will also be subject to 'one strike' and 'two strike' regimes, which impose benefit deductions on recipients", the white paper says. That means a loss of benefits for three months for a first conviction and six months for a second. For the most serious and organised cases, benefit could be stopped for three years.

Benefits that will not be scrapped

- Disability living allowance
- Child benefit

- Contributory Jobseekers Allowance (paid for the first six months of unemployment out of National Insurance contributions)
- Statutory sick pay
- Maternity pay and maternity allowance
- Industrial injuries disablement allowance

When it will come into force?

The new rules are likely to come into force for new claimants by 2013, with a target of migrating all recipients onto it in the first few years of the next Parliament after 2015.

It Could Be You!

Calling all Colchester-based community, voluntary, employment and skills organisations – funding could be available to you from Colchester Borough Council.

Organisations throughout Colchester are being encouraged to apply for their share of the funding that is available to them through the Enterprise, Skills and Employment Funding scheme, made available by Colchester Borough Council.

The Enterprise Skills and Employment funding is available to ‘not for profit’ organisations that promote business creation and provide employment and skills training within the Borough, helping to maximise job opportunities and deliver local economic prosperity.

Project and Development funding is also available for 2011, to organisations and initiatives that can provide outreach support to local voluntary and community groups in setting up and sustaining clubs for older people where they can meet and socialise such as lunch clubs.

Capital funding grant for 2011-2012 is for the improvement of venues that house services which serve residents on a borough-wide basis. These could include repair or refurbishment of buildings, car parks and signage.

Councillor Nick Barlow, Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Culture and Tourism, said: We are very pleased to be supporting local organisations that can help us promote and deliver economic prosperity in Colchester.”

Applications can be made from Friday 10th December. The deadline for applications is 31st January 2011.

Councillor Tina Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Communities said: ““Colchester Borough Council is committed to ensuring that all residents have the opportunities that they need. We actively encourage residents to volunteer in supporting their communities, to help provide an even better place to live.”

To obtain an application form or for more information on the Enterprise grant, please contact Jan Warren on (01206) 282107 or email enterprise@colchester.gov.uk.

If you require more information on Project and Development Funding or to obtain an application form contact Fay Mathers on (01206) 282968 or email fay.mathers@colchester.gov.uk

Colchester's Star Rises in the East this Christmas!

November saw the launch of a new festive lighting scheme for the town centre themed around stars. The theme celebrates Colchester's heritage as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* was written in West Stockwell Street by sisters Jane and Ann Taylor in about 1796.

The project to bring a high-quality Christmas lighting scheme to Colchester was developed throughout 2010 by the Colchester Christmas Group, which includes retailers through the Colchester Retail & Business Association (CoRBA), Destination Colchester, Culver Square & Lion Walk Shopping Centres, the Church as well as Colchester Borough Council. Chair of the group is Michelle Reynolds of the Colchester Retail & Business Association. Commenting on the scheme Ms Reynolds said: "The partnership approach adopted this year has been extremely productive and worthwhile and the lights have received very positive feedback from businesses, visitors and local people alike."

The first ever TV advertising campaign for Colchester also aired in November led by the town's retailers in partnership with the Council to spread the message that Colchester's the place to be this Christmas. Williams & Griffin, Lion Walk and Culver Square and Colchester Borough Council have worked together on the £14,000 jointly funded campaign.

Commenting on the Christmas plans, Councillor Nick Barlow, the Council's Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Culture and Tourism, said: "The new Christmas lights and partnership approach to Christmas are making the town centre an even more desirable place for people to visit this year. The aim is also to encourage local people to retain their spending in the local economy, support local businesses and help to sustain local employment through these tough economic times."

The Council's Parking Services team has also joined in the campaign with special seasonal offers of just 50p to park in Colchester after 3pm on Wednesday late night shopping days and 50p all day on 27th and 28th December to make January sale shopping even more of a bargain.

The aim of the fresh approach to Christmas this year is to grow Colchester's market share for festive retail spending compared to neighbouring towns, large regional shopping centres and online shopping, encourage visits to Colchester to shop, stay and be entertained and provide a wow factor which is a focus for community pride in the town centre.

The approach is being monitored on a number of levels and an evaluation will be carried out early in 2011 to inform next year's campaign.

The project is part of Colchester's drive to bring Colchester an even better town centre. Projects such as the new Christmas lights offer new things to see, help promote Colchester to visitors, help support business and retailers and improve the experience of Colchester after dark. For more information:

www.bettertowncentre.com