

Queen Street Grow On

Welcome to the **Updating Colchester** Podcast where you can take a deep dive into some of the capital work projects that are in the pipeline for our town. This episode explores the **Queen Street Grow On** project and what it will offer creative industries in the borough.

Sue Lissimore, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resources at Colchester Borough Council talks to **Counsellor Darius Laws**, Portfolio Holder for Economy, Business and Heritage, and **Adam Bryan**, Chief Executive Officer at the Southeast Local Enterprise Partnership.

An edited and condensed transcript of the conversation is below.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: Why are the creative industries so important to Colchester?

Adam Bryan: The evidence points to the fact that the creative and digital sector is a big employer in Colchester and across the wider southeast. Colchester is one of the fastest growing towns in the country and the creative and digital sector is the fastest growing sector in the country. So, if you put those two things together, it is evident that those two things are central to the to the growth of the town and will serve to catalyse and galvanise its economic growth over the course of the years to come. Supporting the creative and digital sector in Colchester is vital for so many reasons and I think that no other sector of the economy contributes to the to the feeling of a place like the creative industries, which is why this project so important, and why it's so fantastic that it's taken hold in Colchester.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: What do you think the needs of the industry are right now?

Adam Bryan: The industry is modernising and innovating, supporting that and making sure there are links to the innovation ecosystem is important. Colchester is fortunate to have resources on its doorstep, the University of Essex, for example, is an important player in that space. Then, looking at it from the from the perspective of small organisations and freelance workers, the key issues are around workspace, which is why this project is so important.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: Darius, you've been involved for many years with this industry, how do you think the Queen Street Grow On project addresses some of the needs in the town?

Cllr Darius Laws: This is about increasing capacity and offering a different opportunity than that of the neighbouring 37 Queen Steet, which is a great place start up a business due to its incubation culture. However, when you've developed your business and you want to go somewhere a bit bigger, this new venture will be a great opportunity to do that. Crucially, in this new development, we're going to see those key water cooler moments. In the last two years people have been working from home, however, there is always going to be a need for people to come together to have face to face meetings and collaborations. We'll see a shift away from the kind traditional nine-to-five culture that has prevailed for many, and people are people will be working more flexibly, so fundamentally, there is still a need for people to be together. Queen Street Grown On is a great opportunity because there's going to be a social space and it's going to allow collaboration, creativity, and clustering.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: Can you tell us a little more about the site development?

Cllr Darius Laws: The building itself will be fully accessible. There'll be a cafe on the ground floor. There are remaining brownfield development opportunities around first site, so this is the Council stepping forward - we have identified an opportunity to help a sector which we

believe there is a future in. Colchester is packed with freelancers and creatives, but they don't really have a hub to go to and this will be part of a story saying, if you want to have a coffee or a chat with someone in your industry, come and do it here on Queen Street.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: Why do you think this project is important to the borough right now?

Adam Bryan: It's evident that the way we work is changing. People have gone from being used to working in an office, to spending most of their time at home. However, what a lot of people want is that hybrid version - the ability to work close to home and that's what this project offers. So, maintaining connections with the community in which you work and the community in which you live will be accessible here, and performing your job in a high quality and appropriate workspace provides a unique opportunity. It's evident that this project will support the retention of growing businesses in Colchester, it will also attract new businesses to the town and facilities like this will always have a positive impact on inward investment. It will also provide employment opportunities for FE and HE students, strengthening that link with the university which is so important in innovation sector, and it will further diversify the Colchester economy and reinforce its resilience against current and potential future economic shocks. So, for all those reasons it will have a fantastic impact on the local economy.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: Residents of Colchester and visitors to Colchester have seen and heard for at least 15 years that there is going to be vast improvements in this area of town, which does, on the surface, look very rundown. How do you think this project will link up with other works that are going on?

Cllr Darius Laws: This is part of an exciting story that Colchester Borough Council is leading on. We recognise that town centres have changed. One of the things that we're keen to do is to make sure that every piece of public realm gets enhanced to its maximum. That means levelling up road surfaces or illuminating the area with creative and artistic lighting to make it feel more welcoming and more dynamic. We've got Saint Nicholas Square just around the corner. That's about to have spades in the ground. We've just seen the success in the Mercury redevelopment and the public realm. It's a wonderful space. We're also going to see exciting regeneration plans at the water tower jumbo, so there's lots of activity going on. There are real examples of how you can improve the public realm to make the place feel nicer. And Colchester is a unique place. We've got a fantastic past and we're going to have a fantastic future.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: I've been very excited by some of the schemes that are coming forward to light up local roads and make the area more appealing, particularly at night. Do you think this project will have a real impact on the immediate local area?

Cllr Darius Laws: It's long overdue. We've been talking about regenerating Queen Street for at least 20 years and now we're getting on with the job. Colchester is open for business. Hopefully it's going to be open for business outside of the typical nine to five. There's a gym across the road that's open 24/7, people are going to want to work beyond nine to five, especially those who work in this industry and I'm excited about that. I think the days of you needing to go to London for everything are gone and there's an opportunity here for Colchester.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: What are the timelines for this project?

Cllr Darius Laws: This specific site is going to take about three months of demolition. The existing bus depot has to be taken down carefully because a large portion of this is built on the Roman town wall, which is nearly 2000 years old and a listed monument. Once that's happened, there's going to be around six months' worth of archaeology on the site, which is a painstaking process and can sometimes take longer than expected. Then we can get on with the construction, and we hope we'll be able to open the doors at some point in 2023.

Cllr Sue Lissimore: What do you think is next in line for the creative industries here in the town?

Adam Bryan: I think all the pieces of the jigsaw are in place now to see the growth that we would all want to see in this sector. Other investments have been made in the town whether they're specific to this sector, to the digital capabilities of Colchester and broadband investment, or whether they're broader, they will all contribute to the sector's growth. Ultimately, I think the aim of the creative sector in Colchester is to reach new audiences and become more present in the town. It will reach out to new audiences, and one would hope, become the sector that you associate with Colchester.

Cllr Darius Laws: Colchester is a hub for creativity and culture. We have the National Museum of the Year in first site, we have the Colchester Arts Centre, the Mercury Theatre, which is a regional powerhouse. We want to facilitate more creative businesses in order to support a growing digital sector which can only going to be good news for Colchester town centre and the wider region. We're incredibly grateful to our funding partners for making this happen.

Adam Bryan: Southeast LEP has contributed just over £3.7 million for this project which builds on the many other investments we've already made in in Colchester over the years. I think Southeast LEP working alongside Colchester Borough Council should continue to make the strongest possible case for the needs, the challenges and of course the massive opportunities that exist in in vibrant towns like Colchester.

Thank you for your interest in this episode of **Updating Colchester** about the **Queen St Grow On** project. If you'd like to know more about the wide range of capital works going on around Colchester to improve our borough, head over to our web page:

www.colchester.gov.uk/updating-colchester

The views and opinions expressed are those of the interviewee(s) and are not necessarily those of Colchester Borough Council.

About the Participants

Sue Lissimore is Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resources at Colchester Borough Council. **Counsellor Darius Laws** is Portfolio Holder for Economy, Business and Heritage, and **Adam Bryan** is Chief Executive Officer at the Southeast Local Enterprise Partnership.

This interview and all previous or forthcoming episodes can be found at:

www.colchester.gov.uk/updating-colchester