

# City of Entrepreneurs



20 INSPIRING  
**SUCCESS**  
**STORIES**

Leicester





# Welcome to Leicester:

## Officially the UK's Most Entrepreneurial City

Leicester has a diverse and dynamic economy and its success is integral to driving major economic growth in the United Kingdom. So much so that recent studies\* have rated Leicester as the 'Most Entrepreneurial City' in the United Kingdom. This accolade is based on research showing the huge number of Leicester businesses per capita in the six months between January and June 2021 — a figure of 77, almost double that of runner up Brighton & Hove with just 38<sup>1</sup>.

This fantastic achievement builds upon Leicester's 2020 ranking as the '2nd Most Entrepreneurial City' in the United Kingdom, thanks to an impressive 46% rise in new business registrations between 2019 and 2020<sup>2</sup>. This was higher than all other UK cities in the same period including London, Glasgow, Birmingham and Liverpool.

So, what is it that makes Leicester such an amazing city in which to do business?

There is a huge amount of support within the city for small and new businesses, but it can be difficult to know what help is right for your business and how to access it. That's where initiatives such as the Business Gateway Growth Hub can assist, as the service offers a one stop shop for business advice and support. A chat with one of their knowledgeable business advisers can open doors to opportunities you never knew existed.

Leicester City Council has a growing portfolio of managed workspace in the city. These spaces are ideal for entrepreneurs looking for flexible, agile workspaces without the need for capital. The first managed workspace opened in 2004 at LCB Depot. Phoenix workspaces and Maker's Yard designer maker studios are also located in the Cultural Quarter. Dock at Pioneer Park, a business investment area for innovation and technology. Gresham Works in the former Fenwick store offers contemporary, flexible

space for start-ups, freelancers, remote workers and business. The council has secured Government Levelling Up funding to refurbish Pilot House on King Street to deliver an additional managed workspace in the city centre.

We interviewed twenty business owners, representing a diverse range of industries, and asked them to share their personal stories. How they became an entrepreneur, where they found support, what obstacles they overcame, plans for future business growth and why Leicester? Their stories demonstrate that Leicester means business for everyone.

We hope these powerful stories will inspire others with a burning entrepreneurial spirit to reach out for support and advice and speak to like-minded entrepreneurs for guidance.

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<sup>1</sup><https://startups magazine.co.uk/article-uks-top-10-most-entrepreneurial-towns-and-cities>  
<https://gosuperscript.com/most-entrepreneurial-locations/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.instantoffices.com/blog/featured/entrepreneurial-city-uk-2021/>





# Paul Baker

## **BAKERS WASTE SERVICES LTD**

BAKERS WASTE SERVICES LTD IS A LEADING WASTE MANAGEMENT PROVIDER OFFERING AN EXTENSIVE RANGE OF WASTE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS TO OVER 5000 COMPANIES.

“I think I’m driven by a refusal to never give in. I always go to sleep thinking tomorrow can be better than today.”

“Like most young boys I wanted to be a footballer when I was growing up. Nobody puts their hand up and says I want to be a binman.”

Paul is now Managing Director of leading waste management company, Bakers Waste, a business that he set up himself 20 years ago. “My father had his own business and that was what first turned my eye to the idea of being an entrepreneur. I began working in the removals side of his business and that was where I got my lorry driving qualifications.”

Following family disagreements, Paul went to work for a recruitment consultancy, but soon found that particular industry wasn't for him. “I didn't enjoy it at all, but one of the clients was a refuse company, so I went out to visit them. When I was there, they talked me through the vacancies they had available and I explained that I had my Class 2 driving qualification and needed to get out of what I was doing. That's really how it started. At that time in my life, it was exactly what I needed. I was earning brilliant money and it was flexible around my family.”

Whilst there, Paul saw the opportunity in starting his own business. “I looked around and there weren't many people doing it. I knew it was regular work and it's something that there will always be a demand for. I sold my car, got a credit card and bought my first bin lorry.”

Paul admits when he began the business, whilst he had high aspirations, he didn't plan for the growth that the business has gone through. “I never really envisaged the business as it is today. My initial objective was to turnover £1,000,000 and get up to 6 vehicles. That all came about within 3-4 years, so then it became about resetting regular achievable goals.”

Now Bakers Waste operates with 60 vehicles, 3 operational sites and a head office. The vehicles cover the whole of the East Midlands daily and also offer a national service. “I think I'm driven by a refusal to never give in. I always go to sleep thinking tomorrow can be better than today.”

A large proportion of Bakers Waste's work is with commercial businesses who closed during the lockdown period. “We were doing 20-30,000 collections a month to suddenly having businesses tell us to stop the service with no notice period. We had never prepared for that, why would we have?”

## “I believe successful businesses should be giving something back.”

Bakers Waste continued operating as an essential business throughout the lockdown, but this came with its own complications. “Not all businesses closed, so we continued to operate, however it had large cost implications. All of a sudden, we were doing far fewer collections, but still having to service a very wide area. In the first year we lost around 15% of our turnover.”

Paul admits that the period allowed them to reflect on the business and learn about themselves, their processes and futureproofing the organisation. “We took the opportunity to continue recruiting and had a slight restructure internally. Now we have a team that's in a position to take us forward into the post-pandemic opportunities.”

The future of his team is something that Paul is very passionate about and Bakers Waste has taken steps to reach across the community with opportunities.

“We've always focused on social value. I believe successful businesses should be giving something back.” They first worked with Glen Parva Young Offenders offering opportunities on the picking line, handling machinery and giving the opportunity for them to upskill to forge a career path away from crime.

“We've continued to work with prisons to offer people a future path and potential career. We send products to prisons for sorting and educating individuals on waste management and processes.” We created the Inside Out academy, which recognises that they will offer opportunities to ex-offenders with opportunities for rehabilitation into work and society.

“We're now working with Stocken and other prisons, as we've got a large amount of product to work with that can add to their education, can be giving them work and can be benefitting the environment. Hopefully, this will encourage them to look into a career with real progress after release. We've had a lot of success with it so far.”

As an industry, waste management is needed everywhere, but being from Leicester, Paul is quick to point out the benefits of being based in the city. “The thing I've really noticed from being in other cities is how connected the business community is in Leicester. The networks are more in sync and want to support each other. That's quite unique and has certainly helped us in our growth.”

What Paul believes sets Bakers Waste apart from other businesses is their relationship with customers and a commitment to education around the waste industry. “We're committed to always having a personal relationship with our clients. We're here to explain changes in waste requirements, to offer the best service and to supply a hassle-free solution.”

As well as keeping customers informed of changes, Paul is aware that they're in the rare position of being in an industry that can change at any time and must always be prepared for that. “We're in an industry that changes by the week with red tape and legislation. A change in government, for example, could mean a whole new direction for our business.”

“Waste is no longer waste, it's a product. Everything has a value, as nearly everything can have another life. Part of our investment and development is about finding opportunities for use of customers' waste.”

“In the changing industry I try to see opportunity. The opportunity for us to grow even further as an organisation is there and available, we've just got to go and get it.”

**WWW.BAKERSWASTE.CO.UK**

# Peter Gardner

## COCOA AMORE

AWARD-WINNING CHOCOLATIER, COCOA AMORE, HAS BEEN SATISFYING LEICESTER'S SWEET TOOTH SINCE 2013. THE COMPANY HAS NOW EXPANDED TO THREE STORES, SELLING HANDMADE CHOCOLATES, GIFTS AND OFFERING CHOCOLATE MAKING WORKSHOPS.

“As a child, I didn’t understand why people worked for other people, I just always thought you should do it for yourself.”





Peter knew from an early age that he wanted to be an entrepreneur. Growing up and seeing all the male influences in his life being self-employed, he knew it was his path too; he just didn't know in what field. "As a child, I didn't understand why people worked for other people, I just always thought you should do it for yourself. That was always my goal."

Starting in the bar and pub trade at 18, Peter worked his way up the ladder to Assistant Manager of a nightclub at 19 years old. Following a move to a national pub chain, he wanted more responsibility and decided to take on a pub franchise, but that didn't go to plan. "Naively at that age, I thought I could take on anything. I was bankrupt within 9 months."

"That really made me take a step back and sit and think what it was I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to continue in food & drink, but I desperately wanted to do something more creative." That's when he saw a gap in the market. Based in Loughborough at the time, Peter noticed that the town was saturated with bars, cafés and restaurants but, in terms of chocolate, there was only a Thorntons on the High Street.

"I pulled together £100 and I invested that into learning about chocolate. Straight away, I could see the potential in creating something local and new." Peter pitched the new business idea to Enterprise Loans and from there he opened his first shop in Loughborough.

Peter sold his first shop, Chocolate Alchemy, in 2013, recognising that he needed a stronger brand. "Chocolate Alchemy had a very male stance, but I recognised my audience was more female led. With Cocoa Amore we looked more towards the style of perfume branding, we stripped back the offering and made it a lot more accessible."

"I'd previously spoken to the Silver Arcade about opening a second Chocolate Alchemy

shop, but they didn't come back to me until I'd already sold the business." Straight away, Peter knew he wanted to open in the Arcade. Cocoa Amore began with him taking on a short lease on a very small unit to allow time to see the potential and scalability of the business. "The first 12 months was a whirlwind. Within a year I'd been invited to Downing Street, we were nominated as one of the Top 20 small shops in the country and I'd won Micro Entrepreneur of the Year for England."

From the outset, Peter looked towards scalability as franchising was always in mind for the future. "I really enjoy the business support aspect. The day to day of running a shop bores me a little, but the excitement of franchising and seeing people build their own business with our support, that really excited me."

Peter's goal of expanding Cocoa Amore has been building over recent years, with the second store at The Engine Yard at Belvoir Castle and then the third branch in Grantham, which opened in 2021. This third store is the first to be based on the franchise model with someone taking it on fully costed and ready to launch.

As well as making and selling chocolate, the workshops have become a key part of the Cocoa Amore business. "I wanted to educate people about chocolate and bring the theatre of it to the high street." This all builds into Peter's franchise model: it's not about just opening a chocolate shop, but creating a community and fun learning space.

One of the big breaks for Cocoa Amore was a contract with Watches of Switzerland, which saw them supplying chocolates for their corporate gift bags. Over the last five years that contract has continued to grow and provides a different income stream to the consumer facing side of Cocoa Amore. "It has been a real learning curve for me. Along the way I have realised that some of the work we were doing was dead end and

for very small margin and then I suddenly saw the potential that existed beyond that."

Peter admits there were mistakes along that journey. "It's easy to trip yourself up when you have a goal in mind. You can easily overspend and waste money on the wrong advertising channels for no return. What's been more important in our growth is the relationships we've built. I've been very active in Loughborough BID and was part of the steering group for BID Leicester."

Cocoa Amore now has a thriving online business alongside the shops. Fortunately, before the Covid-19 lockdown, Peter had already separated the shop and the online side of the business — a move which proved to have a huge impact for what followed. "We were very lucky we'd already taken that step otherwise we simply wouldn't have been ready for what came."

"My main goal throughout the pandemic was to remain relevant: we kept our social media active, we created new products, and we kept selling. Fortunately, we've come out the other side, yet you see big national brands, like Thorntons, who haven't."

Reflecting on the early years of business, Peter admits that time is the biggest factor. "If you give something enough time, the right people will eventually find you. It's really tempting to plough loads of money into advertising when you first start, desperate for that early recognition. Instead, keep some of that money in the bank, keep developing and turning up every day. You never know who the next person who walks through the door might be."

"My end goal is to be known as the local chocolate shop on every high street. That's down to looking after our customers, covering our supply chain and working closely with the local community. I'm really excited for what's to come."

**WWW.COCOA-AMORE.CO.UK**

**"I wanted to educate people about chocolate and bring the theatre of it to the high street."**



# Dr Harai Virdee

“We were given 90 days’ notice to leave the country and we arrived in Leicester as refugees as my grandfather was already here.”

## DENTAL ART

A VIBRANT, 3 SURGERY, FAMILY RUN PRACTICE, DENTAL ART HAVE BEEN PROVIDING QUALITY DENTAL CARE SINCE 1989 AND OFFERS BOTH NHS AND PRIVATE SERVICES WITH A FOCUS ON PREVENTATIVE DENTISTRY THROUGH MOTIVATING AND EDUCATING THEIR PATIENTS. THE PRACTICE TAKES GREAT PRIDE IN THE QUALITY OF DENTISTRY AND CARE THEY PROVIDE AND CONTINUALLY INVEST TO ENSURE THEY PROVIDE THE BEST POSSIBLE CARE TO ALL THEIR PATIENTS.



# “For me, dentistry is the perfect mix between the scientific and the practical.”

“What’s happening now in the world with Ukraine very much reminds me of how we came to be in Leicester. My family was expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin along with thousands of others. We were given 90 days’ notice to leave the country and we arrived in Leicester as refugees as my grandfather was already here.”

This was 1972 and a 12-year-old Harai Virdee and his family had to build a new life in a new city that was struggling to accommodate the needs of hundreds of families seeking sanctuary, support and friendship.

“Leicester was a very popular place to settle in and, unfortunately as a result, for twelve months there wasn’t a place for me at any school, so I would go to the temple to read and learn on my own until a place for me could be found.” It’s little wonder then that education has been so important in Dr Virdee’s life. Going on to study Dentistry in Manchester, he returned to the city after graduating and established two dental practices — one of which is an accredited training centre — and he lectures in dentistry at Birmingham University.

“I was obviously very inspired by my father because of his background. He didn’t have the privilege and the opportunities that education can provide. He inspired us to work hard and become professionals. I graduated in 1983 and then went on to establish my first practice in 1989.”

Dr Virdee set up his first practice in Beaumont Leys before establishing a second practice, Dental Art, in the heart of the city on Evington Road. ‘For me, dentistry is the perfect mix between the scientific and the practical. I always knew I wanted to work within the medical profession, but I also do enjoy being hands-on. You must also have good communication skills to work well with

patients and, obviously, with my teaching and mentoring work as well. I must admit, I’m still very passionate about my career, I’ve always enjoyed it very much.’

Listening to Dr Virdee, it’s very evident how passionate he is about his work, so it comes as no surprise when he divulges that both of his daughters have followed him into the profession and work as dentists at the practice, or that his son is in his fourth year of training as a dentist. “My wife also works as Practice Manager, so I guess it is very much a family business.”

“When you build a business, you do have to think about succession. You should think who is it that I’m building this for, so I’m pleased my children have followed me into the profession. Who knows, perhaps one day their children will, too?”

Running two busy practices within the city, you would think that Dr Virdee struggles to maintain a work / life balance. “We started both practices cold — that’s with zero patients — and built them into thriving practices, which I am very proud of.”

“Today we focus on our practice, Dental Art, on Evington Road and offer everything you would expect from a dental practice, as well as cosmetic dentistry services, orthodontic work, and specialist surgical work with many practices across the city sending more difficult extraction work to us.”

“We sold our Beaumont Leys practice a few years ago and had help from local councillors to make sure that a dental provision was retained in the area. Leicester City Council and our local councillors have always been very supportive and helpful to us.”

It is this work / life balance that Dr Virdee says you should expect to sacrifice to

become an entrepreneur. “Obviously, I would be working in the clinic seeing patients full time and then you come home, and you still have work to do: you have to focus on the paperwork, on the administration and on building the business. Although I’m no longer working full time, I’m still up by 6.30 each morning putting a few hours in. There’s always something to do. I’m very lucky in that my wife has always been very supportive and, as she’s Practice Manager, we’ve always brought work home a little. You have to sometimes, as there’s not enough hours in the day!”

Despite a career working such long hours, Dr Virdee has always made time to support his community and not only sits on many local dentistry boards but has been instrumental in the creation of a new place of worship in Hamilton to replace the Ramgarhia Gurdwara on the city’s Meynell Road. “I am Vice Chair of the trustees for this project. I think it’s so important to me, not only because of my faith, but for that first twelve months I spent in Leicester before I was able to start at school.”

“The Temple will not only be a place of worship but will also have purpose-built classrooms and space for the whole community, not just the Sikh community to come together. Our ambition is to open a space for everyone that is truly diverse. We’ve had wonderful support from Leicester City Council with the project.”

It’s heartening to hear how Dr Virdee’s first experiences of Leicester have led him to give back to the city after years of service to its community through his work and his charitable endeavours. “We still go out to schools and show the children the importance of brushing their teeth and diet control. Everything is about education. It’s so important.”

[WWW.DENTALARTLEICESTER.CO.UK](http://WWW.DENTALARTLEICESTER.CO.UK)

# Mark Esho MBE

## EASY INTERNET SERVICES

ESTABLISHED IN 2000, EASY INTERNET SERVICES IS A DIGITAL MARKETING AGENCY THAT'S COMMITTED TO MAKING THE INTERNET AN EASIER PLACE FOR ALL. EASY INTERNET SERVICES IS A DISABILITY CONFIDENT PARTNER, A GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGN THAT SUPPORTS EMPLOYERS TO OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO DISABLED PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE.

“Due to the progression of my disability, I knew that I would find life easier if I was self-employed.”



“The pandemic may well represent the biggest opportunity for disabled entrepreneurs in history as, finally, remote working is seen as not only credible but the norm. For seven years I’ve been working with the Department of Work and Pensions and giving talks to business leaders about the benefits of employing disabled people or supporting them in business and, for most of that time, I’ve been banging on about the benefits of remote working. The pandemic has opened up the doors and demonstrated that hybrid and home working can work.”

De Montfort University graduate and business owner Mark Esho MBE is speaking not only as an advocate for disabled people and disabled entrepreneurs, but also as someone who, when it first came to setting up his own business, felt that his credibility was always questioned because of his use of a wheelchair.

“One of the reasons I chose the businesses I did was because they were faceless. I set them up from day one, so that there was never the need to go out and actually see clients.”

Twenty-one years ago, Mark set up Easy Internet Services, one of the first digital marketing agencies in the Midlands before going on to establish Easy Internet Solutions handling web hosting and domain registration.

“We spotted a gap in the market almost by chance. Due to the progression of my disability, I knew that I would find life easier if I was self-employed, so I set up an online property portal — a bit like an early Rightmove — and, although it wasn’t ultimately successful, it was from looking at ways to promote that business that I recognised the importance of search engines and the business opportunity that they represented.”

“I approached the bank and despite having an existing business relationship with them, they weren’t prepared to back me and, after other sources said the same,

I ended up using my credit card to start the business.” Mark’s savvy business intuition was right and both companies have not only proved hugely successful, but he has also gone on to receive an MBE for Services to Business.

He reminisces; “I think being both black and disabled at that time was a double whammy in terms of lack of credibility. Research has shown that 67% of people have got some kind of disability bias — that’s over two thirds of the population — so there’s definitely a credibility gap there, which is why we are not seeing more disabled entrepreneurs. Even today, if you’re in a wheelchair and you’re with someone standing up, you get people talking to the person standing beside you rather than yourself. It can really affect your self-esteem.”

“Back in 2004 or 2005, Amstrad came calling and wanted me to actually go and see them and I said no. We did end up working with them, but if we’d had video conferencing then like we do now, I would have taken the meeting and my business would probably be a bit different, too. I wouldn’t have had to worry about checking whether there are stairs or if I can get through a doorway.”

“You get into a mindset where you feel that just being you is presenting a barrier to them dealing with you from the outset; all these things are going through your mind before you’ve even got to the pitch. I don’t want other disabled persons going into business to face the same thing, so I decided I needed to do something about it.”

The first of Mark’s initiatives is Access Rating, an app that aims to reduce the access anxiety of disabled people by letting them know where is accessible and where’s not. “Not everywhere can be made accessible, but the app arms people with knowledge before they leave their front door. As a by-product of that, we’re able to offer businesses disabled access audits

showing what they can do to welcome in more customers.”

“The money we make then goes to a project we’re running at Ashfield SEND school where we’ve created the first remote work experience studio for disabled students in the UK. It’s set up like an office and thanks to video conferencing, students can get remote work experience with businesses whilst being in a supported environment. The plan is to roll this out to more schools to give more disabled students work experience.”

The other project Mark has set up is aimed at encouraging and supporting disabled entrepreneurs, connecting them to available grants, training, and support in Leicester. He comments; “Support for disabled businesspeople is actually very fragmented, so I got in touch with people from my own networks and asked if they would be prepared to offer a Circle of Support for a disabled entrepreneur, to help them get their business off the ground. Everyone said yes, which has been quite overwhelming. We’re working with the LLEP and Business Gateway, as well as De Montfort University, Patterson’s Solicitors, Fraser Urquhart Media, ALAC Accountancy and East Midlands Chamber of Commerce. There’ll be a cash injection as well to help get things started. The only criterion is that you must be registered disabled. The plan is to support one entrepreneur this year and then increase the number going forward.”

It’s an ambitious project and one that Mark thinks could only ever have originated in Leicester. “We’re a city of entrepreneurs and of likeminded people. There’s a very close business network here in Leicester with a positive attitude and a desire for success. Trying to get support for a project like this elsewhere, where companies are less collaborative would be almost impossible. Leicester is a city of diversity and coexistence. That relates to our business community, as well and I think it’s why we stand out. It’s about raising people up rather than bringing people down and I’m proud to be a part of that.”

**[WWW.EASY-INTERNET.CO.UK](http://WWW.EASY-INTERNET.CO.UK)**

## “Leicester is a city of diversity and coexistence.”



# Akhil Valjee

## ECO-MOTIVE MANUFACTURING

ESTABLISHED IN 2010, ECO-MOTIVE IS THE UMBRELLA NAME FOR A RANGE OF PRODUCTS THAT ARE DESIGNED TO MAKE CARS GREENER AND MORE RELIABLE FOR LESS MONEY. THE COMPANY BELIEVES THAT ITS INVESTMENT IN GREEN TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH CAN PRODUCE A CLEANER, SAFER FUTURE WHILST ENHANCING VEHICLE PERFORMANCE AND RELIABILITY.

“With our meeting we literally had a room full of interested people — they were even standing up.”



"I've always had an interest in cars and would hang around with a friend at his uncle's garage and we would hear them complain about various products not doing what they were supposed to or having to use multiple different products when servicing a car. I thought, 'what if I could create just one product that would do the job rather than four?'"

The idea kept buzzing around entrepreneur Akhil Valjee's head until he heard about the University of Leicester's Innovation Panel, a project set up to encourage innovation within current and alumni students. Being a Leicester Business graduate, he decided to create a business plan and pitch his idea for a one stop engine cleaning system for petrol, hybrid and diesel engines that would make engines more fuel efficient, reduce maintenance and lower emissions and harmful gases.

"Normally, the process is that you submit your plan to the university, and they forward it around the different departments to see if any of them are interested in partnering on the research. If you're lucky, you get invited in for meeting with maybe three or four people who are interested. With our meeting we literally had a room full of interested people — they were even standing up. It was the first time I really thought, 'wow, we're on to something.'"

That initial meeting led to Akhil working with research teams at the University, making full use of their expertise and resources to test and develop his product until it was ready to launch 18 months later as CleanDrive — Advanced Fuel and Exhaust System Cleaner.

"We would never have had the budget of our mainstream competitors to develop a product like this, but by working with the University we were able to do such extensive levels of research that we can

back every claim we make about the product with scientific evidence."

After the first challenge of creating and testing the product, Akhil then had to think about how he was going to market it. "We rented a small unit; little more than a garage really and I had another job from 6am to 2pm. I'd leave that and go straight to the unit, make up stock and then take it around to all the independent garages in Leicester and try and sell it. As it was a local product, they all pretty much supported us and bought some to try. I knew once they used it and saw the benefits, then they would come back and reorder from us. To be honest, that's how I worked for around three years. I didn't know companies had sales agents that went around and would sell your product to their existing contacts. We went from supplying locally to nationally by using different sales agents in different areas — it was a lot quicker than doing it myself!"

Today, under the brand EcoMotive, Akhil manufactures and bottles at a much larger factory unit on the Faircharm Industrial Estate, employs three members of staff and distributes his products in almost three and half thousand independent motor factors, car accessory shops and garages after securing a deal with one of the UK's largest distributors of automotive products.

"The next step is to get our products into the likes of Halfords and Euro Car Parts, but that takes time and we've been focusing on international markets such as India and China, as there are a much larger number of used cars on the roads over there and extending the life of your vehicle is a lot more important. Petrol and diesel engines are set to be around for much longer over there, too."

Realising that he now had a trusted brand and distribution network, Akhil turned his attention to expanding his product

range. "Off the strength of that one product, people wanted more products from us. Today, under the umbrella brand EcoMotive, we sell a product that seals cracks in head gaskets and radiators; a cleaner for turbo chargers and a range of tyre sealants that are designed to be permanent puncture fixes and have been tested at speeds up to 150 miles an hour, which means more tyres get repaired and less get wasted."

It's inspiring to hear how Akhil has turned an idea into a thriving, innovative, multi product business in such a short space of time. "I've had a lot of help from my dad; he's been really good at making sure all the trademarks are in line, health and safety is in place, all that kind of thing." Akhil's dad has also been instrumental in making sure that EcoMotive has taken advantage of the host of business advice available in Leicester from Business Gateway and the LLEP, as well as the East Midlands Chamber of Commerce and the local representative from the Department of International Trade.

"We've been given some great advice and made some really useful contacts by working with the LLEP. They've also helped us secure grant funding for various projects along the way — even down to things like getting the factory and offices heated properly. The DIT have also been really helpful in our international expansion and have introduced us to international partners they think we can work with. For example, we're going to a trade show in Vegas, in November, and rather than us getting a stand-alone, we're joining a company with whom we have a lot of synergy with and who have a stand already."

So, even with international expansion on his mind, does Akhil think his business could have started anywhere other than Leicester? "Well, obviously, it all started with the Innovation Panel at the University of Leicester, so who knows."

"But, even discounting that, it was those local garages who first took a chance, tried the product and supported me, all because it was a product developed in their city. That's Leicester for you through and through, we stick together."

[WWW.ECO-MOTIVE.COM](http://WWW.ECO-MOTIVE.COM)

**"That's Leicester for you  
through and through, we  
stick together."**



# Femida Latif

## FEMI HEALTH & BEAUTY

OFFERING AN OASIS OF CALM IN THE HEART OF THE CITY, FEMI HEALTH & BEAUTY BLENDS BEAUTY SALON WITH DAY SPA TO CREATE A COMFORTABLE AND RELAXED ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH TO ENJOY TRADITIONAL TREATMENTS AND INNOVATIVE NON-INVASIVE BEAUTY PROCEDURES.

“I was always determined that I would have a career.”



"I always wanted to be a surgeon but, in my family and in a lot of Asian families back then, it wasn't the norm for females to go out to work, let alone to have their own business. I come from a very male dominated family — 6 brothers, can you believe — but, I was always determined that I would have a career," says Femi Latif, founder of multi award-winning, Femi Health and Beauty, on Highcross Street.

"Beauty was never my chosen career, but I went into it as I knew I had an answer to every objection my dad could have about it: I wouldn't have to go away to university; I didn't have to work with men; I could work from home etc. I had to be so assertive and really did have an answer for everything, so eventually he gave in and let me go and study. My dad is no longer with us, but he always used to apologise to me for making me work so hard to have a career. He was very proud of the way I built the business."

Femi Health and Beauty started in an unused staffroom of a hairdressing salon at the city's Shires Shopping Centre (now Highcross). "After I finished my training, I worked at three different salons across the city and the last salon became a TONI&GUY franchise. The owner took me aside and said, 'Femi, I'm so sorry, but TONI&GUY don't do beauty, so we're going to have to let you go.' I was devastated. I said, 'Please, I don't want to leave. Can I just have a tiny space somewhere and I'll do it independently,' and he said, 'Well, there's only the staffroom, so if the staff say ok then you can do it.' I think he thought they'd say no, but they all agreed, and I ended up paying him as I went along."

"I was very naïve; I had no lease or anything, but I was determined. I used to offer free manicures to people having their hair cut and one day, one of the landlords of the building came in all suited and booted and I offered him a manicure. We got talking and I basically bullied him into giving me a vacant unit of my own on a month-by-month basis, so I could move out of the staffroom."

Femi's tenacious spirit, charm, good humour and the business savvy that she was able to impress upon those around her meant that when a larger unit came up with a lease, she was offered it straight away. "I wasn't really sure what I was signing. I didn't get it checked, but I knew that I was

getting more space, so I could take on a staff member and could grow my business further. I was always quite assertive though, always thinking about how I could grow the business, offer more treatments, be better. I'm not money orientated, though. Money's not my motivator. I want to do things to the best that I can. I want to prove to myself that I can do it. That women can do it."

Femi continued to grow her business within The Shires, later to become Highcross, for 19 years before making the leap from tenant to owner by buying her own building on Highcross Street where she still operates from today. "I loved our space in Highcross, but we had outgrown it and I'd had the idea in my head about offering more of a day spa experience alongside our beauty offering and that's when we saw this building. It was an old pub, The Hat and Beaver, and had been empty for some time. It was in a bad state and originally, we thought it would take us a year and it was more like three years from buying it to moving in as I wanted everything to be right. So, for example, I wanted to make sure we had good disabled access, there were double treatment rooms for couples, that there were places in which people could relax between treatments. The idea was always to give it a lovely, relaxing spa feel whilst still offering all the treatments our clients enjoyed alongside some new ones too."

Femi had also noticed how her clientele had been changing over the years too; "I decided to rebrand at the same time, as our colours were all very feminine and we were seeing a lot more men coming into the salon for treatments, and I wanted to reflect that. People were also interested in looking after themselves at home more, so I wanted to create a bigger retail space, which I then developed online just in time for when lockdown happened, which really helped sustain us as a business."

It was during the series of lockdowns that Femi found herself as a voice for Leicester's business community in the national media with television crews flocking to the salon to talk about the effects of lockdown and the reopening of businesses in the city. "It really was a whirlwind; I'd get approached to say something on BBC Radio Leicester and before I knew what was happening, I was live on the national news. I felt so privileged to be asked, but I was also really nervous representing my city and the businesses from it. I had so many calls from other salons saying, 'well done' and being supportive though, which were very welcome. I was so nervous of saying the wrong thing! Leicester's business community is so supportive, everybody gets on and works together. It really is a proper community and I'm so proud to be part of it."

**"Leicester's business community is so supportive, everybody gets on and works together."**

[WWW.FEMIHEALTHANDBEAUTY.CO.UK](http://WWW.FEMIHEALTHANDBEAUTY.CO.UK)

# Blake Edwards

## FLAPPERS & GENTLEMEN

DELVING STRAIGHT BACK INTO THE ROARING 20'S, A PERIOD NOTED FOR ITS DRAMATIC SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE, A TIME OF MODERNIZATION, URBANIZATION, FRIVOLOUS SPENDING AND MOST OF ALL FUN, FLAPPERS AND GENTLEMEN, IS A LEICESTER HAIR SALON THAT ALLOWS YOU TO ESCAPE THE DAILY GRIND AND STEP INTO A FANCIFUL AND ECCENTRIC ENVIRONMENT.



## “We do everything a little bit differently, even Teabag the salon dog is a bit different!”

“I’ve always been a grafter. At 15, I already had three paper rounds, but my mum got me a job at a hair salon and, at first, I was, ‘No chance!’, but being a good lad and doing as I was told I went for my first day. The salon was Remy’s at the bottom of New Walk and I’m not sure what I was expecting but it certainly wasn’t three guys, cutting hair and talking about girls and football all day. I was like, ‘I actually might like doing this’, ended up starting an apprenticeship and loved it.”

What started for Blake Edwards as a part time job to make more pocket money and meet more girls has led to a career working in London and across Leicester, managing some of the city’s best and most premium salons before taking the plunge, eight years ago, to open his own salon to offer something truly different to Leicester Fashionistas: the quirkily named Flappers and Gentlemen.

“Flappers & Gentlemen is a salon that’s been designed as an escape from the daily grind. We do everything a little bit differently, even Teabag the salon dog is a bit different! The interior is just lovely; it has a relaxed but eccentric feel. It was really important to me that we created a comfortable place that isn’t intimidating for clients to come into. Teabag the dog helps with that, but when we first opened, we would have an A-board outside the salon that never had anything on it to do with hair, but it always had something on it to make you stop. It might have been a

joke, something political, or a poem. It was always very slapstick but designed to jolt a passer-by out of just being a passer-by and think ‘where the hell has that come from?’. We were trying to break down the barriers that some people associate with a ‘posh’ salon.”

Blake’s quirky marketing tactics soon saw the salon gain success at its home amidst the restaurants and cafés of St Martin’s Square, but it was during the pandemic when most salon owners were just focusing on survival that Blake’s thoughts turned to how to expand the business and develop the Flappers and Gentlemen brand.

“I’d been aware that the St Martins Square building we were in was just too small for us for a little while, so our ability to grow was minimal. In terms of developing the salon, we needed to move somewhere bigger, but I also wanted to see about developing the brand into some different directions that, whilst being complementary to what people associate Flapper and Gentlemen with, would offer something quite different. It’s about getting new people into the building rather than just marketing something to our existing client base; that way everything grows.”

“I’d always admired a building on Cank Street that had a beautiful art deco window and remembered from when it had been a shop that it was actually quite a large building. With all the plans to open up that part of the city and link it with the

surrounding areas, I thought it could work well for us, so I called Leicester City Council’s property team. The price was good, so I arranged a viewing and spent the rest of the pandemic securing it and starting the work to make it into the new home for the Flappers and Gentlemen brand.”

“Some people said it was high risk, as we’re in a first and second floor property, but we don’t need a shop window on street level. For industries like ours, social media is our biggest shop window — that’s what people are looking at as they explore what’s new in the city; they walk past your actual shop window with their head in their phone, so I’m not worried. We’ve embraced the stairs and made the journey part of the experience.”

Blake has transformed this landmark building in the heart of Leicester’s Lanes into a sumptuous, vintage-inspired space with thickly padded leather upholstered chairs, heritage-coloured walls and antique furniture. Golden fixtures and fittings have breathed life into the interior and made it the eccentrically elegant space he’s always dreamed of.

But, that’s just one of the floors, what does he have planned for the rest of the building?

“It’s all been a big investment, but by doing this I’m building solid foundations for the future. I want to have three different businesses — one on each floor — that all marry into each other. We’ve got two floors at the moment, but we’re hoping to secure the ground floor, too which would potentially be hospitality based.”

“There is a lot of exciting stuff happening on the street and in the area: one of the things I love about Leicester is it’s always evolving and it’s always growing and that’s what we’re looking forward to at Flappers and Gentlemen.”

[WWW.FLAPPERSANDGENTLEMEN.CO.UK](http://WWW.FLAPPERSANDGENTLEMEN.CO.UK)

## “One of the things I love about Leicester is it’s always evolving...”



# Jim Willis

## **BULB STUDIOS & FRAMEWORK BREWERY**

JIM IS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF BULB STUDIOS, A LEADING DIGITAL PRODUCT STUDIO SPECIALISING IN UX & UI DESIGN, WEB & MOBILE DEVELOPMENT, VIDEO & MOTION GRAPHIC. HE IS ALSO CO-OWNER OF LEICESTER'S INDEPENDENT CRAFT BEER BREWERY, FRAMEWORK BREWERY, AND THE EXPANDING FRAMEWORK PUB COMPANY.

“We have great county brewers, but we knew we wanted it to be in the city centre.”



Always with a keen eye for art & design, Jim began his working life as an Art Department Technician installing exhibitions at the Barbican in London. With a journey that took him through Civil Service, running recording studios and teaching TV & Radio Production, he made his way back to his hometown of Leicester to work at Loughborough University.

"I met some amazing people at Loughborough University. It's hugely inspiring to be surrounded by such bright young things."

This was when Jim began getting involved in external funding opportunities and also where Jim met his future business partner, Mat Mabe, who was Editor of the student newspaper at Loughborough University at the time.

A key cornerstone in Jim's career came in 1998 when he set-up Pedestrian, the leading arts organisation and charity specialising in music and arts education. "It's probably one of the proudest things I've done in my career. I set it up when I was in Northampton, but brought it with me to Leicester — and it's still running today, helping to serve and inspire young people."

After chairing Pedestrian for 20 years, Jim handed the reigns over in 2018. "It taught me such a lot about business and about funding in particular. I'm very proud to still see it thrive in the city."

Bulb Studios began life back in 2007 at the LCB Depot. "We started quite organically, doing design and video, but we looked around and saw that there were a lot of businesses offering the same services. We knew we needed to offer something else and that was when we started building apps."

Bulb became the first company in the UK to integrate the PayPal API into an app.

"It was such early days in the app market and a real learning curve, but it taught us the importance of differentiating our business offer."

Adapting the business offer is something that Bulb has continued to do. "It's been vital in Bulb's growth. At the moment, a lot of the work is around electric vehicle design, working with companies in aviation, Jaguar LandRover, and others. There are so many interesting developments being made."

Whilst Bulb primarily works with national clients, Jim has always been committed to supporting the local business community. "Most of our work is outside of Leicester, but we love the local independents. We work with Burleighs Gin; we've worked with brands like St Martin's Coffee and, of course, with our own independent, Framework Brewery."

Framework Brewery is Leicester's city centre independent craft beer brewery, situated on Friday Street. "I'd been a keen member of CAMRA and it felt like there was an opportunity to open in the city centre. We have great county brewers, but we knew we wanted it to be in the city centre."

Running a brewery comes with its own challenges, especially as trends change in the market. "You can't sit back on your products; you have to keep developing. Gluten free beer is taken a lot more seriously now and alcohol-free beer is something that brewers must be looking into."

The brewery also runs The Two Tailed Lion pub on Millstone Lane and they are expanding the pub side of the business. "During the pandemic we set up the Framework Pub Company and we've now got pubs in Kenilworth and Northampton as well as Leicester. This means we can now sell

Framework Brewery beer direct to our pubs, which is vital to the growth of the business."

You'll still see Framework Brewery on tap at key strategic partner sites in the city. Crafty Burger, Lane7 and The Exchange Bar each have their own labelled Framework beers and the brewery continues to work with them, on supply and training staff in craft beers and ensuring a level of knowledge and product development.

Jim continues to look towards further growth of the pub company. "The pub is a central point of the community and we're keen to look at expanding into residential areas."

Looking back on his career, Jim says recognising change and talent has been one of the biggest factors in their business growth. "I didn't have a formal business qualification or a set formula for growth, so it was really about recognising that change is constant and that the people in your team are THE business. Finding and nurturing talent is so important."

Regularly sitting on the panel for Leicester Start-ups, this talent development is something he continues to see in the city. "When you see some of the work coming out of Leicester Start-Ups it blows your mind at the products and tech that are being developed here in the city. We're also seeing more people relocating to Leicester and bringing that talent with them, which is something that's a key factor in the future of Bulb, as we move towards being a Product Studio rather than a Design Agency. We're presented with a lot of exciting opportunities to work on new product development and it's something we'll be doing more and more of."

Managing so many business projects, Bulb remains the common link between them all. "I refer to Bulb as the Mothership, as it's the business that's involved across all of the things we do. From web design to our bottle labels, it's a nice way to marry them together."

Being from Leicester, Jim's keen to add that whilst much of Bulb's work may lie outside of the city, Leicester itself has been vital in his business journey. "Leicester has an energy about it that is really special. People are always coming up with ideas and with the city being compact, if you have any business problem, it's never long before you find someone to help you solve it."

**"Leicester has an energy about it that is really special."**

**WWW.BULBSTUDIOS.COM | WWW.FRAMEWORKBREWERY.COM**



# Yasin El Ashrafi BEM

## HQ RECORDING STUDIO

YASIN IS OWNER OF HQ RECORDING STUDIO, HQ FAMILIA RECORD LABEL AND DIRECTOR OF HQ CAN COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY. HQ HELPS LOCAL ARTISTS TO DEVELOP TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AND OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECORDING AND PERFORMANCE.

“I never really had a clear view of what I wanted to do as a career.”



"I never really had a clear view of what I wanted to do as a career. I went between wanting to be a footballer to thinking I'd be a car salesman." That all changed when Yasin worked on a music project with Soft Touch Arts.

"I'd always been around music, but I'd never worked in it full time." Spending his early adulthood moving between warehouse jobs, it wasn't until Yasin's son was born that he knew he needed a change in direction. "My son has Cerebral Palsy and I lost my job due to the time off I needed to care for him and take him to appointments. That gave me the push I needed to find a career with more flexibility."

Through a friend who had received funding to set up a kickboxing gym, Yasin saw the possibility that lay ahead in different business opportunities. "I'd never heard about funding before. Then I realised there were opportunities open to someone like me who didn't have access to finance and wasn't from a business background."

With his friend's help, Yasin set up his first social enterprise, Leicester Community Music Project. "I followed the work we'd done with young people at Soft Touch Arts, but focused it on adults. I realised how many people were a similar age to me, in their late 20s, who were creatives and didn't know how to channel it."

Starting with music-based projects in libraries and community centres, the project led Yasin to take on the HQ Recording Studio on Charles Street in 2010. "When we opened the recording studio it all started to feel real. Suddenly, we had a commercial business and that got me thinking more carefully about business and finance."

Throughout everything it has been Yasin's family that continues to drive him. "I kept looking for new ways to grow. I just wanted to be able to support my son. Costs are so much higher for the adapted toys and items he needed, but I was determined that he wouldn't miss out on anything."

Things continued to build with the business and HQ was approached to work on a National Lottery Community Fund project administered by the Prince's Trust called Talent Match. "We were sought out to work on the project because of our reputation in urban music and events." Signalling HQ's first big contract, it went on to run over five years. "The fact that

**"Above all, we really want to get Leicester on the map for music. There's so much talent here, let's keep people talking about it."**

they'd come to us for such a big piece of work was amazing. Securing the funding for five years allowed us to focus on the future and begin to build the business."

HQ now continues to recruit top talent across the city. "Many of the artists have come through the community courses and we also do a lot of showcase and open mic events, so we'll occasionally spot talent and want to bring them into the HQ family."

Given HQ's ongoing live event programme, during the pandemic the business had to adjust the ways they showcased artists. "We formed an HQ bubble and focused on creation over performance. We spent the whole time writing and producing and, looking back, it feels like a blessing in disguise giving us so much time to focus on making music."

The pandemic changed the business focus as Yasin recognised the need to explore digital income streams. "It made me reassess where the business income is coming from. I started to put a lot more focus into publishing and creating music for films, TV and adverts. This can all be done digitally and adds something new to the business. We also really focused on live streaming, which is a new income for us. Coming out of the pandemic, we not only have a full set-up available for us to live-stream shows, but also for other groups to come in and use the equipment."

Reflecting on his business journey, there isn't a lot that Yasin would change. "Every step of the journey has been essential to the experience and to arrive here, I needed to go through that learning process."

Having a recording studio and artist management business was never in Yasin's original plans, with much of it being borne out of necessity. "There wasn't a music

infrastructure in Leicester in terms of management, recording or publishing, especially in the urban genres, so we built it bit by bit. I hope the people that come after us are able to succeed with the foundations we've laid."

One of the biggest highs of Yasin's career then came in 2021, as he received notification that he was due to be included in The Queen's New Year's Honours. Receiving the British Empire Medal for Services to Young People, to Music and to Mentoring, Yasin couldn't believe it at the time. "It was crazy, really. Somebody nominated me and when I got the letter about it, it didn't seem real."

Having built HQ from the ground up to receiving recognition from Buckingham Palace, Yasin believes that passion is one of the key necessities in building a business. "You have to have passion, especially in the beginning. Often, you might be working for free or working long hours for what seems like little return. It really takes passion, persistence and patience."

Looking ahead to the future, Yasin is working towards both short term and longer-term goals for HQ. "For me, it's all about growing the various income streams to ensure that our future is sustainable, not just for the business, but for the team and for our artists. I'd love to think we could be a subsidiary of a major label, focussing on both finding talent and creation. Above all, we really want to get Leicester on the map for music. There's so much talent here, let's keep people talking about it."

**WWW.HQRECORDING.CO.UK**

# Kwoklyn Wan

## CELEBRITY CHEF

GROWING UP IN THE KITCHENS OF CHINESE TAKEAWAYS AND RESTAURANTS, COOKING IS IN KWOKLYN'S DNA WITH HIS GRANDFATHER OPENING LEICESTER'S FIRST 'CHOP SUEY HOUSE' IN 1962 WHICH WAS SO POPULAR EVEN THE BEATLES VISITED. KWOKLYN'S CULINARY HERITAGE HAS LED HIM TO BECOME A CELEBRATED RECIPE BOOK AUTHOR AND CHEF WHO CAN REGULARLY BE SEEN COOKING UP A STORM ON OUR TELEVISION SCREENS.



# “What they taught me has always stayed with me and brought me to where I am today.”

It's a busy time for celebrity chef, Kwoklyn Wan. The builders are in and decisions need to be made. A kitchen must be chosen and he's unsure whether he should go slick and modern or vintage and quirky. Choosing the right kitchen is a big decision for any homeowner, but when you have to choose one that can also be used as a television studio and online cookery school, the stakes are raised. Add in the fact that all of this is taking place in Kwoklyn's childhood family home, which he recently purchased in Leicester's West End, and the pressure to make the right decision is immense.

“This building is the old restaurant that my mum and dad owned. It's where we grew up as children and where I trained to be a chef. I could never have envisioned that I would be back here, transforming the building back to its former glory as a Victorian House and cookery studio.”

“We moved in when I was 10 years old and there was an internal phone system fitted in every room so our parents could get hold of us easily. When mum and dad were busy downstairs in the restaurant, all the phones would start ringing and it would be one of them saying ‘we need you to come downstairs and help.’ I used to dread the phones ringing, we all did, but it was a family business and you had to step up. I understand now that mum and dad were instilling in us a strong work ethic: it doesn't matter what needs to be done, whether it's waiting on a table or washing up, the job needs to be done and it needs to be done by somebody. What they taught me has always stayed with me and brought me to where I am today.”

And where he is today has never looked brighter. Kwoklyn's star is very much in the ascendance. He is a regular presenter and contributor on ITV's *This Morning*, BBC One, Channel 5 and can currently be seen on Channel 4's *Steph's Packed Lunch*.

If that wasn't enough, he is in the process of writing his sixth cookery book and is in discussions with production companies to present five new TV Shows over the next twelve months, bringing the secrets of Chinese cooking to the home kitchen. “I just love teaching people and sharing new skills with them. I think this relates to my background as a Kung Fu teacher,” he admits. Kwoklyn left the family business and trained in martial arts before returning to Leicestershire and opening a Kung Fu Training academy that still runs today.

He also credits the sport as helping him develop his skills in business. “The discipline that you get from martial arts, the way it's so process driven really has helped me in business; you can't get from A to D without going through B and C first. I always relate it back to having to work twice as hard with your weaker hand. There are things I've never done before that I have to work twice as hard at just to get as good as somebody who does it naturally. My brother's a natural. He can look at a script, read it once and he's got it.”

Kwoklyn's brother is the television presenter Gok Wan. It was whilst Gok was working on *This Morning* that he suggested Kwoklyn for a cookery feature around Chinese New Year. “I knew that I'd be able to go on and teach people how to cook something — I'd been teaching martial arts for 16 years by then, so I felt quite confident. I'd already written a book and launched my website, by this point, but it was definitely a big break for me — I mean the show has massive ratings. I was manifesting a lot at the time, so I was already visualising myself as an author and as TV presenter. I was already living the life of someone who was already on TV, even though that hadn't actually happened at that point. Regardless of whether it was going to happen in a week's time, a year or even ten years' time, I knew it was going to happen. I could see it so clearly.”

The fact that it is happening on his home turf, in his old childhood home is something that is deeply satisfying for Kwoklyn. “I'm a Leicester boy at the end of the day and I have been known to let my accent slip a few times when I'm filming. Leicester is the perfect location for me; an hour on the train and I'm in central London; 35 minutes I'm in Birmingham, or an hour and a half and I can be in Leeds for filming: it's ideal. And there are so many positive things happening in the city. I actually did some filming today down at the Guildhall. I love showing off my city: I'm proud to be a Leicester lad.”

So, what one piece of advice would Kwoklyn give to anyone setting out in business? “You need to set a goal and focus on it. If you're going to invest all of that time, all of that emotion and all of the money into something, then you really can't afford for it not to happen. You have to make it happen by all means necessary and that means hard work, but also smart work. Focus on what you can achieve and don't be afraid to ask for help with those things that you can't. Learn from them, get stronger and get better.”

**WWW.KWOKLYNWAN.COM**

“You have to make it happen by all means necessary and that means hard work, but also smart work.”





# Glynis Wright MBE

## NELSON'S SOLICITORS

GLYNIS QUALIFIED AS A SOLICITOR IN 2003 AND JOINED NELSONS AS A PARTNER IN DECEMBER 2020, FOLLOWING THEIR ACQUISITION OF GLYNIS WRIGHT & CO, LEICESTER. HEADING UP THE FIRM'S FAMILY LAW TEAM IN LEICESTER GLYNIS ADVISES ON DIVORCE AND FINANCIAL SETTLEMENTS AS WELL AS COHABITATION DISPUTES, PRE AND POST NUPTIAL AGREEMENTS AND SEPARATION AGREEMENTS, ALONG WITH RESIDENCE AND CONTACT CASES INVOLVING CHILDREN.

"I'd had a beautiful hat made for me and at the last minute, just as we were walking into Windsor Castle, I suddenly got the collywobbles: it was such a statement, what was I thinking? Thankfully, as soon as I walked in, people stopped to compliment me on it, which was a massive relief, as I was nervous enough about meeting Princess Anne," says Leicester's highest profile lawyer, Glynis Wright MBE, describing the moments before she accepted her MBE award for services to furthering the cause of female entrepreneurship.

Such uncertainty is not what you'd expect from the woman who, upon launching her own legal practice specialising in family law, used billboards with her own image, arms folded and with a confident look straight down the lens of the camera, shaking up the status quo of the local legal community.

"That first billboard with the folded arms practically went viral because it was an arresting image. It was a woman of a certain age, standing there on her own saying 'this is my firm. This is what we do and we're really good at it.' It was the total opposite of how firms at that time were portraying themselves, which was either very traditional or very corporate. The next set of billboards we featured some of the team alongside me, a collection of strong women, and not only did they look fantastic, but they also looked authentic. These were real people, the ones who you'd meet at the office. These were the people that would fight for you. I think our approach was bang on the button, especially for family law."

It's little wonder that such a confident campaign could come from someone who had the self-belief to leave a successful career in economic development to retrain as a lawyer. "Looking back, it was terrifying: I was 40 and had a very comfortable career, but with limited opportunities for progression, so, I decided I really needed to

**"I got my MBE for encouraging so many other women to get into business and I'm incredibly passionate about doing that."**

carve out a new career. I had to question if I had enough faith in myself to borrow loads of money when I've still got a mortgage and a 13-year-old child and sit down and study again after all these years."

"I ended up with the highest academic qualifications on campus, which I was thrilled with. When you're a mature student the stakes are so much higher, not just financially, but also in terms of your own identity in having belief in yourself. You have to succeed."

After qualifying, Glynis soon became partner at a local firm, but sadly the partnership was not what she had hoped it would be. "I loved the firm, but I felt that my wings were being clipped and I couldn't express myself enough as a partner. I was being approached by the family department of a large law firm and I weighed up between going there or setting up my own business. And, in the end, it was setting up my own law firm."

"Leicester is a great city in which to start a business. The city is a breeding ground for creativity, so I'm not surprised it's ranked as 2nd Most Entrepreneurial City in the UK. We have two wonderful, proactive universities here and a welcoming and generous networking community that is willing to interact and encourage new businesses to flourish."

"After 12 months of running my own law firm I realised that I loved business as well as law and I was actually a businesswoman. Unlike a lot of lawyers, I was seeing it as a business and realised that you should run it like a business entirely. From then on, I was focused on how to make it work, how to expand and develop the brand and I found

my voice as an individual woman. Until then, I don't think I'd ever really known what it was like to be able to speak out and hear my own ideas, see them being put into action and to have complete autonomy. I honestly am not being cynical when I say that it was most invigorating and empowering experience I'd ever had in my career. And it grew and grew and grew. At this point, I still feel it. I still feel excited by what I can do."

Over 15 years, with one of those years spent as the President of the Leicestershire Law Society, Glynis, and her predominantly female team-built Glynis Wright & Co into one of the city's most recognised, multi award-winning legal businesses in Leicester before selling to Nelson's Law in December 2020, where her and her team are all still based. "You get to a certain point where you have to have succession from within, or you have to look at the next stage. I knew I had created a very sellable business, but it did all happen much quicker than I expected it to."

So, is that where Glynis's entrepreneurial story ends? Not at all. "I got my MBE for encouraging so many other women to get into business and I'm incredibly passionate about doing that. Part of my role at Nelson's includes mentoring, which I love. I'm part of a panel of inspirational female speakers for De Montfort University and will be talking about bursting through barriers — the perfect subject for me and we've just hosted ten of their students at the practice giving them a proper taste of what it's like to work at a law firm. I've also been asked to join a cohort helping women who are overcoming abuse and poverty get started in business, which I'm very excited about."

**"I ended up with the highest academic qualifications on campus, which I was thrilled with."**

**WWW.NELSONSLAW.CO.UK**

# Kiran Parmar

## THE PARMAR COLLECTION

THE PARMAR COLLECTION MANAGES A PROPERTY PORTFOLIO INCLUDING THE CITY ROOMS, WINSTANLEY HOUSE AND BLACK IRON SOCIAL. THEY ARE ONE OF LEICESTER'S LEADING INDEPENDENT HOSPITALITY OPERATORS.

“The most important thing in a business is the team and the working culture you develop.”





One of Leicester's leading hospitality business owners, Kiran Parmar works day to day on his property portfolio, which includes The City Rooms, Winstanley House and Black Iron Social.

Kiran knows every inch of The City Rooms in Leicester. "During school holidays I'd go and help my dad with the building work. I'd helped to put the walls in, did the painting and then I started running it when I was 20."

Historically The City Rooms was built to be Leicester's first hotel, but it never was. On buying the building Kiran was keen to restore that original plan and they put four hotel rooms into the building. It has since flourished into a popular wedding venue and The City Rooms was the catalyst for the growth of The Parmar Collection.

However, a career in hospitality wasn't always on the cards for Kiran. Having gone to university to read engineering he soon decided it wasn't the right fit for him, "I wasn't one for working on my own but I love the buzz of being around people and creating things."

Winstanley House was the second opening in 2017, with Kiran managing the entire project. Set amongst 168 acres of public parkland, the Grade II listed Georgian house had fallen into disrepair after being empty for nearly twenty years. It took great vision to see the potential to transform it into a nineteen-room hotel, wedding venue, conferencing space and high-end restaurant. Leicester City Council also provided a funding package to assist with renovations along with committing to build a new portion of road for access to the House. "The vision we had for Winstanley House really has come true. It's wonderful seeing people here enjoying it as we intended. We wanted to attract the locals in with our food offering, but also appeal to those travelling from further away and I think we've achieved that."

"There were times during the build when we faced difficulties and the voices of those people questioning the location and what we were doing became louder, but I always knew we'd get here."

## "Mistakes happen, but we learn from them and grow."

As a passionate foodie, Kiran knew that getting the catering offer right was key to the success of Winstanley House. "We're proud of the diversity of the food we offer here. One of our Head Chefs is Caribbean, and we do a lot of Caribbean events and catering, we do high end vegetarian Indian food, we have our charcoal grill restaurant and award-winning afternoon teas."

The menu at the in-house restaurant, Black Iron, was shaped by Kiran and the food he and his family love to eat. "I love cooking steak on charcoal. When we started to design Black Iron's offer I knew that was what I wanted it to be. People will travel for a great steak and we wanted ours to be the best there is."

Family is a big factor in the growth of the business and Kiran's parents continue to be a driving force behind his work. "My Dad's very into property and works in the business. Alongside my mum they always inspire me to go further."

The family togetherness of the business extends through their wider teams and the staff at each of the venues are something that Kiran holds with the utmost regard. "The most important thing in a business is the staff and the working culture you develop. We want to create the best workplace and want people to be happy coming to work. If we want our guests to enjoy the venues, we have to start with our own staff who are here day in day out."

Like all hospitality businesses, the pandemic caused a major shock. "In the first week we had to take stock and assess what we could do, but then we rallied round and knew we'd find a way through. We had two options; to continue investing in property and our team or just do damage limitation. I didn't want the lockdown to determine our future, we wanted to turn it into an opportunity."

As a business they kept the kitchen open and launched as a takeaway, they also launched cook at home boxes with everything from their award-winning afternoon tea to fully prepped Christmas Day meals. "We managed to use the time to improve every aspect of the business. We recruited, we redeveloped our websites, and we were determined to use the time positively."

Perhaps the most major move of the pandemic was the opening of Black Iron Social. "The deal for Black Iron Social was actually done during that period and was a huge leap of faith for us."

"A former client came to us with the opportunity and I really liked the vision of the owners of The Gresham. The concept of having hotel, restaurant and office space all intertwined in the city is exciting for Leicester and it's great to be a part of it. The investment in The Gresham by its owners has created a real gem on Market Street."

Reflecting on the growth of the business, Kiran knows that it hasn't always been plain sailing. "Of course, there have been mistakes along the way. Any businessperson would have to admit that, but the key is in learning from them and that's something that I say to our staff all the time. Mistakes happen, but we learn from them and grow."

The Parmar Collection is the umbrella company that ties the brands together and the rebrand shows a dedication to growth. "Everyone here wants to grow and improve. To do that, we need to add more property and diversify our range of services."

"Financial success is a by-product of business success, but it isn't the main thing that motivates me. I just want us to keep growing. I'd love for The Parmar Collective to be known across the country and speak proudly of our roots here in Leicester."



# Callum McKeeferey

## REVIEWS.IO

REVIEWS.IO HELPS BUSINESSES TO SOURCE AND PUBLISH GENUINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS. SINCE THEIR LAUNCH IN 2010 THEY HAVE WORKED WITH SOME OF THE UK'S BIGGEST BRANDS AND HAVE GROWN TO OPEN THREE INTERNATIONAL OFFICES.

“I think entrepreneurial spirit in Leicester is deeply engrained in me.”

Callum has experienced every level of entrepreneurship in Leicester, from working on his family's stall on Leicester Market to running a multi-million pound tech company from his Silicone Valley inspired city centre offices.

Callum set up Reviews.io from his kitchen table and built it into a business generating revenue of £10 million and employing 100 people. The review collection and publishing platform works with leading retail and consumer brands by helping them to gather real reviews online or in store and then publishing them online. Powering this technology for over 8000 brands, they have now grown to having offices in California, Sydney and Berlin, as well as here in Leicester.

A born entrepreneur, Callum knew he never wanted to work for anybody else. "My family are all entrepreneurs and I knew I didn't want to work for anybody else. My family worked on Leicester Market and I'd work there with them when I was young. My dad owned the bar next to the market and he'd be working there whilst my mum was on the stall, so I think entrepreneurial spirit in Leicester is deeply engrained in me."

Going back to 1999, Callum says his first moves in the online world saw him capitalise on buying domain names to later re-sell at a premium. "I spotted very early on that all commerce would shift online and back then it really helped me to grow and get an early footing in business. All my friends were out partying and I was sat at home trying to find new ways to capitalise on this new online world." And the biggest one he sold?

Reviews.io was born in 2011. "My wife and I started Reviews.io from our kitchen table. We'd worked on a few businesses before, some we'd sold and some we closed down due to changes in the market. We had a few ideas so I went to different brands and pitched them. Reviews was the one that stuck."

The company grew steadily until they reached the £5 million turnover mark, when they decided to double down on their growth plan. "We spent a long time hiring staff as and when we needed to, but in the past couple of years we've shifted to very clear focus on growth."

**"We're driven by our ultimate goal which is to create a world class tech solution."**

Not always plain sailing, Callum admits that the company's first attempt to go international was unsuccessful but getting up and trying again is the true mark of an entrepreneur. "We first tried to move into America in 2018 and it didn't work. We got up, we tried a different approach and it was a success. For any entrepreneur it takes determination and the willingness to fail, learn from it, and try again."

Unlike many tech companies, Reviews.io hasn't had any cash injection from outside investment. "We're one of the only UK bootstrapped tech companies to have got to the size we have", Callum explains. "Perhaps if we'd have been in London or elsewhere we'd have seen more offers of early investment, but we did it the hard way, expanding off our own revenue and profits."

The importance of his team is evident and it's that which Callum says drives the business forward. "My team members inspire me every day. We're driven by our ultimate goal which is to create a world class tech solution."

With the city's two universities on his doorstep, Callum sees that as a huge bonus for Reviews.io and the city's business landscape. "Leicester has been very good to us in recruiting talent. The universities are a great source of talent and right on our doorstep."

Very hands on with the business, Callum works as part of the team every day. Spending four months of the year working from the California office also allows him to oversee the company's growth overseas. "We train up members of staff in Leicester and give them the opportunity to go and work abroad. We have people out in California and Sydney now who started work for us here in Leicester. It's a real incentive to be able to offer that."

The timing of the company's growth meant that they were able to weather the storm of the pandemic. "We supported many businesses and stopped billing during

lockdown. Of course, it affected us but we were fortunate in that we're global, so whilst we saw a downturn in the UK we saw growth in Germany. The pandemic also pushed tech to the forefront of all business, so I think ultimately it helped us."

As Reviews.io continues to grow, Callum is also working on other projects and business opportunities. He has recently launched Poet.so, a new tech platform that turns Tweets and reviews into beautiful imagery. "We came second to Canva in the best new tech products for designers and we haven't even started pushing it yet. This is a really exciting time in its development."

Aside from tech, Callum's driven by his family and has been dedicated to using his business success to help others. Callum's son was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder, FXR, and following the diagnosis, Callum and his wife invested in a research facility in America to help other families in the same situation. Meanwhile, here in Leicester, in 2021 Callum set-up the Inclusive Grotto, a wonderful festive experience designed to give all children the best possible Christmas experience, with each session designed for their individual needs.

His commitment to Leicester is clear. Having purchased the former Dorothy Perkins building on Gallowtree Gate he has a number of potential plans for the site. And the future of Reviews.io is to continue to grow, to challenge himself and to find new tech solutions to help businesses.

"The plan is definitely to continue grow and grow. An entrepreneur will always find a way."

**[WWW.REVIEWS.IO](http://WWW.REVIEWS.IO)**





Right: Nasreen Khan

# Nasreen Khan

## ROCOCO EVENTS

ROCOCO EVENTS IS AN EVENT PLANNING BUSINESS BASED IN LEICESTER. THEY SPECIALISE IN BRINGING DREAM WEDDINGS AND PARTIES TO LIFE THROUGH WORKING WITH VENUES, MANAGING SUPPLIERS AND SOURCING THE PERFECT DÉCOR.

“I wanted to prove that women can achieve as well.”

# “The passion that we have for what we do means that we’ll always deliver the best event we can.”

From planning family parties to building a successful events business, Nasreen and her business partners, Zeenat and Zeinab, have been on an exciting journey with Rococo Events.

“I’ve been doing events for over 15 years, but I only used to do them for family and friends. Whenever somebody wanted anything decorating, or even when I went abroad for a wedding, I was being asked to decorate the venue. It started there and the passion I have for it continued to grow.”

It was whilst planning her daughter’s wedding in 2020 that things took a different turn. “Due to Covid we had to cancel the venue 4 or 5 times and, in the end, we just decided to do the wedding in the garden. We decorated the garden and managed it all ourselves, which was when a very good friend of mine said ‘why don’t you do this as a business?’”

The effects of Covid-19 on the wedding industry ultimately helped to get Rococo Events off the ground. “More and more people were having garden weddings or scaling back, which was perfect for us. I set up the business alongside my friend’s daughter and my niece, who both have an excellent eye for detail.”

After establishing the business in September 2020, Rococo has moved from garden events to larger weddings and events across the Midlands and beyond. “Speaking to friends and family has been such a big part of the start of Rococo Events. Being able to turn my passion into a business wouldn’t have happened without that support.”

Nasreen’s business journey saw her overcome obstacles to get to where she is today. “We came from a very humble

background and I didn’t go to college or university. Growing up, everything in our culture was focused on the men in the family and, for me as a woman, I was always so determined to do something for myself. I wanted to prove that women can achieve as well.”

The first taste of entrepreneurship came when Nasreen was 21 when she opened a manufacturing business. “My husband later joined me in the business and we built Aristec into the company it became.” Brexit had a devastating effect on the business as the majority of Aristec’s business was European, then, of course, Covid came and put a halt to all production. “We adapted and set up an e-commerce site selling casualwear, which my husband now runs, but I decided to take a step out of that to launch Rococo Events.”

Running any business requires a special set of skills, but moving between manufacturing and event management saw Nasreen swap to a very different client relationship; a change which she now relishes. “With Rococo Events we get to see the reaction on our clients’ faces and that drives us. In manufacturing, it was very different, you never see that final customer response.”

Being an entrepreneur in any field can sometimes be a lonely experience, but Nasreen has her two business partners alongside her, with the three of them together being the joint force behind the business. “Each of us have ideas and we all want to make Rococo Events bigger. Between us, we’ll make every event work.”

“The passion that we have for what we do means that we’ll always deliver the best event we can. For many brides, they’ve dreamt of this day their whole lives and

we’ll go above and beyond to meet their expectations. The positive feedback we get from our clients is such a big factor in motivating us to go further.”

Inspired through life by her father, Nasreen often recalls his words reminding her ‘you can do whatever you want to do and be whoever you want to be,’ and it’s that same drive that recently took her to Everest Base Camp. A challenge of a different kind, but one that takes the same mental resilience as a true entrepreneur.

“In any business you have to take risks. Running your own business is never the safe choice and you can’t give up the first time you have a downfall. That’s the same mindset that got me to Everest Base Camp.”

Travelling in a group including her husband, Nasreen admits she undertook the challenge despite not being confident in her fitness levels for the challenge. “I was one of the most unfit people around and suffer from arthritis as well. If I didn’t have a strong mind, I’d never have made it. My body alone couldn’t have got me there, but it was the mental willpower to keep going and not give up.”

Giving back to the community has always been important to Nasreen and her family. After being foster parents for many years, they still wanted to help raise money, which is what led them to begin the more physical challenges. “When we went to Everest, we were raising money for the Imran Khan Cancer Appeal, which helps those abroad who can’t afford cancer treatment.”

“The views from Everest when you make it are amazing and the sense of achievement when we got there was like nothing else. But, the journey can defeat you unless you stay strong and determined to keep going. It’s very much the same in business.”

With the lessons learned and strength gained, Nasreen is looking forward to using this towards building Rococo Events further. “We want to get to the top of the industry, but that’s a long way away and there are steps to take along the way. Ultimately, I want us to be known as a well-established, trustworthy and humble company. I hope we are now well on our way to that.”

[WWW.INSTAGRAM.COM/ROCOCO.EVENTS](https://www.instagram.com/rococo.events)



# Roshni Desai

## LINGERIE DESIGNER

ROSHNI DESAI DESIGNS SPECIALISES IN DESIGN OF LINGERIE AND INTIMATE PIECES. A GRADUATE OF DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY, ROSHNI DESAI RECENTLY WON A LEICESTERSHIRE INNOVATION AWARD FOR ONE OF HER PIECES.

“I think you have to enjoy what you’re doing in order to be successful.”





Roshni's love of textiles began at secondary school, which led to her undertaking a work placement at De Montfort University. "My work placement was in Contour Fashion and as soon as I learnt how to make a bra and pair of knickers, I was sold. I've never wanted to do anything else since then." From a school work placement to winning an Innovation Award for her designs, it's been a wonderful journey.

Roshni went on to study Contour Fashion at De Montfort University and in terms of career inspiration, there's one particular person who helped to shape Roshni's early career: "Diljit Kaur was the Contour Technician at De Montfort University. It was through learning next to her, with her patience and understanding, that I was able to get a much faster grip with it all. Having a teacher who's able to come to your pace and understand how you work made an enormous difference."

After graduating in 2019, it wasn't long before she established her own business. "I did some freelance work after university and it made me realise that, as a creative person, I didn't like working in that environment or working to someone else's brief instead of my own."

This creative desire continued through Roshni's work as she set up and established her own business. "I design items that I like. I don't like to follow trends, but instead focus on items that I think my peers and I would wear. Trends come and go, but if you focus on timeless pieces, you'll always have something relevant."

Roshni Desai Designs launched fully in September 2020 and is now on its third collection. There's a personal touch to all of the items with Roshni hand dyeing pieces herself. "By handling it myself, I can control what happens with the dyes and it reduces a huge amount of waste."

One of the unique aspects of Roshni's designs is that all bras are adjustable across the back and the shoulders, meaning they can fit up to four cup sizes. "Women's bodies fluctuate constantly and the adjustable nature of my pieces means that even if you change up or down a cup size, this will still fit you."

Being able to offer this adjustable feature at an affordable price has been a key factor in Roshni's business plan. "I want my designs to be accessible and people can purchase a whole set for just £40. I've ensured that our design, sampling and production costs are carefully considered to keep this price accessible."

Reflecting on the business, Roshni admits there have been bumps along the way. "When I first started the business, I was just keen and eager to get set-up. I began working with a factory for production that would only allow me to do three sizes of product. By the time I reached my second collection I wanted to double this to offer more to my customers. As a small business it was a very careful consideration between business costs and what we're able to offer the customer."

"Looking back, it all worked out for the best. The factory I now use works very closely with me on the fabrics and I'm really happy to have made that move."

In terms of what's driven the success of the business, Roshni puts it down to her passion for what she does. "You have to have passion. I'd wanted to do this from such a young age and that continues to drive me. I think you have to enjoy what you're doing in order to be successful. Never lose that spark."

Having established the business and launched online, in 2021 Roshni submitted the Teal Bralette from her first collection to the Leicestershire Innovation Awards.

Inspired by her auntie, Roshni designed the product for women undergoing breast cancer treatment. "My auntie had been diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time and I thought to myself 'I am in a position to change how she's feeling about what she wears.' The bralette has no underwires in, nothing to interfere with scars, it's fully lined with mesh to ensure that it's soft against your skin and, of course, the adjustable nature means it accounts for any body fluctuation due to medication."

"So many post-surgery garments are dull and I wanted to create something that was practical but also pretty, that women will want to wear. All I wanted was to achieve this for one person — my auntie — to give her something to brighten her mood when getting dressed. To then win the Innovation Award for it was amazing."

Having grown up in Leicester, studied here and launched her business here, to win the Leicestershire Innovation Award was an incredible personal success. Whilst so many fashion designers are based in London, Roshni has remained here and understands the support that the city offers to start-ups. "I've had incredible support from De Montfort University and BBC Radio Leicester. Leicester has so many people and organisations that will be rooting for you."

For an online business like Roshni Desai Designs, social media is invaluable and that local support has helped to overcome many of the challenges that can affect new businesses. "It can be difficult to be visible when you first start. Something as simple as sharing social media posts can seem small, but it can make a huge difference in terms of exposure to a new business. The support we've had from local organisations resharing has been a huge help."

Looking to the future of the business, Roshni has one main goal in sight: "It's one of my dreams to see my collection in a large department store, like John Lewis or Selfridges. I'm delighted at how the business is growing online, but into the future that's my main goal."

[WWW.INSTAGRAM.COM/ROSHNIDESAI\\_DESIGNS](https://www.instagram.com/ROSHNIDESAI_DESIGNS)

**"Having a teacher who's able to come to your pace and understand how you work made an enormous difference."**

# Pawlet Brookes MBE

## SERENDIPITY INSTITUTE FOR BLACK ARTS AND HERITAGE

SERENDIPITY IS AN ARTS ORGANISATION THAT HOSTS A GROWING LIVING ARCHIVE THAT DOCUMENTS BLACK ARTS, HERITAGE AND CULTURE, PUBLISHES THE VOICES OF BLACK ARTS PRACTITIONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS, NURTURES ARTISTS TO CREATE HIGH QUALITY NEW WORK AND MENTORING YOUNG PEOPLE. THEIR PROGRAMMES INCLUDE THE FLAGSHIP DANCE FESTIVAL, LET'S DANCE INTERNATIONAL FRONTIERS, BLACK HISTORY MONTH LEICESTER AND THE ANNUAL WINDRUSH DAY LECTURE.



# “Be clear about who you are, who you are serving and why. Clarity is really, really important.”

“I set up Serendipity 12 years ago, right in the middle of a recession. Most people would agree that’s not the right time to set up a new project, to create a new festival and build an organisation, but I think the complete opposite: I think it’s a great time to start because if you can’t make it work then, you’re never going to make it work.” says Pawlet Brookes MBE, CEO and Artistic Director of Serendipity Arts, a Leicester-based organisation whose programmes include the flagship dance festival, Let’s Dance International Frontiers (LDIF), Black History Month Leicester and the Annual Windrush Day Lecture.

Serendipity has established a legacy; hosting a growing living archive documenting Black arts, heritage and culture; publishing the voices of Black arts practitioners and community activists, and nurturing artists to create high quality new work and mentoring young people. They’ve also just made history having been awarded the largest ever grant to a black-led organisation by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Producing and programming in the arts cannot be done by grants alone though, “It’s about recognising what the pitfalls are and how to navigate them to get to the next step, whilst putting in place the right strategic partners to help you grow in the way that you want to grow. Focus on what you can commercialise, that’s your bread and butter; if you haven’t found your bread and butter then it’s not going to work. You need to have that baseline so you can go on and do greater things.”

It’s little wonder that Pawlet has found such success with Serendipity; working in the arts was all that she ever wanted to do. ‘I’m one of six children. My dad played cricket for the West Indies, arranged music and he taught me to tap dance. I went on to dance school, but I soon realised that the only way a girl of my age was dancing on stage was with not a lot on, which was not for me’.

“So, I worked backstage as a lighting technician for some of the biggest production companies before coming

to Leicester to complete an Arts Administration degree. That’s where my history with the city began. I’m originally from Manchester- a proper Blue — but I’ve been in and out of Leicester for all of my career. I’ve always had a really positive relationship with the city.”

One of Pawlet’s signature projects with Serendipity is the Let’s Dance International Frontiers dance festival, which brings a diverse range of artists from across the globe to perform together at arts venues across the city. “Leicester always used to have a dance festival and then, for some reason, it just stopped, which I found amazing, as the city has some really strong dance traditions. It offers real diversity and has a huge background in dance. What’s more, De Montfort University offers one of the biggest dances courses in the country here. It’s very much a birthplace for new talent. Leicester’s pedigree, when it comes to dance in differing communities, is immense and it wasn’t being talked about. So, we decided to try and bring a dance festival back to the city.”

Since its inaugural season, LDIF has become a cultural highlight in the world of dance. “The festival has built up its own reputation now. Internationally, we are very well recognised for the calibre and the quality of the work that we do. And the fact that we focus on diversity in dance means that you’re not going to see these artists performing on the same bill in other parts of the world, which means that audiences are attracted to Leicester from all over the country and further afield.”

“And the artists love coming to Leicester. Yes, you have to do a little explaining about geography, that it’s Leicester and not Leicester Square however, but the artists come and fall in love with the city’s cultural richness.”

So what’s it like running an arts business within Leicester? “It’s very supportive. There are 21 Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations in the city and we all meet monthly to talk about what

it is that we’re doing; what the pitfalls are; how we can share work; and even things that we might be able to do better. One of the successes of this is that we’ve all signed up to a Black Lives Matter framework document, looking at how we can programme better, recruit better, train better etc, which has been really beneficial. It’s easy to pick up the phone to other arts professionals within the city and feel connected, as we all know each other and work together.”

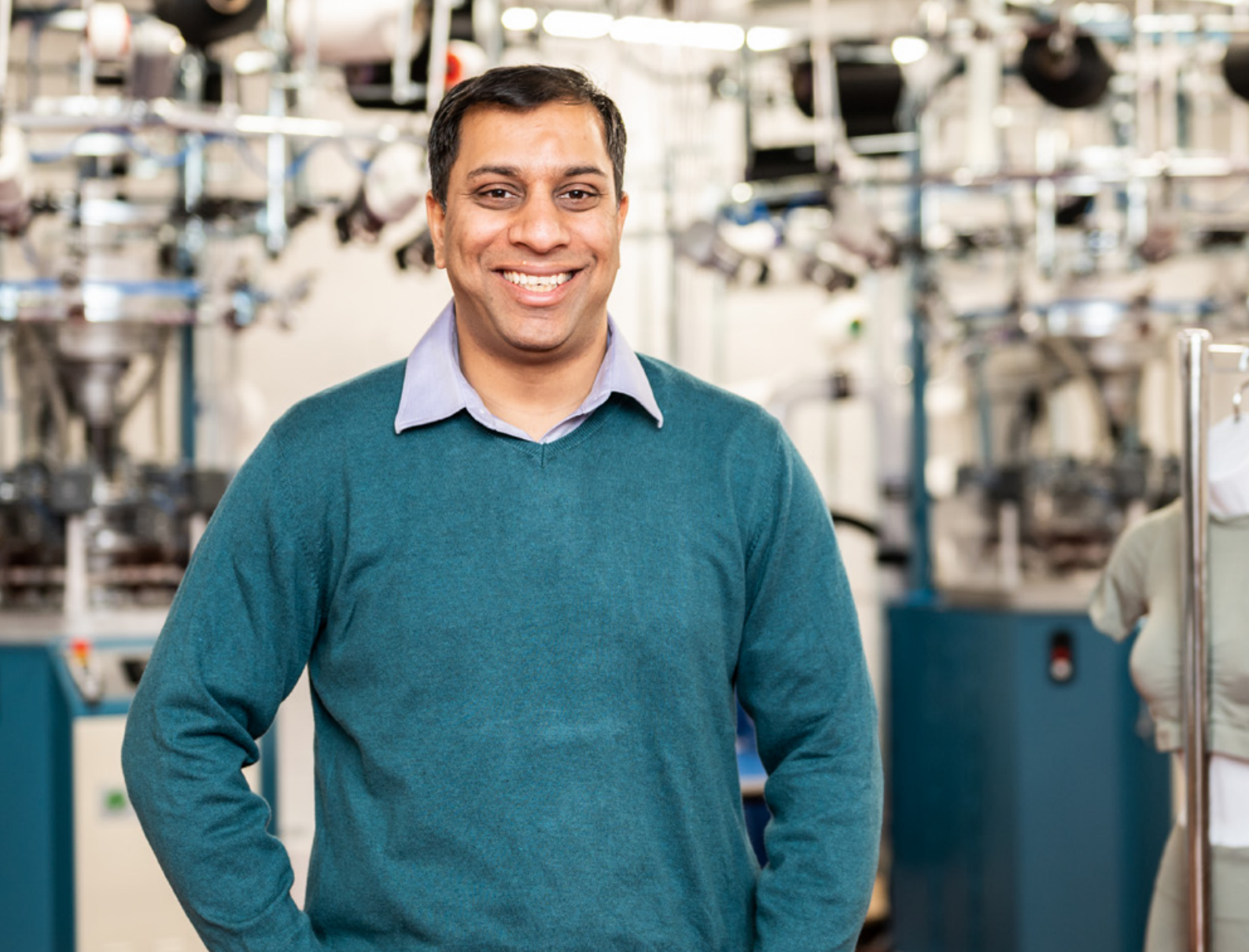
And following what must surely be the most challenging period in the history of the arts, what does Pawlet think it takes to make an arts-based business in Leicester succeed in 2022?

“You need to have a clear vision. It doesn’t need to be over-complicated or cluttered; you just need to have a clear artistic vision of what you want to do and need to make sure that there is a need for it. You need to know where you, as an organisation, fit within that hierarchy of need. Be clear about who you are, who you are serving and why. Clarity is really, really important.”

[WWW.SERENDIPITY-UK.COM](http://WWW.SERENDIPITY-UK.COM)

“The artists come and fall in love with the city’s cultural richness.”





# Tejas Shah

## SHAHTEX

A LEADING MANUFACTURER OF KNITTED FABRICS FOR THE LEISUREWEAR, SPORTSWEAR AND UNDERWEAR INDUSTRIES SINCE 1987, TODAY THE £2MILLION STATE OF THE ART SHAHTEX KNITTING PLANT IS ABLE TO ACCOMMODATE SIMULTANEOUSLY SPECIALIST FABRIC, SMALL RUNS AND RAPID DESIGN CHANGES. IT CONSISTS OF 35 COMPUTERISED CIRCULAR KNITTING MACHINES THAT RUN DAY AND NIGHT, OVERSEEN BY A TEAM OF HIGHLY SKILLED TECHNICIANS AND OPERATIVES.

“He made me question what it was that I was passionate about.”

**“It is difficult coming into a family business and to be taken seriously, especially if you are looking to implement significant changes.”**

Taking over the family business is never an easy thing to do. Doing this during a time of shrinking margins and economic uncertainty is even more challenging. But taking the reins of a family firm and fundamentally changing what it's been offering for the last thirty years is a sure sign of confidence, not only in your own ability, but also in the infrastructure around you, your business, and its trading environment. And that's exactly what Tejas Shah did when he decided to increase his involvement in the knitted textiles business that his dad and uncle had first started in 1988. He's never looked back...

“It was never a predestined thing,” he says about taking up his role in 2005; “I'd forged my own path as they say, I went to university in London and then went and set up my own business in India taking old gold, jewellery, and the like, and refining it and making it into gold biscuits to sell on. I was over there for seven years before coming back to Leicester to put in place what I'd learnt. That business is still running, and I go back to India around twice a year. The rest of the time I have meetings over Zoom weekly, if not daily.”

Upon his return, Tejas treated his relationship with the business as if he was an outside consultant. “It is difficult coming into a family business and to be taken seriously, especially if you are looking to implement significant changes, not only in how things are run, but also in how things are going to develop.”

“When a business has been built into a success by one generation, there can be a resistance to changing the way things are done. When I came on board, my dad was in his sixties and my uncle in his late fifties. They'd been there, done that, taken the risks and reaped the rewards. They were now in a position where they didn't need to take any risks in business and I completely

got that, although it wasn't right for me. I was in my late twenties and thought that ‘if I'm going to do this ‘til I'm 60, I've got to focus on where I can see the business developing and take those risks.’”

It was during a peer networking event organised by the Leicestershire and Leicester Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) that Tejas discussed his vision with Business Gateway Advisor, Altaf Ahmed. “When you get bogged down in your business looking after the day to day, talking to Altaf gave me the opportunity to take a step back and view my business as a whole. He made me question what it was that I was passionate about and what it was that I wanted to achieve over and above the standard business objectives of increasing profits.”

“Having someone else's eyes looking at my business gave me a fresh perspective. We'd always been a high volume, low margin business but, what with overseas competitors, fast fashion and changing customer profiles, it made me realise we were working harder for less. The aim was to grow the business not to sit back and watch it rescind, so what would happen if we changed our model to offer something high end and unique to the UK?”

“I'd been looking at going over and above our traditional offering of knitted fabrics and investing in seamless garment manufacturing — something not previously offered in UK textile manufacturing. I wanted to use the technology to create high performance technical sports clothing as well as the on trend ‘Ath Leisurewear’ — the premium style sportswear that's more at home on the catwalk than on the sports pitch. That's now where our focus is and we're working with some of the biggest and best names in the sportswear market.”

“We're working with companies and professional athletes who are looking to be at the forefront of technology, who are

pushing the garments to the limit, but we're also working with companies that create sportswear for the average person on the street who goes to the gym two or three times a week for companies who no longer want to have their seamless garments manufactured overseas.”

Tejas was able to use the LLEP's Business Gateway not only as a sounding board for his business, but also as a gateway to access advice on grants and funding enabling him to invest fully in the business and purchase the machinery needed to fulfil his vision. It seems entirely appropriate that in Leicester, the historical heart of the UK textile industry, a home-grown, Leicester business is leading the way with technical innovation of this kind.

“As someone born in Leicester, raised here in the city, this is all my family knows. My dad has three brothers and all of them were involved in textiles. My granddad was involved in textiles, in Leicester so where else would you do it? The skillset is here and so is the passion. My dad was so passionate about his industry. He went to Leicester Polytechnic and got a degree in, in running circular knitting machines — Leicester gave people the skills and it's still doing that. We've recently recruited a Textile Design graduate from De Montfort University, and she's been fantastic. It's about finding the right people for your business, not being scared to invest, not being scared to ask for advice, to persevere and to take that risk.”

And what does the future hold for Shahtex? “With fabric we were only really telling half the story, we were only part of the process. Now, instead of reading up on the latest yarns we're attending catwalk shows, working with sports people creating completely new, British made, high quality sportswear products that we can launch on a global scale.”

**WWW.SHAHTEX.COM**



# Angela Orton

## STRUCTURAL ADHESIVES

STRUCTURAL ADHESIVES IS A MANUFACTURING COMPANY SPECIALISING IN FORMULATING, DEVELOPING AND MANUFACTURING TECHNICAL GRADE ADHESIVES FOR AEROSPACE AND CONSTRUCTION.

“It’s all about collaboration, not competition.”



"The business was set up back in 1989 by my father. He came from India and retrained here as an architect, then went to launch Structural Adhesives with four other partners."

Before Angela became involved in the business, she had been a teacher. "My father fell ill in the early 2000s. I had absolutely no business background but chose to leave my teaching role to help my father with the business. I started at the bottom, learning about the business, working hard and working my way up the ladder." Angela then took over the business following her father's passing in 2017.

"During that time, I had three children, was trying to retrain, learn how to run a business and support my father. It was so different from everything I was used to. I'm an artist, I'm a very creative person, and suddenly I was thrust into this scientific world." Having a creative mind allowed Angela to look at the business from a different angle. "I think it's really helped the business. I look at things in a different way to everyone else."

Taking over in 2017, Angela didn't have long to make her mark on the business before Covid hit. "I really didn't take over at the best time. We were navigating through Brexit, which affected us regarding supply issues, then the pandemic came. That changed everything. It became about survival."

"It all became very real during the pandemic. I was suddenly aware that I had ten other people's livelihoods to look out for. For me, it wasn't just about the business, it was about these ten people, their families and the affect this would have on them."

This proved to be a key time in reshaping the company as Angela admits she needed to take a step back to consider which way the company would go. "Sustainability had already been high on my agenda when I took over the business, but the time during Covid furthered my commitment to this."

The changes undertaken mean that Structural Adhesives now not only supplies a product, they have streamlined their processes and made products more sustainable. Perhaps most significantly they have expanded their laboratory space and are moving more into research and development. "Our manufacturing stopped during Covid because the aerospace

## "Your values are what drive your business. That has to be a key consideration for anybody."

industry came to a halt. But what didn't stop was people's desire to innovate."

Angela retrained and upskilled key staff members, and her concern for her team and the people around her was of the utmost importance. "The caring element of work is really important to me and Covid amplified this. I looked around and thought we need to stop being overly competitive, we need to collaborate more, share and be understanding of how we are working in our industry and environments. It's not just about the bottom line anymore."

Angela's teaching background has impacted the growth of the business in many ways, not least with her recent decision to reach out to the local universities to discuss research opportunities. The business has been working with University of Leicester, De Montfort University and Loughborough University and facilitating this learning has accelerated the growth. "Combining shared knowledge has been an amazing support. Through this work, we have made a breakthrough in our work moving into composites, which is very exciting."

Angela also points out that the public sector support in Leicester is amongst the best in England and has been instrumental in the growth of the business. "This support has allowed us to develop our innovation. These University projects are pivotal in allowing us to make further connections to facilities and technology. These may not have been readily available to us if we were not based in Leicester and we are now in the process of developing a larger Research & Development Lab facility, which will allow for even further innovation opportunities and knowledge transfer. Again, this is supported by the Business Gateway in Leicester."

As well as funding, Angela notes the further impact that being in Leicester has had.

"Leicester has a history of manufacturing and has always enjoyed close links to the Aerospace Industry. It has the reputation of being a city of opportunity, particularly when it comes to business and innovation."

Looking back on her time at Structural Adhesives, Angela admits that the main piece of advice she would give to her younger self is to listen more. "It's not about the people at the top. It's about the people who are the wheels of the business. We are a small company and ensure everyone's views are heard. Back at the beginning, having come from teaching I perhaps didn't listen as much as I should have. Just because you're in management doesn't mean you can't learn new things."

When asked about her advice to anyone starting out in business, Angela recognises that not coming from a business background herself, she has approached things differently. "Your values are what drive your business. That has to be a key consideration for anybody. Then it's about what your values mean to your customer base. Are you sustainable? Do you offer a good workspace? What are your moral drivers? To me, when starting a business these are the foundations you need to lay."

Looking ahead to the future with the business in a strong position to move forward, Angela has a clear path for the next two years' growth. "Our next goal is to become a dual provider of products and services within the next two years. This is hugely important for us as it enables us to continue to evolve. We'll also focus on ensuring that our green agenda flows through all our products and services."

"It's all about collaboration, not competition. If you stay on your own, you won't get anywhere. We will go out, network, share with people, and build together."

[WWW.STRUCTURALADHESIVES.CO.UK](http://WWW.STRUCTURALADHESIVES.CO.UK)

# Sam Hagger

## THE BEAUTIFUL PUBS COLLECTIVE

ESTABLISHED IN 2008, THE BEAUTIFUL PUBS COLLECTIVE IS AN AWARD WINNING, PROUDLY INDEPENDENT BUSINESS OPERATING PUBS IN & AROUND LEICESTER, EACH PUB IS BRILLIANTLY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER WITH A FOCUSED OFFERING TAILORED TO THE COMMUNITY IT SERVES BUT ALWAYS UNITED BY THE GROUPS UNWAVERING VALUES & ATTENTION TO DETAIL.

“We learned so much about our business as a result, and about ourselves.”



Sam Hagger is a force of nature. Working as an operations manager for some of the UK's largest pub companies, where he quickly gained a reputation for turning failing pubs into hugely successful ones, Sam used the skills he'd developed to create The Beautiful Pub Collective, jointly investing £1.5 million in Leicestershire pubs. Today he runs premium venues The Forge in Glenfield; The Rutland & Derby on Millstone Lane and The Knight & Garter on Hotel Street, both located in the Old Town area of Leicester city centre.

Sam has just successfully cycled 335km across the desert in Jordan raising over an incredible £11,000 in aid of The Licensed Trade Charity, a charity that has provided support for pub, bar, and brewery people for over 200 years & Only A Pavement Away, a charity supporting people facing homelessness, prison leavers & veterans into careers within hospitality.

"During the pandemic there were two particular charities that worked really hard to support the people in our industry, helping them through all sorts of things, financial advice, advise about grants, funding and also counselling as a lot of people in the hospitality industry live alone and were suddenly very isolated. We did everything we could to support our own people, but these charities did great things. An industry friend of mine told me about this bike ride that was being planned to raise funds for these very charities so, I thought to myself, how, hard could it be? And then I find out it's 335km across the desert in Jordan..."

If anyone could do it, then it was Sam. Recognised three times by 'Caterer.com People Awards' including once as one of the UK's 'Top 25 Hospitality Employers' & as Ambassador of the Industry, the group was also the first independent pub operator to be recognised by 'Assured Food Standards' for only serving the best 'Red Tractor Accredited' produce in its pubs. Its Old Town pubs haven't been short

of recognition either with The Rutland & Derby winning the 'Best Bar None' 'Leicester's Best Independent Pub' three times & Knight & Garter being awarded 'Best Leicestershire Pub' in 2018, 2019 & 2022 & 'East Midlands Pub of The Year 2019' by industry excellence National Pub & Bar Awards.

So, did this award-winning hospitality entrepreneur find cycling across the desert more demanding than trying to trade during the pandemic? "I can't deny Covid was really challenging. The first couple of weeks were horrendously stressful."

Key for Sam was to make sure that there was a business for his team to come back to after lockdown and to make sure that his company's good reputation and business relationships remained intact. "At the start of the restrictions we were able to give everyone a month's wage, which deferred their anxiety a little bit. I mean, at that time we thought it might only be a three-week close down, nobody really knew. Thankfully, furlough came along in good time and meant we could retain most of our team."

"The next thing we did was get to grips really quickly with our costs, as we'd suddenly got three large sites sitting there empty. Everards, another great Leicestershire company & our primary landlord immediately stepped in and reduced our rents right down to support us. I also wanted to make sure that we did our bit to support our other partners & suppliers, so everybody that we worked with got paid bang up to date, so that we only really had our ongoing costs to think about, things like payroll contributions & our utilities. Luckily support was forthcoming through the grants issued by Leicester City Council, I think despite being the most restricted industry, hospitality was quite well looked after, actually."

"We learned so much about our business as a result, and about ourselves. When I started the business at The Forge, I'd either

be in the kitchen or I'd be front of house, and then, when we got the Rutland and Derby, I'd finish work in the kitchen at The Forge and around nine o'clock, I'd get my suit on and host at the new venue until the early hours. So, I was really heavily involved in the communities of both venues. Then with taking on a third venue, The Knight & Garter, and becoming so busy before Covid-19 hit, through busyness I lost the ability to play an active part in nurturing those community links a little, which we've concentrated on rebuilding."

"Leicester's night-time economy is really growing. Having run businesses in the city for the past decade, you can see how it is evolving and the quality of its offering is improving too. Leicester City Council's strategy of reconnecting the city and making it easier to move between areas has made it feel less fragmented. It's much easier now to go from one part of the city to the other, the different areas flow into one another more naturally."

Business networking within the city has been really important as well. "Leicester has got a really vibrant & supportive business community. When we first opened our doors, I would be heavily involved in the networking circuit and, now that these groups are starting again, it's important for us to keep growing in that area. We are already ahead of pre pandemic levels of activity which is great. In fact, we are seeing an upsurge — even with the office workers who are hybrid working. We're seeing a trend of them wanting to have more of an experience, more of a relationship with the city and their colleagues on the days they are back working in the office. Rather than bringing in a sandwich, they'll go out for lunch."

"Having a reason to come back into the city is vital and festivals like Light Up Leicester and the Leicester Comedy Festival are really good for that. I sit on the board for BID Leicester, so I get to hear the plans & support their implementation then I come back and share it with the team here. They always get so excited about what's coming up in Leicester and have a real sense of ownership & pride for their city. And that's the thing about Leicester, it has so much to offer and always surprises people. It's a city I have confidence in."

[WWW.BEAUTIFULPUBS.CO.UK](http://WWW.BEAUTIFULPUBS.CO.UK)

**"Leicester has got  
a really supportive  
business community."**





# Dr Asiya Maula, Dr Dominic Greenyer, Fatema Contractor

## THE HEALTH SUITE

THE HEALTH SUITE OFFERS SPECIALIST TREATMENT IN BESPOKE, INTEGRATED, PATIENT-CENTRED HEALTHCARE. IT IS THE FIRST CLINIC OF ITS KIND IN LEICESTER.

“For all of us, our main drive is the outcomes we see with our patients.”

The Health Suite was established by joint Directors, Asiya, Dominic and Fatema, having recognised a gap in the market for a medical clinic integrating complementary healthcare therapies through a mix of professionals working together.

Discussing how the concept first developed, Asiya explained, “Fatema and I have children at the same school. I’m a GP and Fatema is an Osteopath and we began discussing the idea of joining the two together.”

Through joining their professions, they now offer multiple treatment types under one roof. Patients come to The Health Suite to be assessed by a GP and are then directed to the most suitable practitioner across a range of different therapies, from traditional private General Practice to reiki, acupuncture or psychiatry. They are also free to self-refer to whichever practitioner they wish to see. “This approach allows us to treat the person as a whole and not just their symptoms that are currently showing.”

Working as three joint Directors can have its challenges, but Fatema comments, “In private practice, I’d been so used to working alone as an osteopath, but it’s been wonderful to have each other to bounce off, as we each have different personality traits and bring something different to the table. Clinically and otherwise it was important from the beginning that we had a shared vision, and as a group we work really well together, we motivate each other and support each other.”

Asiya added, “For all of us, our main drive is the outcomes we see with our patients. When you see how they’ve recovered, it encourages us to introduce even more treatments and continue to grow.”

Since opening, The Health Suite has grown rapidly and they now have over 40 professionals working there, offering over 100 different services. “What we offer is quite unique. It is rare to see doctors working alongside complementary therapists in the same building and, most importantly, working collaboratively in the way that we do.”

This joint service has been very well received by patients. Dominic explains, “People had become so used to travelling to multiple sites for appointments. We’re able to facilitate people seeing multiple practitioners on one day, which is not only beneficial in their treatment plan but also in saving huge amounts of time. We’re a multi-disciplinary holistic clinic, offering a

“The local community has been so welcoming, especially those surrounding the clinic.”

patient-centric approach. Rather than just offering medicine for a symptom, we’re able to give more time to allow people to talk and try to find the real root cause and explore what treatments might be beneficial. We treat the patient as a whole, not just the condition.”

The Health Suite was due to open in April 2020 but with the country going into lockdown it was delayed until Leicester was in a safer place and opened in August 2020. The first lockdown period gave the team more time to develop the back end of the business. Asiya explained, “We spent a lot of time building our networks and also continuing to research alternative therapies and see what was working across the Atlantic and elsewhere.”

Dominic added, “The extra time allowed us to ensure the customer journey would be as smooth as possible. Asiya and I also work in the NHS, so we’re very aware of some of the difficulties that can arise from making appointments and speaking to doctors and we were keen to make it as accessible as possible for everyone.”

The success of The Health Suite is also linked to the changing attitudes towards alternative therapies. Fatema explains, “Asiya and Dom are our two main GPs and both of them are very open minded. They’re open to referring patients for complementary therapies, so instead of a patient going away with a prescription to see how they are in four weeks, they get offered a package of treatment to get them better. Our reviews always pick up on how the doctor listened to them and that they tried an alternative therapy that they’d never been offered before. For example, acupuncture, massage and osteopathy. It’s that team effort and holistic rounded approach that sets us apart.”

Looking back on the journey that led them to launch, Asiya added, “For both Dom and I, the courses we’ve chosen to further our professional training in have been

more geared towards a functional lifestyle medicine approach and we’ve always taken a holistic approach to patient care. So, building something like this was always in the pipeline. I think it was serendipity that meant Fatema and I met and had the conversation that led us here.”

Considering their future growth, Dominic explains that word of mouth has been their biggest marketing tool. “The ultimate aim of the clinic is for people to be happy and healthy. Our commitment to their treatment means that most are happy to recommend us. We have done a little advertising, but word of mouth is definitely our biggest growth path.”

Another factor that’s been key to the success of the business is the support of the local community. Fatema explains, “To me Leicester is home. The local community has been so welcoming, especially those surrounding the clinic in Thurnby, Scraptoft and Bushby. It’s been heartwarming to have their support. Our patient base now stretches outside of Leicester, but we wouldn’t have got where we are without the support of the local community when we first opened.”

Looking ahead to the future at The Health Suite, Asiya explains that they’re keen to expand further. “We’ve seen patients coming to us from outside of Leicester and that’s really shown us how unique what we do is. We have everyone from Primary Care clinicians, Secondary Care clinicians, and all our other healthcare professionals, all under one roof. You just don’t find that in many places, and certainly not in the collaborative way that we work. As we look to the future, our first focus is to expand services even further here, then we’ll be looking at expanding into other cities across the Midlands.”

[WWW.THEHEALTHSUITE.CO.UK](http://WWW.THEHEALTHSUITE.CO.UK)

# LLEP Business Gateway



The Business Gateway is the one stop shop for business support in Leicester and Leicestershire. Whether your business has been trading for many years or is just an idea in your head at the moment, we can support you with your challenges. Over 95% of our current clients are microbusinesses or very small businesses with 10 or fewer employees so we have a lot of experience supporting these types of companies. They make up the vast majority of companies in the Leicestershire economy so it's important that they succeed and grow.

Our support comes from our team of Business Advisers who you can talk to at any point about any issue. They're very experienced in all aspects of starting and running a business so a session with them is a great place to start. They will probably recommend that you attend some of our events to learn more about things like finance, marketing, sales, and so on — the essential skills you need to run your business. They can also help you find sources of money for your business. These could be loans or grants or investments depending on what's right for you. We also have our own fund — the Business Growth Grant — which gives up to £25,000 to eligible businesses.

If your business is in a particular sector (like fashion, retail, manufacturing etc) and you need sector specific support, we can usually find you an expert to provide consultancy to help you; just talk to your Business Adviser.

Recently we have focussed on green issues as these are now crucial to all sectors as we try to address climate change and reduce carbon emissions. We have regular events on this as well as projects to support businesses from time to time.

Everything we do for you is free of charge because we are fully funded by BEIS and the ERDF and the advice we offer is completely impartial.

Find out more at

[WWW.BIZGATEWAY.ORG.UK](http://WWW.BIZGATEWAY.ORG.UK)

or call 0116 366 8487

## Invest in Leicester

Whether you are looking to expand or relocate, our professional team at Invest Leicester supports your business every step of the way with account management and ongoing agile support. We go the extra mile to understand your business requirements and work collaboratively to ensure your needs are met. We can help with site and property intelligence, finance, planning support, skills and labour market information and introduce you to professional networks and business ambassadors.

For further details please contact

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or call 0116 454 1220

**Leicester**  
investinleicester.com



HM Government



**European Union**  
European Regional  
Development Fund

## Shop Front Improvement Grant

Leicester City Council Shop Improvement Scheme provides grants of up to £5,000 to improve Shop frontages in Leicester. Businesses that can demonstrate a marked improvement to the area through proposed changes to their shop frontage will be able to apply for the shop front grant.

Independent retail businesses within Leicester who are looking to upgrade and improve their shop frontage and shops that have been vacant for a minimum period of 6 months may apply. Businesses will also need to provide a percentage of the funding for the proposed works.

For further details please contact

**MICHAEL.ROSE**  
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## Leicester City Council managed workspace portfolio

For information and support please contact:

**CREATIVE WORKSPACES**  
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