

Visitors use a smartphone to access digital guides during their visit. Credit: National Galleries of Scotland.

The National Galleries of Scotland has transformed the Scottish galleries in Edinburgh, with the needs of local – and global – audiences at the heart of the project.

The eight-year mission saw the home of the Scottish art collection at the National double in size, thanks to over £38million in total funding, including nearly £7m of Heritage Fund support.

The development – at the centre of a World Heritage Site – presented significant challenges, such as working above busy rail tunnels and beneath a category A listed building, with a pandemic thrown in for good measure.



The National in Edinburgh, as seen from Princes Street Gardens. Credit: National Galleries of Scotland.

The project was completed in late summer 2023. It reintroduced visitors to the historic Scottish art collection, which had languished for years in dark, outmoded galleries with poor access.

One year on, we spoke to Adam Christie, Head of Audience Insight and Visitor Experience at the National Galleries of Scotland, about the impact of the project and its audience-led approach.

A targeted plan of action

The project's activity plan used detailed research to identify key audiences who were disengaged by the old gallery spaces, including:

- families, schools and young people
- adults with special needs
- people living more than an hour away
- visitors with little knowledge of Scottish art

The needs and experiences of these groups informed the decisions made about every aspect of the regeneration. Adam says: "Over the many years of its development, this project has been about finding a way to present the Scottish collection in a way that audiences of this century can identify with. Not just through what's hung on the walls, but through the architecture, the accessibility, the themes, the interpretation and the programming."



Visitors to the Scottish galleries pose for a selfie with Monarch of the Glen. Credit: National Galleries of Scotland.

Broadening access

One key thread of the focus on audience has been to improve accessibility for neurodiverse visitors and those with different access requirements. The team partnered with community groups and professionals to learn from and embed their expertise.

As well as integrating step free access throughout the site, enhancements included:

- a wellbeing trail developed in partnership with Art in Healthcare
- a 10-stop British Sign Language tour for D/deaf audiences
- a sensory-friendly welcome area, video and floor plan
- bespoke events programming for people with dementia

“My family and I found the new spaces so different from the old spaces,” Adam says. “When my son – who is neurodivergent – came and visited with me, he didn't feel like he was being encroached upon. He didn't feel like he was in a dark space in a basement. Giving the art the space to breathe has given people space to breathe as well."

Welcoming the next generation

Another of the project’s target audiences was young people aged 16 – 24. Through analysis of visitor feedback, the team discovered that younger visitors often had the least knowledge of art, particularly Scottish art.

“They were a key audience for us to attract but also provide additional resources for,” Adam explains. “We’ve built a digital team, who have created accessible, educational video content for YouTube inspired by the Scottish collection.

Some 

A nursery group visit the Scottish galleries for a learning session. Credit: National Galleries of Scotland.

Bringing digital technology into the physical gallery space has also given younger (and older) visitors more opportunities to engage with the collection. The National Galleries of Scotland were one of the first arts organisations in Scotland to use Smartify, an app that offers audio tours and additional interpretation via visitors' smartphones.

Evaluating success

Adam and his colleagues are measuring the impact of the project through visitor feedback data. Before the project only 19% of visitors viewed the Scottish galleries, now, it's 46%. Target audiences have grown, with 26,000 visitors from Scotland and more than 7,500 local school children taking part in group visits. This is all contributing to improved commercial results, too.

Looking back on an exciting first year, Adam says: "Even with people coming in record numbers, visitor enjoyment scores are going up! More people are seeing the galleries and they're enjoying it and recommending it to their friends, which has been great to see.

"Another figure that I'm tracking is increased levels of pride among local people. This project has given them somewhere they can take their visitors. They feel like they own it and can show their guests around, which is something really special for the people of Edinburgh and for Scotland."

Head to the National Galleries of Scotland's YouTube channel to watch videos inspired by the collection or explore the learning programme on their website. Find out more about how we're supporting museums, libraries and archives across the UK.



A community group enjoying a reminiscence session at the Wee Museum of Memory. Credit: The Living Memory Association.



heir own histories

Lynn Morrison, Anna Higham, Douglas Frost and Aisha Fatunmbi-Randall from Leith Theatre Trust. Credit: Leith Theatre Trust.



A gymnast prepares for the games on Orkney. Credit: Kirstin Shearer.

Capturing memories from four decades of the Island Games