

Engage Scotland

Sharing practice 2021

Improving access to galleries for visually impaired people

Overview

As part of Engage Scotland's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated shutdown of the gallery sector, we supported Kirin Saeed, a visually impaired disability training specialist, to buddy up with the community engagement team at the National Galleries of Scotland, (NGS), in Edinburgh, during the summer of 2020. This micro project saw Kirin work with Meg Faragher, Communities Learning Coordinator in the Learning and Engagement Department, and other colleagues, as NGS sought to maintain existing links with visually impaired audiences and adapt their programmes to offer ongoing access for visually impaired people at this challenging time.

About this project

At Engage Scotland we had been planning to work with Kirin for a while, with the aim of exploring **how the gallery sector can support on demand access through greater user involvement, by blind and visually impaired people.**

As a visitor, Kirin has commented on the lack of information available online before a gallery visit, highlighting access problems to venue websites for visually impaired people. This is echoed with access at venues themselves remaining inconsistent and tending to be a one-off, artist-led tour or workshop at a set time, with only one offering per exhibition.

We know that a lot of good work and expertise has been developed in this area in Scotland and we aimed to reflect this. Any work would engage with key people already working in audio description and with visually impaired visitors and artists.

However, we also wanted to acknowledge that visually impaired visitors still feel that there is a lack of spontaneity, diversity, and choice in how they access exhibitions and museum/gallery venues.

Kirin's ideal scenario would be on demand access, which is what other visitors get.

We were aiming to model a meaningful response to these issues through the full involvement of visually impaired people in any work we did.

Of course, our plans had to change with lockdown in March 2020 and so we pivoted our approach to find a way to undertake an initial scoping phase of our collaboration with Kirin, within the parameters imposed by Covid-19 restrictions. We were keen not to lose too much momentum.

What happened?

The outline of our new approach was that Kirin would offer support and advice to Meg at NGS in the following areas:

- Seeking audience feedback from visually impaired people on how they feel about returning to NGS venues and what information and approaches they would need to feel comfortable
- Find out what the appetite is for online sessions.
- Commenting on digital content that has already been created that is suitable for visually impaired audiences, audio tours, concerts and talks etc. What works/what doesn't, what is missing?
- Suggesting other digital content that could be helpful either for in-gallery or online use, e.g. self-guided resources such as audio-descriptions of key artworks/areas in the galleries that could be available online and in-gallery on the Smartify app.
- Advising on digital platforms accessible to visually impaired audiences and investigating the possibility of online sessions as an alternative to in-gallery visits
- Advising on what information visually impaired audiences might need before they visit once NGS reopened and how that information would be best conveyed. For example, how the 'welcome back' film NGS was producing could be made accessible for visually impaired audiences.
- In-gallery – advice on the in-person welcome that would be required and what staff training would be useful, ie visual description training for front of house/public facing staff.
- The consultancy work undertaken by Kirin with NGS will help to inform the development of an Engage Scotland programme of training in visual description to take place in 2021.

What was significant?

Of particular interest is the process that Kirin and NGS undertook to refine the questionnaire for visually impaired audiences. This involved Kirin offering feedback and advice to NGS colleagues working in other parts of the organisation who were developing the questionnaire platform, rather than just engaging with community engagement staff. These interactions highlighted problems with the accessibility of the Typeform software that NGS planned to use. Kirin commented that working in this way was empowering as she was able to offer input at crucial moments in the process of developing the questionnaire for VI audiences, enabling greater access for users.

The key findings of the survey included:

Preferred methods of consultation/communication

- Typeform software used by NGS was not accessible for visually impaired audiences. NGS were not able to use other potentially more accessible technology such as SurveyMonkey because of GDPR concerns.
- Low return rate, probably due to software problems
- Majority of survey was therefore conducted over the telephone. These individuals tended to be less engaged with technology, some were subscribers to the large print mailing list rather than the digital e-bulletin list, so had not received ebulletins and could not access digital content easily or at all
- Survey ended up being more of a 'focus group' type conversation mainly over the phone, using survey questions as basis.

Use of digital platforms

- Navigation on SoundCloud was found to be problematic when used in conjunction with screen readers. Interestingly VocalEyes use this platform.
- Preferred digital platforms for this audience were:
 - Zoom
 - YouTube
 - WhatsApp
- Significant number preferred telephone contact and found technology problematic, felt 'disenfranchised'
- 80% were interested in participating in online activities
- 70% were interested in audio tours on the NGS website/Smartify – however 40% of these were concerned about access/platform)

Preferred ways to visit in person

- People/personal/social contact were the things all respondents missed most over lockdown
- Respondents felt generally positive without visiting.
 - 40% intended to or had visited
 - 30% would only visit with some support
 - 30% would not visit without planned group session

Pre-visit information and support needed

- Most respondents felt they needed information about booking before they made a visit.
- All respondents said they would need contact details to make access enquiries before a visit. 60% said this would need to include a phone number
- 90 % said it would be useful to know that gallery staff have had visual impairment awareness training.
- 70 % said they would find it useful to know if some gallery staff are able to deliver ad hoc audio-descriptions.

- 30% said this would not be expected or they preferred descriptions from artists
- 40% were interested in pre-visit audio-described information. 50% were not interested due to concerns with technology.

Learning for Galleries

- For VI programme going forward, 'in-person, in-gallery' sessions are the preferred option when this can happen.
- In the meantime, during 'live' online sessions a focus on the social aspect as well as creative aspect important.
- Zoom is the preferred platform, however not for all, need to investigate combining Zoom plus telephone/WhatsApp technology.
- As well as digital newsletter for VI audiences, plan to build up a (GDPR compliant) phone list to replace the large print postal mailing list which is redundant in current circumstances. Use the phone list to give people who request it reminders about upcoming sessions as well as keep in touch with participants who cannot access email or Zoom.
- There is interest in online pre-visit and in-gallery digital resources, however there is a concern around platforms.
- Investigate accessibility of SoundCloud as a medium to enable audio-descriptions and content to VI visitors – in terms of its compatibility with screen reading software e.g. JAWS.
- Smartify seems to be an accessible platform for VI users, but would need testing.
- There is a need for VI visitors to have clear information on how to book a visit and an alternative to online booking. VI visitors need an email and phone contact for making access enquiries and booking a visit. This needs to be included on communications/promotions on booking a visit.
- Review staff training in VI awareness and in front of house staff being able to deliver ad hoc audio-descriptions.

Impact on the ongoing programme at NGS:

Since November 2020 NGS have been delivering online sessions via Zoom, a platform that was selected after consultation with Kirin and other visually impaired people. The sessions take place every month (third Wednesday of each month) from 2-3pm. In these sessions two artists give extensive visual descriptions of artworks and facilitate discussions about a variety of themes, artists and exhibitions.

I enjoyed today's session very much. The introduction was helpful, and the discussion afterwards was interesting with the different insights that viewers got from the images. An interesting social history item in 3-view!

This is the 2nd session that I've attended, and it was another great session thanks. The information around the photos was excellent as well as the AD.

Thank you to the team for the very pleasant presentation for the visually impaired this afternoon. I live in Perth and am now 87, and until this pandemic, was a regular visitor to your exhibitions. I look forward to future zoom meetings. Just know your work is appreciated.

Thank you so much for these brilliant sessions! NGS keep investigating accessibility of SoundCloud offering relaxing descriptive talks suitable for both sighted and visually impaired visitors.

In the Mind's Eye <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/minds-eye>

Feedback from Meg Faragher at NGS included:

I enjoyed working on this project. Having the benefit of Kirin's expertise, knowledge, and experience as a VI consultant has been invaluable and will benefit the programme in the future. I enjoyed the flexible way we were able to work which seemed even more fitting for the current circumstances, as it allowed us to take quite a responsive and fluid approach as we went along.

Feedback from Kirin Saeed:

I believe for both myself and Meg this was an empowering opportunity. I was able to input to web content and surveys at crucial moments enabling greater access for users. An added value was to be able to contact and work with many digital content makers and other staff in the museums continually creating a safe space of learning for both parties. I really feel this way of working should be the future, on-demand consultancy would ensure that access is at the heart of exhibitions and digital contact.

I hope we can further develop this process to create a toolkit and ongoing training for more galleries and museums throughout the country to provide positive, creative, and cost-effective solutions to ongoing access in museums. In the hope doors will open up soon and we can all be with each other.

If there is one positive from COVID19 it is the use of technology to decrease distance and enable more disabled visitors to attend more accessible events and meet each other. Still there is much to do, to make sure on-line events are more accessible and participatory.

I would like to thank Engage Scotland for their support in enabling this project to take place.

Partners

Kirin Saeed is currently working as a trainer and access consultant. In 1999 she obtained an MA in Human Resources at Northumbria University. She is also a professional actor trained through Graeae Theatre Company and London Metropolitan University through their Missing piece program in 2003. She has toured with Extant, Britain's leading professional arts company for visually impaired people both in the UK and Europe. Kirin is an avid user of audio description in theatres, cinemas and hopes that one day access provision will be the norm for all blind and partially sighted people.

In February 2021 Kirin was appointed as a member of **Creative Scotland's Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Group**.

<https://www.creativescotland.com/what-we-do/latest-news/archive/2021/02/equalities-diversity-inclusion-advisory-group>

The National Galleries of Scotland cares for, develops, researches and displays the national collection of Scottish and international art and, with a lively and innovative programme of activities, exhibitions, education and publications, aims to engage, inform and inspire the broadest possible public.

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/>

Engage Scotland represents the Scottish body of Engage members, responding to training and networking needs within gallery education with a Scottish focus. Engage is the lead advocacy and training network for gallery education, representing arts educators, organisations, freelancers and artists from across the UK and over 20 countries worldwide.

Previous work around improving access to the visual arts and gallery sector in Scotland for Deaf and disabled people includes:

<https://engage.org/happenings/everyone/>

<https://www.notgoingbacktonormal.com/>

<https://engage.org/engage-scotland/>

More resources

<https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/services/museums-galleries-and-heritage/museum-resources/>

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/scotland>

<https://www.artlinkedinburgh.co.uk/>

<https://www.creativescotland.com/what-we-do/the-10-year-plan/connecting-themes/equalities-and-diversity>

<https://www.museumnext.com/article/making-museums-accessible-to-visually-impaired-visitors/>

<http://audiodescription.co.uk/resources/adlib/links/>