

iBeholder Report

January 2023

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Background

Thrive has been working closely with the visual arts sector in Northern Ireland for over 10 years to help them find ways to collect data on their audiences. We have carried out population research into attitudes to the visual arts, and in-venue research to provide galleries with the detail on who visits, when and how often. But there is an ongoing issue about how this data collection can become more regular and useful.

Visual arts organisations in Northern Ireland are even less resourced than their colleagues in the performing arts. Indeed, Northern Ireland's arts galleries are usually free and non-ticketed, attracting a lot of walk-in visitors. Additionally, they rarely have dedicated marketing or audience development staff who often are the driving force behind data collection. And this lack of data has a long-term impact – it is difficult to deepen your relationships or find new visitors when you are working without evidence or insight.

In 2020 then, thrive partnered with [The Audience Agency](#) and [g39](#) to deliver a pilot programme that would test the role of technology and additional content in audience data collection.

Introduction

An earlier pilot version of the platform called ART (Audience Response Tool) had been tested in g39, Wales' largest artist-run gallery in 2017, in collaboration with Golant Media Ventures (now The Audience Agency). The Northern Ireland pilot of iBeholder was made possible by the Creative Industries Seed Fund, distributed by the [Arts Council of Northern Ireland](#), and brought together by thrive, Belfast Visual Arts Forum, The Audience Agency and g39 to test the potential of the platform with audiences here.

Thrive played a key role in working with The Audience Agency to project manage the pilot, maintaining the relationships with the galleries, and collating and analysing the data once the pilot was finished. The Audience Agency supported the delivery of the pilot with thrive, in partnership with Octophin, to develop and maintain each of the online platforms. The pilot development was guided with the assistance of g39 and a steering group for the project, made up of funders and stakeholders.

What did we want the pilot to achieve?

The Northern Ireland pilot sought to use the platform in a slightly different way than had been tested in Wales. For us, the focus was on giving the audiences the right content in exchange for their data. In essence, we wanted to:

- Find a new digital way to gather data easily and consistently
- Give galleries useful data on their audiences

- Produce audience focused content to enrich the user experience
- Broaden the sector's understanding of audiences

Part I: What we did



The project originally had a short, defined timeline. This was then impacted by COVID 19, and the closure, opening and closure of galleries across the country.

However, although the timeline changed, the overall shape of the methodology remained unchanged.

Gallery recruitment

For any collaborative sectoral project to be successful, it has to be co-designed with its end users. Belfast Visual Arts Forum¹ became an early champion of the pilot and were central to helping locate those spaces who would participate in the project.

Four galleries came forward as participants – 3 were Belfast-based and 1 from Derry~Londonderry. Those spaces were:

- [Golden Thread Gallery](#)
- [The Naughton Gallery](#)
- [Belfast Exposed](#)
- [Centre for Contemporary Art \(CCA\) Derry ~ Londonderry](#)

Data decisions

We knew that we wanted to collect audience data – but it was also important that we agreed what type of data that should be. We knew that we would be limited within the platform to the number of questions that we would be able to ask, so the decision on where to focus was crucial.

Two workshops were held and together galleries and project partners debated the merits of demographic, behavioural and motivational audience data collection. While previous research had focused more on demographics and behaviours, this time it was agreed that data that helped to better understand the role of visual arts in people's lives, and the impact it had on them would have the most value.

This decision then opened up further conversations as how to word and present potential motivations and impacts.

¹ The Belfast Visual Arts Forum was established in 2014 to promote and celebrate Belfast as "a city where visual arts can be embraced and enjoyed by all". The Forum currently has over 70 members from the sector plus key stakeholders, including Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

We decided on the following 7 questions:

1. Why are you visiting today? (select all that apply)

Answer options: To spend time with family and friends / To be challenged in my thinking or understanding / To be stimulated / For quiet or relaxation / To broaden my mind / To connect with my culture or what matters in my life / To have things to discuss with others / To have some time to myself

2. I went to [insert gallery name] and I felt?

Answer options: Felt connected to people / Felt seen / Felt peaceful / Felt heard / Felt relaxed / Felt I belonged / Felt out of place / Felt happy / Felt bewildered / Got time to myself / Felt disappointed / Felt uncomfortable / Felt inspired / Felt challenged / Felt energised

3. We'd love to know where you were before you came? (select all that apply)

Answer options: Out for a bite to eat / Meeting with friends / Going shopping / Going home / Back to school or university / Back to work / Exploring the city / Going to another cultural venue / Other

4. Have you been here before?

Answer options: It's my first visit / I've been a couple of times / I'm a regular

5. What other kinds of culture are you into? (select all that apply)

Answer options: Music / Film / Literature / Video games / Musical theatre / Plays and drama / Dance / Children and family friendly / Museums and heritage / Other

6. We're hoping to learn more about our visitors. Do you identify as disabled?

Answer options: yes / no / I wouldn't use that language but I do experience barriers to participation

7. When you leave where will you be going to? (select all that apply)

Answer options: Out for a bite to eat / Meeting with friends / Going shopping / Going home / Back to school or university / Back to work / Exploring the city / Going to another cultural venue / Other

Target audience

To identify the target audience for iBeholder, we used findings from thrive's previous visual arts research: the visual arts audience survey carried out in-person in various art galleries

across Northern Ireland in 2016 and the [Culture Beyond Covid for visual arts survey](#) carried out online in 2020. Based on this research, we knew that:

- In-venue and online audiences are different. Therefore, we couldn't rely solely on the participant galleries' social media insights to determine who our target audience would be.
- In-venue visual arts audiences in Northern Ireland are relatively young, including students and young adults.
- The more recent Culture Beyond Covid survey showed an older audience, within the age group 30 to 65. This could suggest that visual arts spaces' online audiences are older than in-venue audiences. However, it could also be that older age groups are more likely to answer surveys.
- Online audiences include locals but not only. People who follow the galleries on social media but never visited in-person, visitors to the city and tourists are also part of the galleries' online audience.

To understand who would be most likely to use the iBeholder platform in-venue, we also considered its design and format – a free, online link or QR code, accessible via any mobile phone device, that audiences could scan when visiting the galleries.

This knowledge enabled us to select the following target:

- Students and young adults, in the 18 to 35 age group, who
 - Use their mobile phone often and know how to use a QR code;
 - Are interested in trying something new;
 - Are curious to know more about the gallery and its artworks;
 - Are a mix of regular visitors of the participant galleries and people who have never visited.

Brand and visual identity

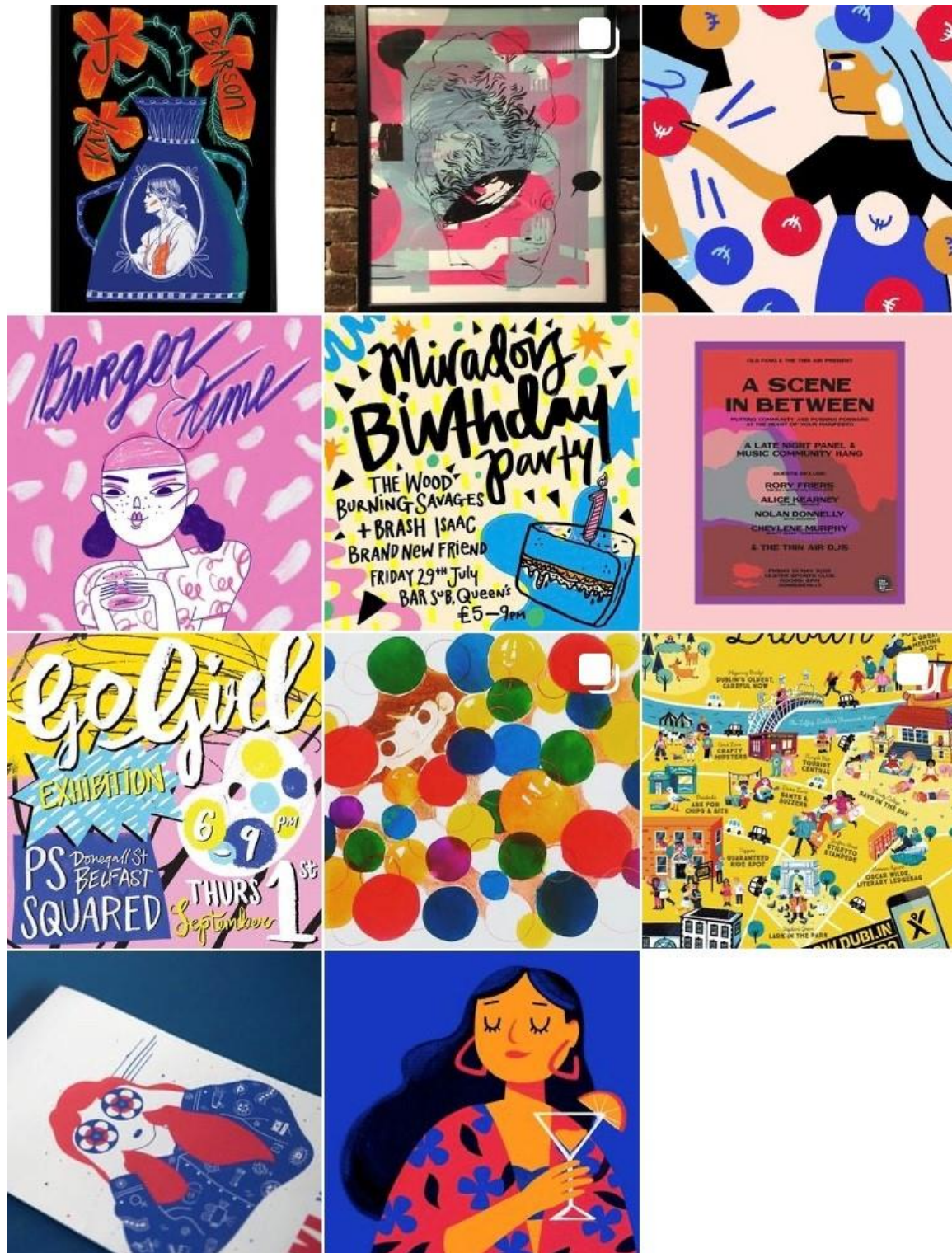
This target audience was at the forefront of our mind when developing the brand and visual identity for iBeholder. The platform's purpose is of course about collecting audience data but when it came to selling it to students and young adults, we had to think about what would convince them to visit the galleries and ultimately, to use the platform.

Thus, this project became an opportunity for galleries to invite regular visitors as well as people who would normally not visit an art gallery. Consequently, the iBeholder branding had to be different and separate from their traditional visual representation and colours. We identified the following characteristics and guidelines for the new brand and visual identity we wanted to create:

- It is friendly, inviting, and colourful.
- It is not intimidating.

- Copy does not include jargon.
- Its design suggests discovery, learning, curiosity and experimentation, digital and innovation.

We then gathered examples of images to reflect these directions and created a mood board, that we included in a design brief for an external designer:



Based on the type of work we were looking for, we selected [Alice Kearney](#), a graphic designer and illustrator based in Belfast. Together, we came up with the slogan “Go on an art-venture” to convey the element of discovery, learning and curiosity. The final design ticked all the boxes we aimed for at the start: colourful, friendly, distinctive from the participant galleries’ brands, and featuring a phone to represent the iBeholder platform.

With this design, Alice Kearney created different formats to be used in all marketing materials, online and in print, and by the galleries. In total, she adapted the design for A1 posters, A6 flyers, digital visual assets for social media use, and a short animation for digital screen advertising. We have included an example of the A1 poster design below:



Platform design and creation

Octophin, our developer for the project, created the platform using Wordpress and maintained each of the links throughout the project. It’s key features are:

- A simple and easy to use graphic design that can be customised with images, colours and logos.
- Video and image embedding including self-hosted and externally hosted videos.
- Data collection themed around images and video rather than long text forms.
- Easy editing and customisation through a familiar WordPress content management system.
- The ability to create multiple 'surveys.'
- Logic systems to show different questions depending on input.
- Export of data in CSVs.

Content creation

The galleries were tasked with creating the content which would populate the platform and be sandwiched between data capture questions.

Although conversations were had with gallery about the type and style of content that work best for our target audiences, the final decisions rested with them. They were allocated a small amount of funding to help with the content creation and this was used to hire creatives or produce content in different formats, for example photos, animations, etc.

Each of the galleries created seven pieces of content which included:

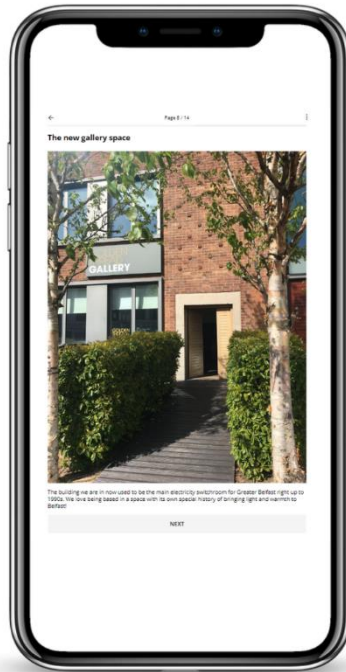
- 3-4 videos each which ranged in style and theme. Some described what was available to see in the space whilst others used longer videos to explain their curatorial vision.
- 3-4 images with accompanying text that included an interesting fact or a piece of trivia about the gallery.

Here are two examples of what the content looked like, taken from the CCA Derry~Londonderry and Golden Thread Gallery platforms. There are further examples from each platform shown in the appendix.

The first image is taken from the Golden Thread Gallery platform:

'The New Gallery Space

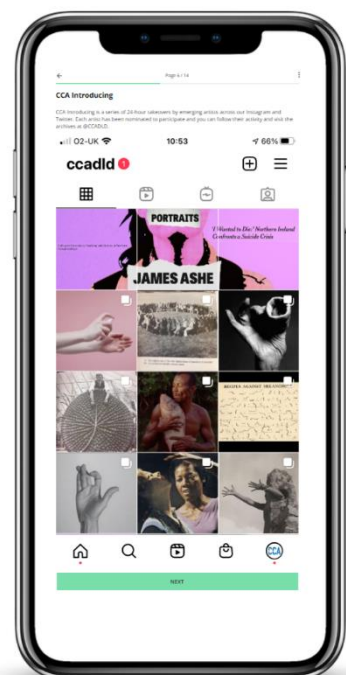
The building we are in now used to be the main electricity switchroom for Greater Belfast right up to 1990s. We love being based in a space with its own special history of bringing light and warmth to Belfast!



The second image is taken from the CCA Derry~Londonderry iBeholder platform. The text states:

'CCA Introducing

CCA Introducing is a series of 24-hour takeovers by emerging artists across our Instagram and Twitter. Each artist has been nominated to participate and you can follow their activity and visit the archives at @CCADLD'



Marketing iBeholder

We launched iBeholder with two separate communications plans:

- One for the participant galleries to support them in communicating about iBeholder with their audiences and entice them to use the platform when visiting
- One for thrive to generate interest about iBeholder on a wider scale, outside the galleries' pool of audiences

Communications by the participant galleries

The communications plan for the galleries included information about the platform's selling points, target audience, messaging, timeline and evaluation, as well as recommendations about tone, copy, traditional and digital marketing. Branded visual assets were sent to each participant gallery and The Audience Agency to promote iBeholder on their respective communications channels. Prior to the launch, a meeting was arranged with all the galleries to present this communications plan to them and co-ordinate the launch of iBeholder.

Marketing activities carried out by the galleries involved:

- Digital marketing:
 - Regular posts on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.
 - Sponsored posts on Facebook. Each gallery was given a budget of £100 and encouraged to set up paid ads to promote the project.
 - A dedicated page on their respective websites.
 - A dedicated iBeholder e-newsletter sent out one week prior to the launch from each of the galleries' mailing lists.
 - Each gallery was encouraged to write a blog about iBeholder midway through the project to publish on their website.
- Traditional marketing:
 - An A1 poster displayed at the front desk or near the entrance of each gallery. Each posters featured a QR code linking to the iBeholder platform.
 - A6 flyers for each gallery to keep at their front desk, also featuring the QR code for visitors who didn't use iBeholder in-venue to access the platform later.

Communications by thrive

Our own communications plan was focused on supporting the participant galleries to get as many people as possible to use the platform, regular art gallery goers but also people who don't usually attend. We organised the design and printing of physical marketing materials, and advertised the project on channels unfamiliar to the galleries' usual networks.

Marketing activities carried out by thrive involved:

- Digital marketing:
 - Regular posts on thrive’s social media channels, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, as well as on local cultural and community groups.
 - A blog about the project on [thrive’s website](#).
 - We included news about the project in thrive’s monthly newsletter when iBeholder launched.
 - Listings on local online event guides and external websites.

- Traditional marketing:
 - We commissioned the design of the A1 posters and A6 flyers, organised their printing and delivery to each of the participant galleries. Some of the flyers were also distributed in 50 different locations across Belfast, including cafes, bars, hotels, cultural venues, bus and train stations, and university student centres.
 - With the help of our external designer Alice Kearney, we created a digital animation for outdoor advertising purposes. The animation was visible on the front window digital screens at the [Visit Belfast Welcome Centre](#) for a duration of two weeks.
 - We sent a press release about the project to relevant local radio shows, online blogs and news outlets. Sadly, there was no pickup.

Marketing campaign results

The online campaign engaged 696 people across all the galleries’ various social media platforms. 413 people were reached through the Belfast Exposed and CCA Derry~Londonderry websites.

Not all galleries were able to set up paid advertising on their respective social media channels due to lack of capacity. The only venues that were able to do so were Belfast Exposed and CCA Derry~Londonderry. Their sponsored posts on Facebook generated engagement from 317 people.

The launch page and blog on thrive’s website led to 261 page views and 402 engagements across our different social media platforms.

We did not receive full website and e-newsletter results from all the galleries, as some of them were not able to access this information at the time of writing the report.

Part II: What we found



Fieldwork

iBeholder was available for audiences to use for 8 weeks between April to June 2022.

Each gallery then took action to encourage visitors to use the platform by:

- Having the posters and leaflets with QR codes on prominent display within their venues.
- Adding iBeholder leaflets directly into exhibition booklets.
- Front of house teams chatting to visitors and encouraging them to try it out

Thrive monitored the amount of data being collected, alerting the galleries to their individual response rates and suggesting actions to drive engagement.

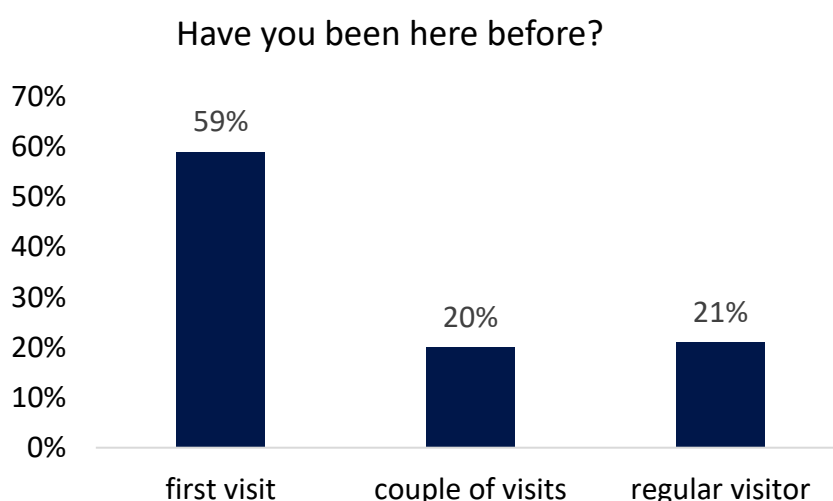
Data analysis

We analysed each gallery's data individually to provide them with a specific insight into their audiences. The responses from the four galleries were then combined to give an overall picture of the visual art audiences present. Given the small number of responses, no additional cuts were made to the data and individual galleries were compared with the overall 101 collected responses.

Findings from iBeholder

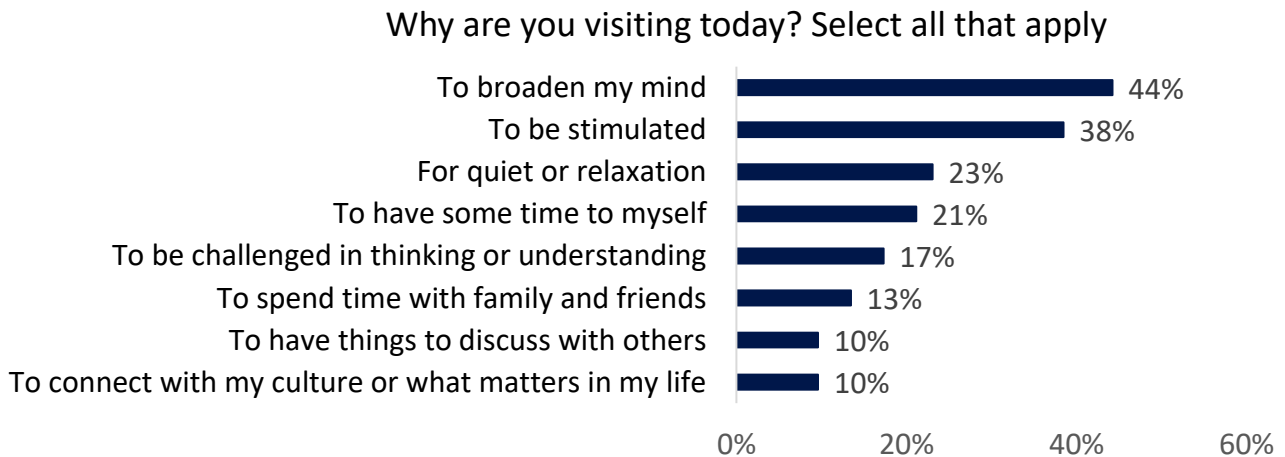
This section presents the results of the research conducted at various stages of the project.

The majority of respondents were new to the galleries



The high level of new visitors using the iBeholder platform was consistent across all four of the participating galleries.

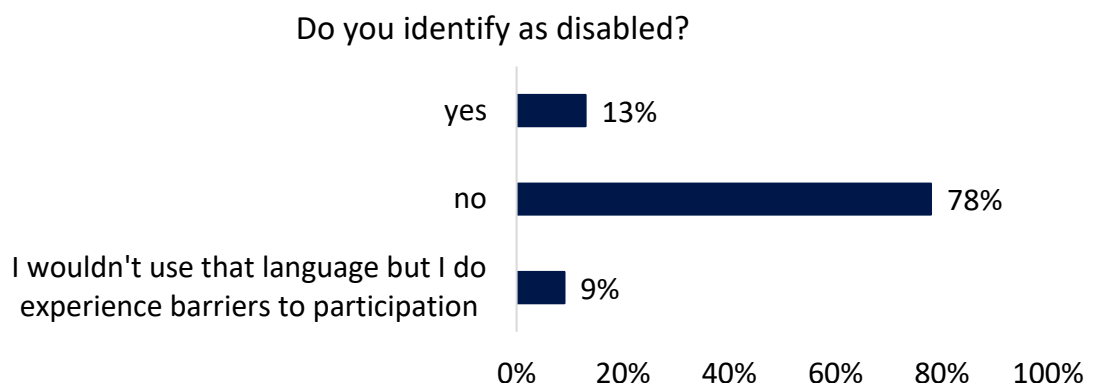
Top reasons for visiting were to 'broaden my mind' and 'be stimulated'



Visual arts audience motivations are different than those normally seen in other parts of the arts and heritage sector. The response that is typically seen in response to this question is around spending time with family and friends. Our responses here were different.

The responses above indicate that people visited the galleries to experience something personal and have an individual interaction with the art, rather than see their visit as a social occasion.

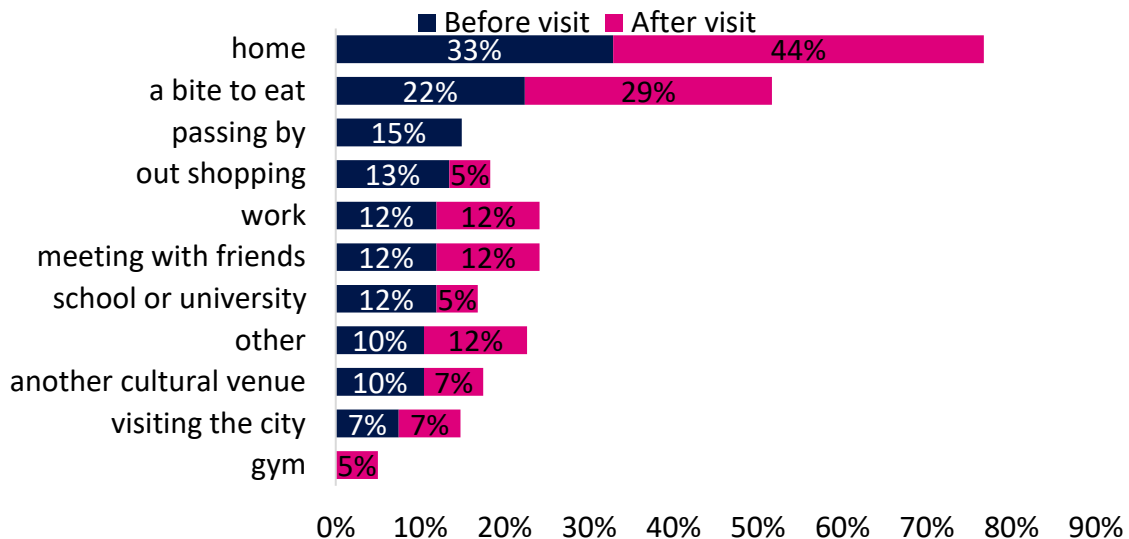
13% of respondents identified as disabled



This is lower than the number of people who report themselves as having a disability in the NI population. That figure currently sits at 21.7% of the population aged 16-64.

Visiting the gallery formed a part of their day

We'd love to know where you were before you came and where you'll be going after you leave



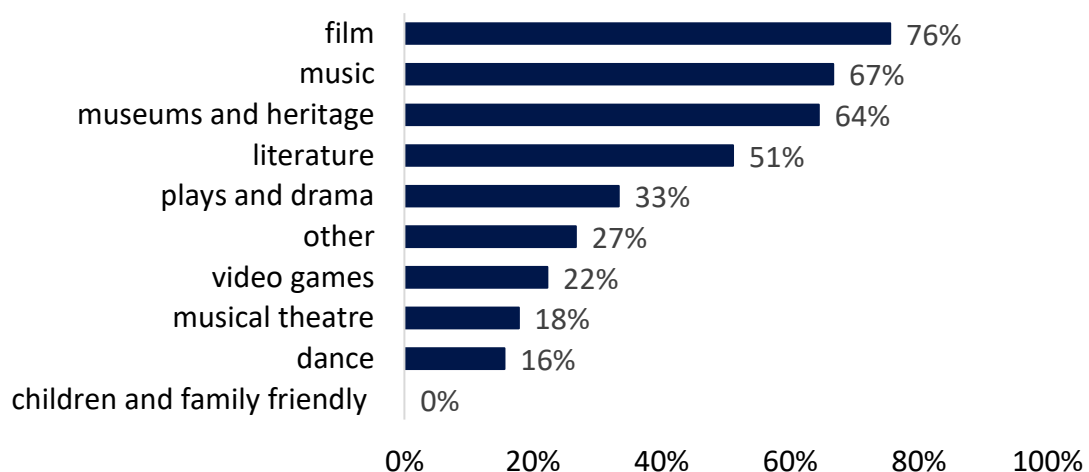
Respondents could choose more than one option to share what they were doing before visiting a gallery or what they would be doing after visiting a gallery.

Only 2 people visited the gallery straight from home and then immediately returned home.

This indicates that respondents included their visit to the venue as a part of their day, among a variety of other activities.

They are interested in a wide range of culture

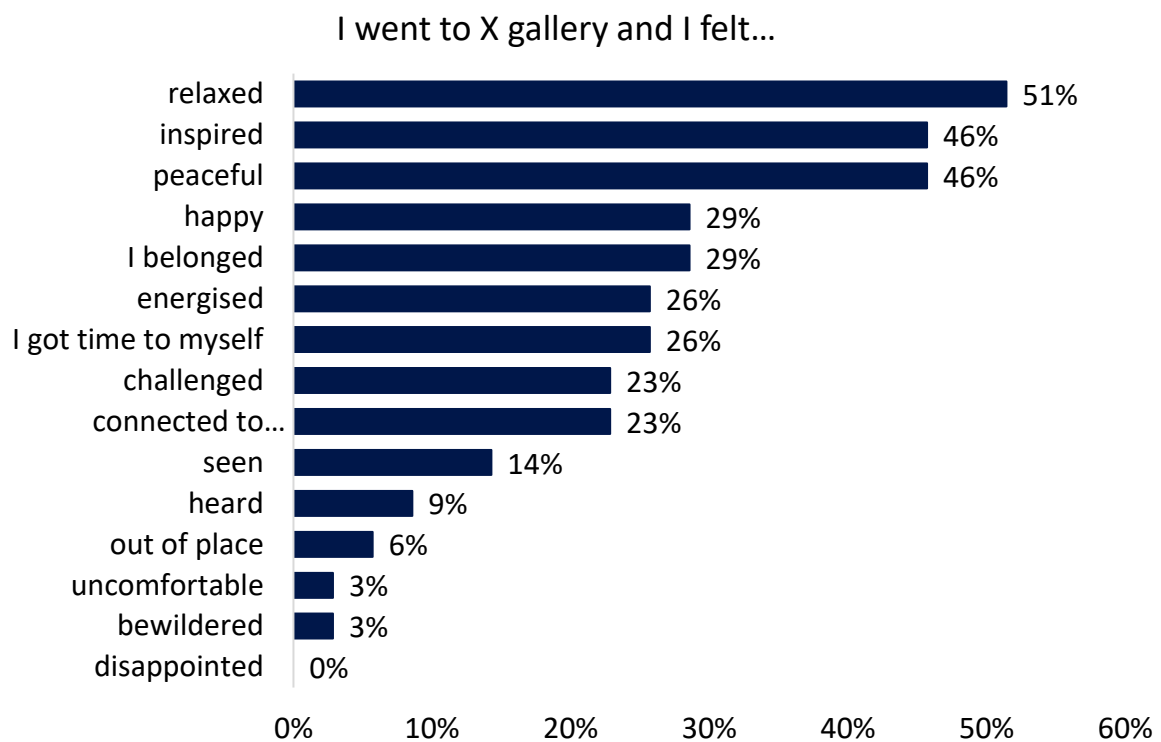
What kinds of other culture are you into?



The exception to this trend is ‘children and family friendly culture’ and was reflective of the results across all four galleries. This is interesting to note as some of the participating galleries do offer family friendly activities and offerings.

We were not able to capture data on what “other” constituted here, which would have been interesting and should be considered in any future iBeholder roll out.

Audiences most commonly felt relaxed, inspired and peaceful after visiting



The results from this question loop back to what motivated people to visit. 44% of visitors wanted to ‘broaden their mind’ and 38% wanted ‘to be stimulated.’ 23% of visitors also wanted to go for ‘quiet and relaxation.’ These results suggest that audiences are getting what they want from their visit, with 56% feeling relaxed and 46% feeling inspired and peaceful after going to the galleries.

User testing

We surveyed audiences to gather their feedback about the iBeholder platform so we could understand how well it performed with its users. The data collected could also inform how to improve the platform's usability in future iterations of the pilot.

We set a target for user testing responses based on how many had used the platform. As we collected 101 responses through iBeholder, we expected a minimum of 20 responses to our user testing survey, aiming for 5 responses per gallery. We ran the survey through SurveyMonkey over 3 weeks.

We recruited testers through a call out on all the galleries' social media and mailing lists and across our own social media channels. We also offered a £10 Tesco voucher as an incentive for the survey recruitment.

As well as questions around demographics (age, gender) and behaviour (art galleries attendance frequency), the questions we included as part of the user testing were a mix of scaled and open-ended question formats:

1. Which iBeholder platform did you use?
2. How did you find using iBeholder on your phone?
3. How did you find using iBeholder on your desktop?
4. How long did it take you to complete iBeholder?
5. What would you change about iBeholder?
6. Did you find out anything interesting by using iBeholder?
7. What do you think would make iBeholder more interesting?
8. Was the information you found out worth the effort it took to use the platform?
9. How likely would you be to use iBeholder again?
10. What kind of person would most enjoy using iBeholder?
11. Is there anything you didn't like about iBeholder?

What did we find?

Overall, participants to our user testing were mostly positive about the platform:

- All respondents found the iBeholder platform easy to use, whether it was via their phone or desktop.
- Most respondents (85%) found out something interesting by using iBeholder. 90% thought the information they learnt through the platform was worth the effort of engaging with it.
- The majority of respondents were likely to use the platform again. None of them said that they would not use it in the future.
- They suggested that iBeholder would work best for audiences who enjoy art but are not necessarily regular visitors to galleries.

- Several of our respondents mentioned students, particularly those interested in arts and culture. Tourists were mentioned often too.

However, they also had suggestions on how the platform could be improved in the future:

- Our testers wanted a more interactive and visually exciting platform. They also wanted to be able to select more options when it came to answering questions.
- Respondents wanted the journey through the platform to take less time. The majority of our testers took 5 to 10 minutes to complete the platform.
- Respondents wanted more from the platform – more information on the exhibitions (past and present), the staff in the galleries and the history of each organisation.

Venues debriefs and insights

Once we had finished analysing the data and creating the reports for each venue, we visited each gallery in person and conducted a debrief. We walked them through their individual data and asked for feedback on how they found the project benefited them.

Some of the galleries would have liked a longer timeline to launch the project after Covid. This would have allowed more space and time for learning and reflection on how to fix potential mistakes and issues during the process.

As all the galleries involved in the pilot were made up of small teams, they found it was difficult to find capacity for creating content for the iBeholder platform and promoting the project more consistently. Communicating the benefits of the platform to their audiences was challenging, particularly in person. However, most of the galleries involved were pleased with the opportunity to create video assets that now have a life beyond the project. Suggestions such as a detailed creative brief on what sort of content works best on the platform and further technical assistance in the content creation phase may be needed in the future.

When it came to the quality of the data they received thanks to iBeholder, the galleries were particularly interested in the experiential and behavioural responses and found the results fascinating. The responses allowed them a greater insight into their audience's emotional states, but also helped them to evidence the impact of what they do. The galleries indicated that following this line of enquiry in further research would be useful for the sector.

All four galleries plan on using information collected in their individual reports as evidence for funders or to their senior management teams as evidence of impact or a need for audience driven change.

Part III: Conclusion



Delivering the iBeholder project was not without its challenges. Due to Covid, repeated lockdowns and the shutting down of arts and culture venues, the project faced a bumpy start and it became difficult to progress steadily. We were constrained to stop and start many times throughout 2020 and 2021. The pandemic also added huge strain to the already small teams working in the Northern Ireland visual art sector, and reviving the project was as difficult for all of them due to reduced capacity. Thankfully, we were able to complete iBeholder to launch in April 2022, at last.

At the beginning of the project, there were many things we wanted to achieve. We wanted the platform to:

- Be a new way to gather data
- Give galleries useful data
- Produce audience focused content to enrich the user experience on the platform
- Use digital means to capture data
- Broaden the sector's understanding of visual arts audiences

Two years later, were we successful in reaching our goals?

A new way to gather data

We did successfully find a new way to gather data through the iBeholder platform. The format of iBeholder was never tested before in Northern Ireland. Although the number of responses was low (101 across all galleries), it did succeed in generating data trends and insights for all participant galleries. In the future, we would aim to gather more data to form a richer, more robust dataset that could provide more insights for participants and the wider sector alike.

Give galleries useful data

We did give the galleries useful data, some of which was new information for them. The behavioural and motivational data was of particular interest to the galleries. All the galleries plan to use the data in a strategic way, either as feedback for funders or to enact change within their own organisation. As a learning for a future version of this pilot, additional questions and a change in the logic of some of the current questions would be welcome for more insightful findings:

- Who did they visit with?
- How did they experience the exhibitions? Did they walk through with a loved one, or immerse themselves in the exhibition alone? Did going with someone change how they interacted with the art?

- We suggest changing the logic of the ‘we’d love to know where you were before and where you are going after?’ question, to allow a separate before and after response. This would give us a clearer idea of what respondents did before and after their visit to the spaces.
- When ‘other’ is offered as a possible response for users, we suggest adding a comment box for people to explain what ‘other’ means for them.

Produce audience focused content to enrich the user experience on the platform

We did achieve this, however there are improvements to be made to the process. In a future iteration of the project, we would add additional resources and time to the content creation phase. The galleries needed support to decide on what type of content to make and found it difficult to allocate time and staff capacity to its creation. There are some steps that could be taken to alleviate the pressure some the galleries felt and answer some of the points made by audiences during the user testing phase:

- The production and sharing of a detailed creative brief to help the galleries come up with ideas for what they should create as content.
- Some galleries may need to hire external support with graphic design or video editing skills to create the content for them.
- Audiences wanted the option to skip past content and have more engaging content available on the platform. This could be implemented in future versions of iBeholder.

Use digital means to capture data

By its design, the iBeholder platform was a fully digital experience for users.

QR codes were used to direct audiences to the platform through the posters and leaflets. Due to Covid, QR codes have experienced a comeback, particularly on restaurant menus. Most people had become comfortable using them and knew what the technology entailed. Additionally, as the in-venue target audience was a young adult audience, most were already familiar with how to use a QR code.

Audiences visiting the venues could take a leaflet home and access the iBeholder platform after they had left. Because the platforms were online, they could be accessed at any time. The iBeholder pilot has given us a chance to test technology in a new way, which has shown us the vast potential of exploring new avenues for data gathering.

Broaden the sector's understanding of visual arts audiences

iBeholder was a natural successor to our previous audience research in the visual arts sector over the preceding years. The learnings from this project have further developed our understanding of these audiences and will be shared with the wider sector through this report.

We would like to thank our partners at The Audience Agency and g39, our web developer, Octophon, and each of the participating galleries for all their hard work and dedication in bringing this project to fruition. We would also like to thank our funders at the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Future Screens, Digital Catapult Northern Ireland and the Belfast Visual Arts Forum for their contributions to the project.

Appendix

Fig. 1 & 2 Visual examples of the iBeholder Platform

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Why are you visiting today? (select all that apply)

- To spend time with family and friends
- To be challenged in my thinking or understanding
- To be stimulated
- For quiet or relaxation
- To broaden my mind
- To connect with my culture or what matters in my life
- To have things to discuss with others
- To have some time to myself

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The new gallery space




The building we are in now used to be the main electricity switchroom for Greater Belfast right up to 1990s. We love being based in a space with its own special history of bringing light and warmth to Belfast!

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The old gallery space




Before we moved into this building, we used to be based on the Crumlin Road. Although we loved the old space, it was a bit draughty!

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Aeon by Marcel Rickli




Our first exhibition after the pandemic was Aeon by Marcel Rickli. It was wonderful to see the gallery spaces alive with people once again!

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Residencies




Since 2021 CCA has hosted week-long artist residencies on our website at CCADLD.org. You can visit the previous residencies in our archives by Alberta Whittle, Cat & Eiméar McClay and Clara Finnegan. Keep your eyes out for upcoming residencies!

NEXT

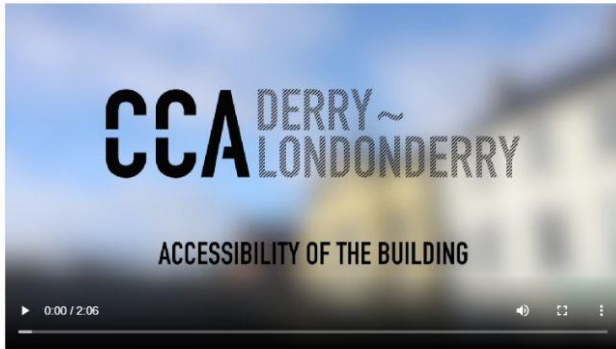
Welcome

Hello and welcome to iBeholder. Let's explore everything the gallery has to offer while we learn more about you! We can't wait to get to know you better.



BEGIN

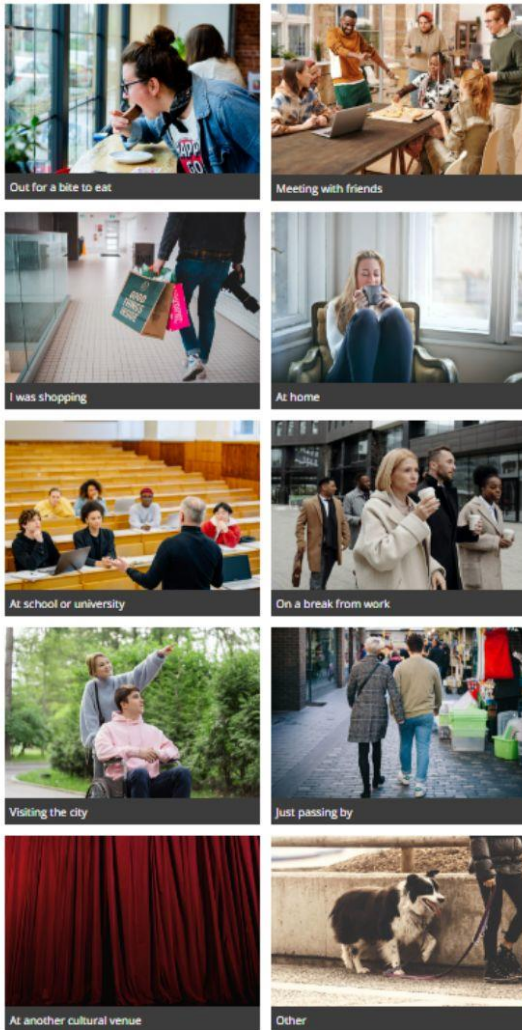
Accessibility at CCA



Everyone is welcome to visit CCA's exhibitions! This video introduces our ground-floor galleries and the accessibility of the building. We are always looking for more ways to be more accessible so if you have any feedback let us know by email (info@ccadld.org) or talk to a member of the team in our office or by telephoning +44 (0) 2871373538.

NEXT

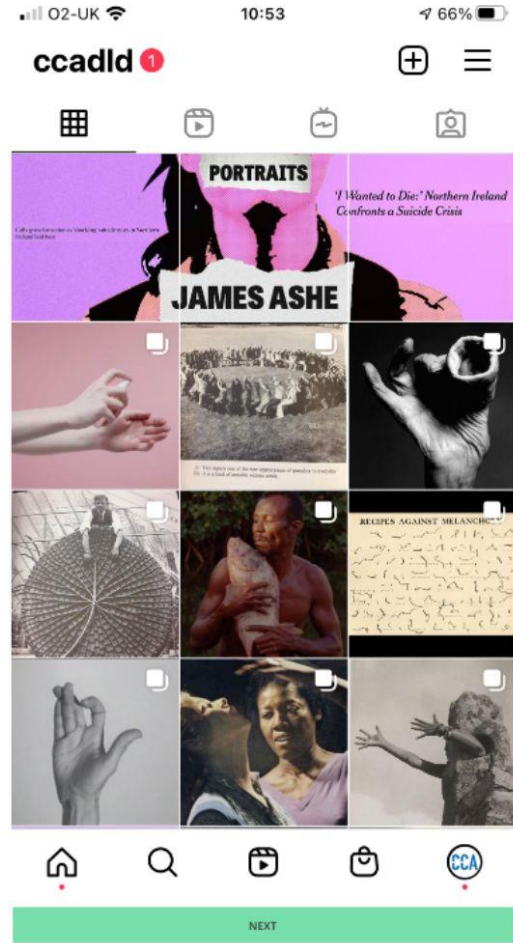
We'd love to know where you were before you came? (select all that apply)



NEXT

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NEXT

Social issues



Our exhibitions explore a range of social issues, from mental health and body image to LGBTQ+ rights and the Black Lives Matter movement. We aim to create an accessible and engaging environment in which to consider and discuss these important issues.

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