

# Manchester Art Gallery

## Understanding Manchester Art Gallery's Contribution to Pandemic Recovery

27<sup>th</sup> November 2020

### Preface

Here in Manchester, like many regions across the north, we are preparing for the transition next week from lockdown to Tier 3.

Whilst not perhaps surprised to find ourselves in Tier 3, we are however devastated by the news that museums, galleries, theatres and other public venues will not be able to open.

This is particularly galling as gyms, hairdressers, and non-essential retail (including our own museum shops) have been given the green light to resume their trade. From December 2nd we can hit the high-street stores and the treadmill but we cannot find solace and wander freely in a spacious 3000 sq metre art gallery with carefully timed and limited entry.

Not only does this defy logic, it seems to specifically penalise cultural organisations that have worked so relentlessly and invested so heavily to make themselves safe and secure places to visit – and all with generous Government support.

This is not about the visitor economy, it is about the lifeline that art and culture provides to so many people, especially now - and all provided within an environment of care, consideration, and wonder.

Today Manchester Art Gallery publishes a report in response to Neil Mendoza's call to arts organisations to demonstrate how they can contribute to the nationwide recovery, because as he puts it, the sector "finds it very hard to quantify" the positive impact it has on communities when making its case to the Treasury.

Since re-opening our galleries to the public in mid-August, we have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of thanks from our visitors who see these free, safe public spaces as their first step to re-engaging with the world, and seeking an opportunity to engage with things that offer joy, even while feeling anxious about returning to public spaces.

98% of visitors reported feeling completely safe and more than half said their visit had given them more confidence to return to other public spaces. As lockdowns and isolation continue, re-socialisation and re-connection becomes an even more pertinent issue.

This crisis has exposed many fissures and inequities in our society, but it has also exposed our fundamental need for art at the centre of our lives - in all its forms, from cooking to Caravaggio.

This week I have had many calls from workers in the health sector, exhausted by the relentless demands of caring, desperate for our doors to be open, “just to have some joy in all this”, as one said.

We therefore call on government to reassess their decision on the re-opening of cultural venues in Tier 3 and for a wholesale re-evaluation of the way the arts are considered.

As we move towards some kind of life beyond Covid, we do not need a baseline economy, rather a generative and inclusive one that capitalises on our creativity - and in this mix, museums and galleries are truly a gymnasium for the soul.

*Alistair Hudson, Director, Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth. 27<sup>th</sup> November 2020*

### **Key Research Findings:**

- Almost all (98%) visitors to Manchester Art Gallery said that they felt safe while they were in the building
- 95% of visitors indicated that they felt welcome and comfortable while they were at Manchester Art Gallery.
- Over half (58%) of visitors to Manchester Art Gallery felt that their visit made them feel more confident to return to other public places.
- Two in five (60%) strongly agree that their visit to Manchester Art Gallery had a positive impact on their happiness and wellbeing. This figure rises to 76% amongst female visitors aged 16-34, a group whose mental health and wellbeing has been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic according to UCL research (Covid-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Surveillance Report).

*Manchester Art Gallery is invaluable especially given the current situation (Manchester Art Gallery visitor)*

- Three quarters of visitors (75%) agree that it felt good to have a shared experience with other people, with 30% strongly agreeing with this statement.
- Over half (55%) of visitors said that spending time at Manchester Art Gallery made them feel more connected to other people in Manchester.



Visitors enjoying Manchester Art Gallery re-opening, autumn 2020. Image credit: Andrew Brooks

## 1. About the Research

### 1.1 Context

In a recent article in the Stage<sup>1</sup> the government's commissioner for cultural recovery and renewal, Neil Mendoza, urged arts organisations to demonstrate how they can contribute to the nationwide recovery from the pandemic. Mendoza argues in this article that the arts sector "finds it very hard to quantify" the positive impact it has on communities when making its case to the Treasury.

*"I've got a brilliant place where I can act as a champion both within DCMS, working very closely with the secretary of state and the ministers, and working with Number 10 and the Treasury [...] The help I need from the sector is to give me material data to encourage the government that we're all doing a good thing."*

Mendoza urged arts organisations to argue their case by demonstrating how they can help wider society recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

*"Keep putting the pressure on, but put the pressure on in a positive way. It's like that cliché: stop asking for stuff but tell us what you can do to help [...] I'm under no illusions that this is a very, very tough time it's going to take us some time to come out of it. But the best way to get out of it I think is to see what we can do to help society, come out of it too."*

This report presents results from audience research carried out at Manchester Art Gallery during late summer and into autumn 2020 when the gallery reopened to the public following the first UK wide coronavirus lockdown. The research was designed to respond to Mendoza's initial call for evidence (July 2020) and explores Manchester Art Gallery's civic contribution to pandemic recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Mendoza: Arts sector struggles to quantify its value to Treasury. 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/neil-mendoza-arts-sector-struggles-to-quantify-its-value-to-treasury>

## 1.2 Research Aims

The audience research aims to:

1. Understand the **social value** of Manchester Art Gallery in the context of pandemic recovery. We have understood this in terms of:
  - a) Public confidence to return to public spaces;
  - b) Use of the gallery for supporting mental health and wellbeing;
  - c) Experiencing social connectedness and social bonding.
2. Explore the **experience** of visitors to the reopened gallery, both terms of navigating Covid-safe procedures and overall quality of experience.

## 1.3. Methodology

Audience data was gathered using a post-visit online questionnaire distributed to visitors to Manchester Art Gallery throughout the first reopening period, 20<sup>th</sup> August to 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020. All visitors who opted-in to receive communications from the gallery at point of booking or arrival at the gallery were invited to take part in the research.

A total of 13,371 people visited Manchester Art Gallery during the first period of reopening. The audience research survey sample is 631 giving us results accurate within a margin of error of 4% at a confidence level of 95%.

Research limitations – this research is limited in terms of sample and selection by a digital only method of collecting data that was therefore inaccessible to those without digital access or email. A digital methods of data collection was chosen to comply with Covid-19 safety standards.

## 2. Results: Understanding Manchester Art Gallery's Contribution to Pandemic Recovery

### 2.1 Feeling safe in the gallery

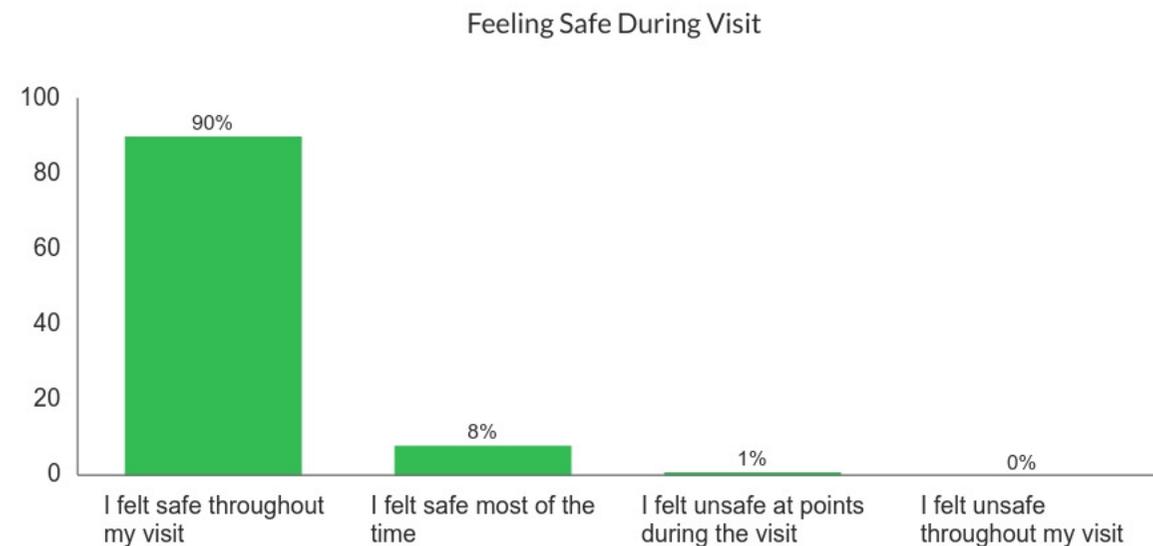
Feeling safe in the gallery is a crucial precursor to a positive visit experience and social benefit. Almost all (98%) visitors to Manchester Art Gallery said that they felt safe throughout their visit or most of the time.

Qualitative feedback from visitors suggests that for many, Manchester Art Gallery was one of the first public places they chose to go to as lockdown measures were eased.

*I really appreciate the measures you have taken to allow, what felt to me, as a safe visit to the gallery. I have not visited any inside venues for several months..so this was something of an experiment for me. I was reassured by your arrangements, especially by how uncrowded the galleries were.*

*This was our first outing (apart from going grocery shopping) since the lockdown started and it was lovely to visit the familiar surroundings of the museum and to feel safe there.*

*Great job though, was the best covid-safe adapted experience I've had yet*



n = 612

95% of visitors indicated that they felt welcome and comfortable while they were at Manchester Art Gallery.

This experience was mirrored in qualitative feedback where visitors reiterated feeling welcome, comfortable and reassured.

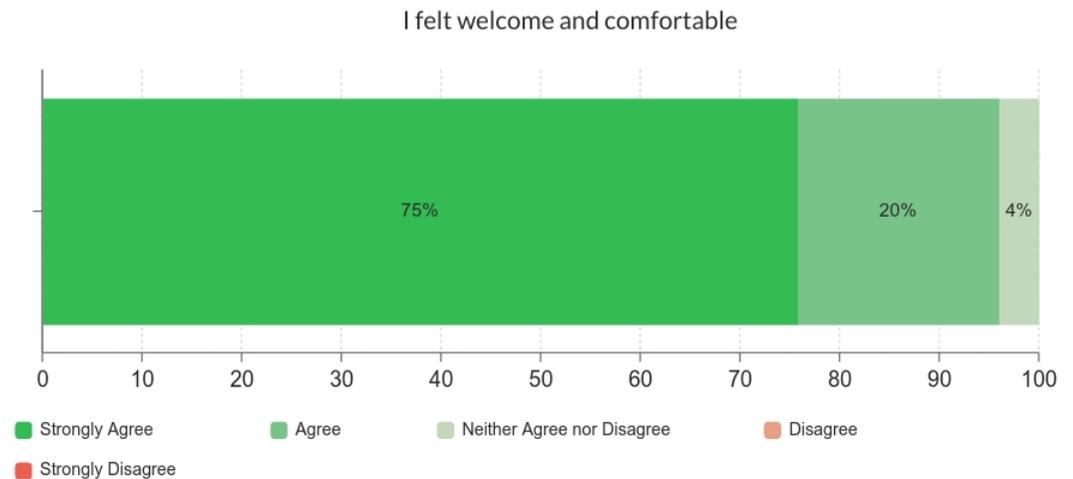
*The welcome I received was superb. Friendly, informative, concise. As my first experience of any kind of culture since March, I couldn't have wished for better. I never appreciated art quite as much as I did today. I may have cried with joy.*

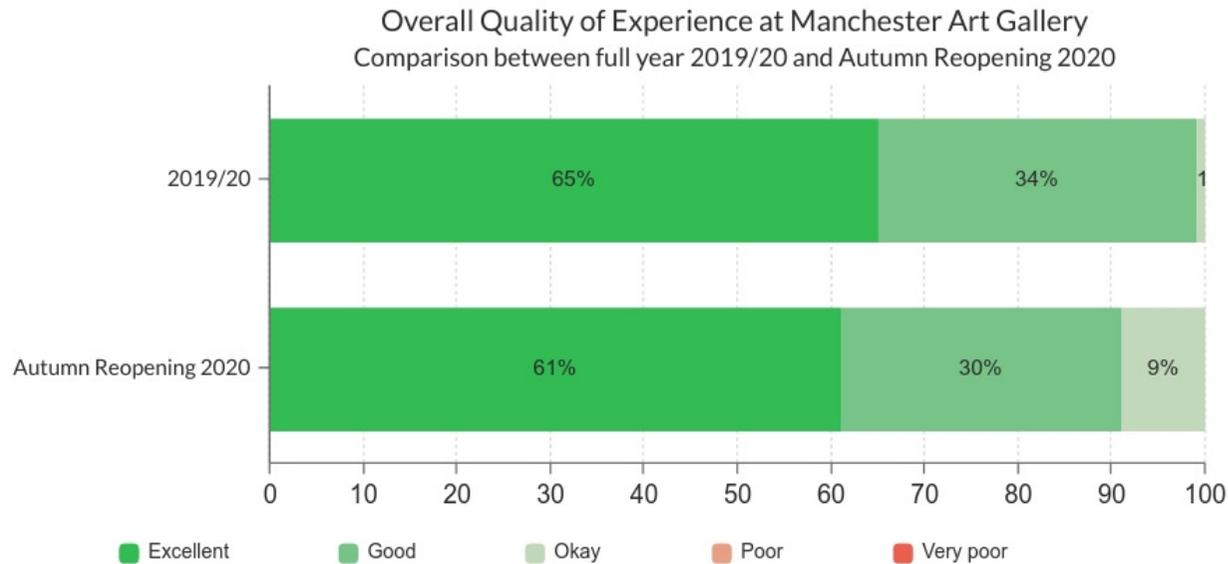
*I felt very safe and other than wearing a mask it felt like 'old times'.*

*n = 606*

Across the board, overall 'quality of experience' has been largely maintained at the gallery, despite significant changes to protocols impacting arriving at the gallery, navigating the space and the availability of some parts of the offer through the closure of some gallery spaces and the café.

The chart below compares the results of our standard quantitative measure of overall quality of visitor of experience for the financial year April 2019 – March 2020 with the period of autumn reopening. Last year 99% of visitors rated their experience of the gallery as excellent (65%) or good (34%). During autumn reopening 91% rated their experience as excellent (61%) or good (30%).





2019/20 = n = 854

Autumn reopening = 602

## 2.2 Confidence to return to other public spaces

The research indicates that feeling safe and comfortable in the gallery environment had a positive impact on people's attitude towards returning to other public spaces, such as the high street or city centres. Over half (58%) of visitors to Manchester Art Gallery felt that their visit made them feel more confident to return to other public places. Over 1 in 5 (21%) strongly agreed with this statement.

The value of spending time in the safe environment of the gallery in boosting confidence to re-enter the city and other public spaces also emerged as a strong theme in comments made by visitors.

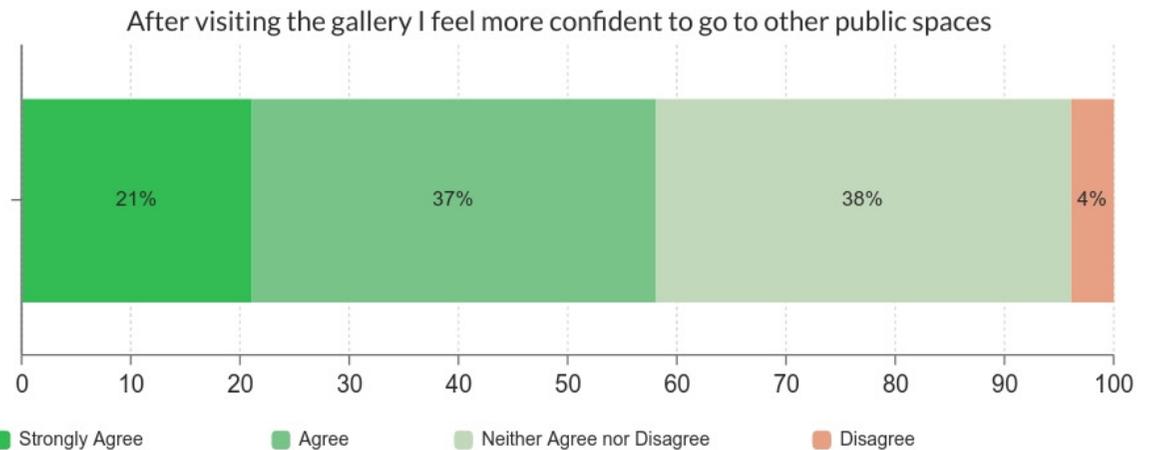
*Lovey visit - made me feel confident about being in the city again. Visiting the gallery is like seeing old friends - I've been popping in for over forty years and find something new and interesting each visit -thank you for reopening so well.*

*We really enjoyed the change of scenery from the current norm of walks in the countryside. It was my first trip into Manchester (from Hyde) since pre lockdown.*

*The gallery itself was peaceful and spacious and I don't recall anyone not wearing a mask. People were considerate of each other.*

*It was lovely to visit the gallery, and the staff were excellent and accommodating. It felt safe to be in the gallery but at times I was quite aware of other people around me and trying to avoid being too close to people.*

*I have been wanting to bring my daughter to Manchester for many years, we had rented a cottage in the Peak District and I was so pleased the gallery was open making our day trip to the city worthwhile. Outside it was like being in a zombie movie - eerily empty streets, but inside it felt safe and normal.*



■ Strongly Agree    
 ■ Agree    
 ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree    
 ■ Disagree

n = 606

### 2.3 Happiness and Wellbeing

There is now a significant body of research evidencing the role of arts on public health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Manchester Art Gallery's reopening audience research highlights the use of the gallery as a resource for managing good mental health and wellbeing in the context of the pandemic. Over nine in ten (93%) agree that their visit to Manchester Art Gallery had a positive impact on their happiness and wellbeing. 60% strongly agree with this statement.

<sup>2</sup> What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review (2019). Daisy Fancourt, Saoirse Finn. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/what-is-the-evidence-on-the-role-of-the-arts-in-improving-health-and-well-being-a-scoping-review-2019>

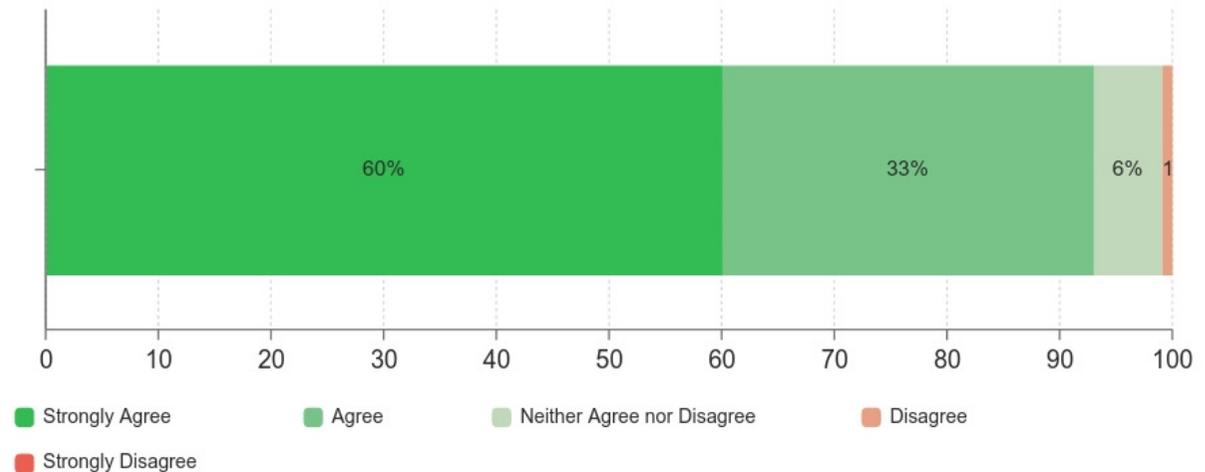
The value of a visit to the gallery to wellbeing, in the context of the pandemic, emerged as a strong theme in the qualitative data.

*This is a vital resource to the people of Manchester... I felt safe under the current Covid 19 restrictions. It's really improved my mental health in the following days after my visit. If we lose art we lose everything*

*We need art to help us through this pandemic- I am an NHS nurse so I really needed the escapism of art. Thank you*

*I really enjoyed it. Getting to see the beautiful art improved my mental state hugely after being stuck inside for a long time.*

My visit had a positive impact on my happiness and wellbeing



n = 606



Young people enjoying Manchester Art Gallery re-opening, autumn 2020. Image credit: Andrew Brooks

*I'm a resident of Manchester and visited the gallery 1-2 times a month pre-lockdown so just glad to get in again. I have found the gallery helpful in past during periods of depression so boosted by this visit in the midst of current situation.*

*This was my first visit to the art gallery as I had relocated towards the end of 2019 and then Covid hit upon us :( I absolutely loved the curation at the gallery, extremely well thought out [...] a trip to the art gallery is something I always cherish, the time spent is always therapeutic and adds to the well-being.*

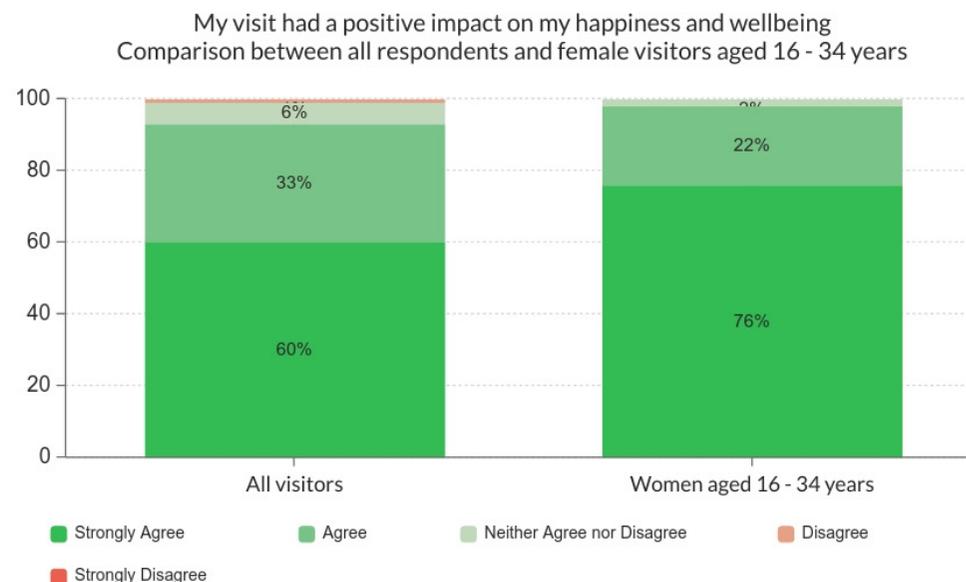
*Just really grateful to have had the chance to do something different, that feeds the soul and reminds me of the important things in my life. Of course, it would have been nice if there had been more open, but actually limiting the access to the permanent collection made me look closely at*

*artworks I often walk past to get somewhere else. Also, it meant that as a group we talked more about what there was rather than having to 'do' everything. Very, very much appreciated.*

Ongoing UCL research into the psychological and social impacts of COVID-19<sup>3</sup> evidences a worsening in self-reported mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Surveillance Report also finds that young adults (aged between 18 and 34) and women have been more likely to report worse mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic than older adults and men, respectively.

Manchester Art Gallery's audience research suggests that visiting the gallery is particularly valued for its contribution to happiness and wellbeing by younger women.

When we isolate the responses to the survey given by women aged 16 to 34 we can see that the proportion who strongly agree that with the statement 'my visit had a positive impact on my happiness and wellbeing' rises to 76% of responses (compared to 60% of all survey respondents). This data demonstrates that the gallery is of particular value to those in society whose mental health and wellbeing are being most severely impacted by Covid-19 restrictions.

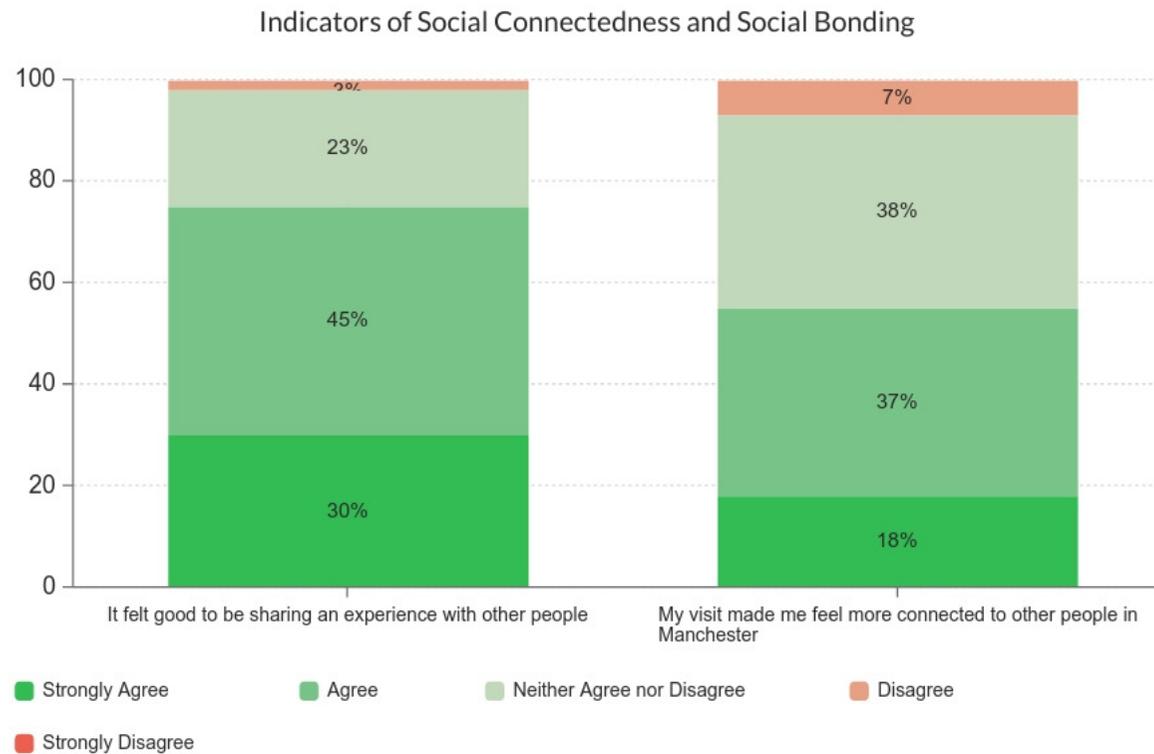


All visitors = 607 Women 16-34 = 131

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/2-important-findings-so-far>

## 2.4 Social Connectedness

The questionnaire included two statements relating to social connectedness (It felt good to be sharing the experience with other people, taken from the NEF Audience Experience Framework) and social bonding (My visit made me feel more connected to other people in Manchester). The results are shown below.



*n* = 606

Three quarters of visitors (75%) agree that it felt good to have a shared experience with other people, with 30% strongly agreeing with this statement. Over half (55%) of visitors said that spending time at Manchester Art Gallery made them feel more connected to other people in Manchester.

The value of connecting with staff, seeing other people and spending time with friends and family at the gallery emerged as a strong theme in visitor comments, particularly in relation to why being able to spend time at the gallery was so important to people.

*I haven't visited a gallery since February so this was like a much-needed catch-up with an old friend. I appreciated the thought that had gone into guiding visitors through the exhibition, and the attention paid to care and safety. Huge thanks to curators and venue staff for making this such a lovely experience.*

*Mcr Art Gallery, amongst so many of our arts spaces, reminds me to lookout, beyond myself, beyond the pandemic and brexit and think what the rest of the world is doing. How I can learn from them, be inspired by them, now and in the historical past. It's good to stretch ones brain :) And it's good to be in a calm shared space. Thank you!*

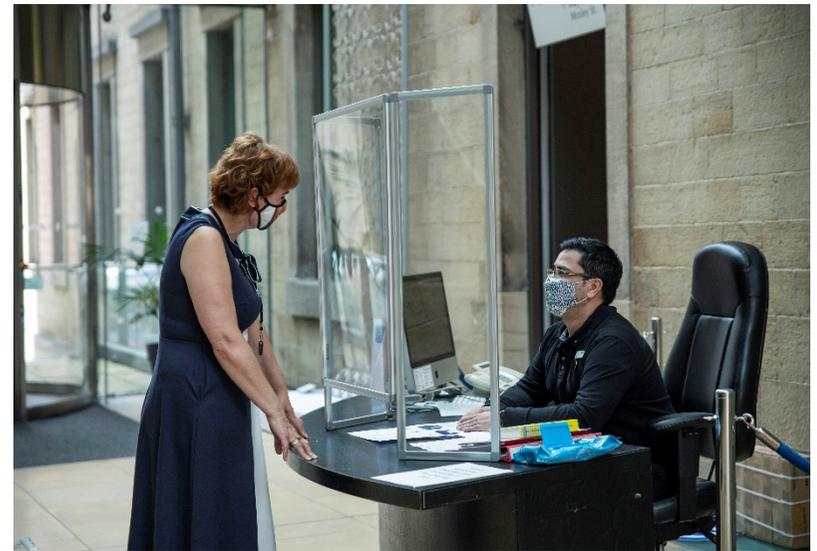
*My son and I love the gallery, it's one of our favourite places, we loved visiting and plan to come back as soon as you are able to open again.*

*Could not fault our visit, would love to thank the reception staff, who explained the new system so clearly and were so friendly*

*In spite of the current (strange) COVID circumstances, my visit to the Manchester Art Gallery was excellent. The pieces of art on show were awe-inspiring, interesting, varied. The staff were friendly and engaging, and the building itself was warm, inviting, and suitably laid-out. Definitely will return soon! :-)*

*I was excited to go back to the gallery, but the visit more than exceeded my expectations. The staff were wonderfully helpful and kind and although it was controlled, it didn't feel restrictive (ie you weren't hurried through the space)*

*Visiting museums and art galleries for me is like going to church for religious people. I'm not an expert but I quite enjoy the feeling in these places, and in particular Manchester Art Gallery has always very nice and committed workers...The shop always give me joy and the workers there are really nice people. I*



Staff at Manchester Art Gallery during re-opening, autumn 2020. Image credit: Andrew Brooks

*don't know how is the working environment but at least, the few words I tend to share with the workers, transmit always good vibes. In addition, I really enjoyed watching the video of the conversations of people talking about the art work. This was new for me and allowed me to engage in a discussion that I couldn't have as I didn't have anyone to discuss it with. I really enjoyed hearing others' opinions about both the art and the gallery's Work. I really really enjoyed attending the gallery and I intend to visit again this month as it had such a positive impact on my wellbeing and happiness. Thank you so much*



Visitors at Manchester Art Gallery during re-opening, autumn 2020. Image credit: Andrew Brooks