



A clear welcome at the National Portrait Gallery

When plans were made to refurbish the National Portrait Gallery in London, accessibility was at their heart.

The Gallery's '*Inspiring People*' project, a three year, £41.3m redevelopment programme to completely re-present the Collection and create new spaces for the public, was completed in the summer of 2023.

The NPG contacted the RNID as to how to make the new spaces welcoming for art lovers with hearing loss. As the charity's installation partners, the Gallery was referred to us and so began a six month programme of work.

"It was a huge priority to make the '*Inspiring People*' project as accessible as possible," says Leah Romaniello, Visitor Experience Manager at the Gallery.

"We are a public space and, in order to offer an equal experience to everyone, upgrading our existing loop systems and adding to them was very important."

Senior engineer at Contacta, Stuart Ward, began by carrying out surveys to assess where loops could be most beneficial to visitors.

The key sites were those where visitors would be talking directly to staff; ticket desks and cloakrooms areas were the first to be considered for hearing loop upgrades.

The Gallery welcomes some two million visitors each year. Most of them enjoy a cup of tea or bite to eat after contemplating the artwork, so hearing loops at the cafés and The Portrait Restaurant were essential to make staff heard clearly above the hustle and bustle. Buying a souvenir of their visit is also now clearer with upgrades at till points in the Gallery shop.

Some of these areas had yet to have their counters installed but Stuart's experience led him to specify our K200 under-the-counter hearing loops with M72 microphones.

As many areas of the 170 year old Gallery were undergoing refurbishment, Stuart was able to lay the loop wire onto the floors of areas such as the board room before the carpets went down.

The flooring had already been laid, however, in parts of the new Mildred and Simon Palley Learning Centre, which provides learning experiences for children, young people, community groups and adult learners. Loop cables couldn't be concealed so Stuart had to decide on an alternative assistive listening system. Our radio frequency (RF) system was the ideal solution as the radio waves can reach hearing aid users no matter where they are in the fully accessible 'open' studios. Even those who don't use a hearing aid can tap into sound from the transmitter via our pocket-sized receivers and headphones.

"The work has blended seamlessly into the building," says Leah. "The only thing you can see are the microphones and these are positioned discreetly. It's a very clean job."

Staff training and awareness has been an essential part of the installation. While signage in each location lets visitors know loops are available for them to use, the Gallery staff need to know the loops are there.

"The microphones we put on the counter-top are in a specific position to pick up the staff member's voice," says Stuart. "It's important for staff to understand this so they don't move them around."

With the job done, Leah and Stuart were keen to get first-hand feedback on the new hearing loops to make sure the listening experience is of the highest quality.

Former RNID trustee, Janine Roebuck, was only too happy to help. A mezzo-soprano opera singer until progressive hearing loss brought an end to her career, Janine now uses bi-lateral cochlear implants.

"I wholeheartedly applaud the National Portrait Gallery for its efforts to make the building, and its events, accessible to people with hearing loss," Janine says. "It's incredibly frustrating when you go to a venue, and you just can't hear staff or a performance clearly.

"When there are lots of people in the café or buying tickets, if you have the 'T' switch it dampens the background noise and brings forward the voice of the staff. There's a real sense of change when you use the loop setting; I certainly know from experience that it makes you less stressed!

"It was a great privilege to test the loops, and it was an interesting exercise for all of us. I was able to tell the engineer that there was some interference on one of the microphones which he could then resolve.

"It's such a beautiful space and there are so many fascinating works on display. The new arrangement gives it all new life. I'm very much looking forward to coming back to the gallery to experience some of their events, and the assistive listening systems elsewhere in the building."

The Gallery has also taken delivery of several portable hearing loops. These rechargeable units can be taken anywhere in the building.

“The whole process has been really professional, and the engineers have been extremely helpful,” says Leah. “We want using the loops to be a seamless experience for all our visitors with hearing loss.”