

Case study: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth



Arts Access® Aotearoa
WHAKAHAUHAU KATOA O HANGA

Recipient: Big 'A' Creative New Zealand Arts For All Award 2011

October 2011

New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is the inaugural recipient of the Big 'A' Creative New Zealand Arts For All Award. The Govett-Brewster Communications and Experience Manager, Felicity Connell, talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the gallery's commitment to improving access for all.

1. Background: about the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Based in New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is regarded as one of New Zealand's most courageous contemporary art galleries.

The life and spirit of the Govett-Brewster was determined by the vision of founding patron Monica Brewster (nee Govett). Monica envisaged a contemporary art museum of international standing that would offer New Plymouth a window to the world. In 1962, she realised her dream through a generous gift and a subsequent bequest to the city that established the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, its policy and collection.

Described as a "futurist", Monica believed in openness and individuality, choice and freedom of expression. The Govett-Brewster opened in February 1970 with a groundbreaking multi-sensory installation by New Zealand artist Leon Narbey. Since 1980, it's been home to the collection of modernist filmmaker and kinetic sculptor Len Lye.

The gallery continues to present innovative and challenging work by New Zealand and international artists. It is owned and operated by the New Plymouth District Council.

Website: www.govettbrewster.com

2. What are the benefits for the Govett-Brewster in receiving the Big 'A' Creative New Zealand Arts For All Award?

Being part of the awards ceremony at Parliament was a real buzz and it was fantastic to have our Mayor, Harry Duynhoven, with us. It was also inspiring to see and hear what other people and organisations were doing to provide access.

A key benefit of receiving the award is that it's encouraged us to continue our journey of ensuring accessibility – plus there's nothing like having the spotlight on you to ensure you stay focussed!

It's also great for the New Plymouth District Council to be recognised for its Disability Strategy, which ensures accessibility is a priority for the Council.

Another benefit is recognition for the people and communities who have given us their time, skills and energy to help us develop our accessibility. We can't take this journey by ourselves. We've also appreciated the ongoing support and encouragement from the team at Arts Access Aotearoa, and think it's great that Creative New Zealand is recognising the importance of access by sponsoring the award.

The award money enabled us to buy our own FrontRow ToGo, an amplification system for people with a hearing impairment. This means the system is always available at the gallery: before that, we used the Council's FrontRow ToGo. This has the added benefit of freeing up the Council's resource.

3. What does accessibility mean to the Govett-Brewster? What steps have you taken to open your doors to disabled visitors?

Accessibility to us means that everyone should feel welcome in the gallery. I've been thinking a lot recently about the concept of manaakitanga – treating everyone with respect, no matter who they are. Ensuring the gallery is as accessible as possible has benefits for everyone, whether it's a mum with a baby in a pushchair or someone with a hearing impairment.

In March 2011, we launched our redeveloped website, which was designed and coded to help overcome accessibility issues. Features include high contrast between the text colour and background screen colour and minimal page clutter. Clickable targets, buttons and images are deliberately generous in size for people with motor skill difficulties.

Others steps we're taking include:

- regular sign language exhibition tours, working with Deaf Aotearoa and local sign language interpreter Fleur Daniel
- gallery staff attending disability awareness training and regular refresher courses
- plain-language descriptions for exhibitions
- finding out from our different communities what accessibility means for them
- improved signage around the gallery
- using Arts Access Aotearoa guidelines and checklists for our exhibitions.

4. Do you have a disability/accessibility policy?

Yes. Our accessibility policy is based on the three strands of New Plymouth District Council's Disability Strategy: that its services, facilities and assets are accessible to all people; that staff are aware of disability in the community and receive appropriate training; and that staff are active champions of an inclusive society.

The judging panel for the Big 'A' Awards 2011 commented on our commitment to accessibility and how it was underpinned by the New Plymouth District Council's Disability Strategy. The strategy and the way the gallery incorporated it into its planning and processes was "an example of best practice that gave the Govett-Brewster the edge".

As a part of the Council, we also share its four core values of "Community, Kotahitanga, Creativity and Excellence". These values also inform our accessibility policy.

5. The journey: the barriers, challenges and rewards

The barriers and challenges? In a word – time! We don't lack for enthusiasm, good will and ideas but sometimes finding the time to put ideas into action can be a challenge.

Connecting and communicating with all our different audiences can be a challenge. But again, it comes down to time.

Our front-of-house staff are very accessible – partly because of the training they've had and partly because of their attitude. Where we can all improve, I think, is opening our eyes to the accessible journey and seeing it through the eyes of our patrons, whether they're in a wheelchair or pushing a buggy, or have a vision impairment.

As for the rewards, we're rewarded every day when we see the reactions of our visitors to our exhibitions.

6. Has your accessibility built new audiences for the Govett-Brewster?

Yes, definitely. Our accessibility works across all sections of our community: for example, our Gallery Babes and Gallery Seniors are both popular programmes. As we do more sign language interpreted tours and programmes we are seeing more of the Deaf community come into the gallery.

We expect to see more and more diverse visitors to the gallery as we continue to increase our emphasis in this area. And of course, they will return because they feel welcomed and valued.

7. Top tips to becoming accessible

- Listen to people in the disabled community
- Don't presume
- Be open to new ideas.

8. Looking ahead: what does the Govett-Brewster have on its access radar for the next two years?

We want to continue to improve our accessibility, build on the relationships we've established and engage with different communities. A big focus for us in the next two years will be working on the planned Len Lye Centre.

My aim is to go beyond just ensuring the Len Lye Centre is compliant with Building Code requirements, and seeing it lead the way in using architecture, interior and exhibition design to enhance accessibility for all our visitors. It's a wonderful opportunity to get it right from the outset.
