# Scotland leads UK in cultural access but socioeconomic gaps widen



According to recent research from the National Galleries of Scotland, Scotland exhibits the best access to cultural resources in the UK, although a stark class divide persists. The survey reveals that while 49% of the UK populace believes they have easy access to cultural venues like museums and galleries, this figure rises to an impressive 64% in Scotland. Notably, access is considerably lower in areas such as Wales and the East Midlands, where just 38% report easy access, and in Northern Ireland, where the figure stands at 46%.

The survey underscores a significant disparity along socioeconomic lines, revealing that 59% of individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds feel they have access to cultural activities, compared to only 37% of those from lower socioeconomic groups. In Edinburgh, this divide is particularly pronounced, with 87% of the higher socioeconomic group claiming easy access to cultural experiences, contrasted with just 68% of those from lower backgrounds.

These findings arise as the National Galleries of Scotland calls for governmental support to develop a cutting-edge facility known as The Art Works in Granton, North Edinburgh. The planned centre aims to enhance cultural access across Scotland and beyond, facilitating loans and touring programmes that target communities with historic cultural disengagement. The Art Works project boasts a projected benefit/cost ratio of 1.31, suggesting that for every £3 invested, £4 in broader societal benefits could be anticipated.

Anne Lyden, director-general of the National Galleries of Scotland, expressed concern over the widening socioeconomic divide in access to culture, stating, “The socioeconomic divide in access to culture in the UK is deeply concerning. Not only is The Art Works vital to the regeneration of Granton... but it will also act as an enabler that will allow us to share Scotland’s incredible art collection more widely.” Lyden emphasised the profound impact of cultural engagement on mental health, noting that galleries and museums are increasingly recognised for their role in alleviating anxiety and depression.

Chairman of the National Galleries of Scotland, Benny Higgins, added to this sentiment, affirming that the facility would not only increase accessibility to Scotland's national art collection but also ensure its safekeeping. Higgins warned that without The Art Works, the existing storage facilities pose risks to the collection, stating, “Without The Art Works we’re not only risking catastrophic failure by storing the collection in buildings that aren’t fit for purpose, we’re preventing people from having easy access to culture.”

The recent Scottish Household Survey further supports these insights, revealing that 88% of adults in Scotland engaged with culture over the past year, either attending events or participating in various activities. However, disparities remain evident across local authorities, influenced by factors such as urban-rural distribution and the availability of cultural services. Even with high satisfaction rates—91% of library users and 90% of museum-goers expressing contentment—significant gaps in engagement persist, particularly among groups such as older adults and those with lower incomes, indicating a continued need for targeted outreach initiatives.

As financial pressures mount on cultural institutions—evidenced by a survey revealing that 11% of Scottish museums believe they may face closure within a year—there is a clear urgency in securing financial backing for initiatives like The Art Works. While the Scottish Government has pledged £12.1 million towards the project, ongoing discussions aim to ensure value for money in further investments. Meanwhile, a UK Government spokesperson stressed their commitment to broadening access to arts and culture, acknowledging the necessity of addressing inequities inherent within the current system.

The path forward for Scotland's cultural landscape is intertwined not only with funding and infrastructure but also with the recognition of art’s transformative potential for all social strata. The imperative remains clear: without decisive action, access to culture will continue to reflect and exacerbate existing societal divides.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/scots-have-best-access-to-culture-in-uk-but-class-divide-exists-survey-suggests-QAHTKP7DGVLE5JDULFZFR3K52I/), [[4]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/5/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/scots-have-best-access-to-culture-in-uk-but-class-divide-exists-survey-suggests-QAHTKP7DGVLE5JDULFZFR3K52I/), [[2]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/), [[5]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/6/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/3/), [[6]](https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/research/national-survey-for-scotlands-museums-galleries/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/scots-have-best-access-to-culture-in-uk-but-class-divide-exists-survey-suggests-QAHTKP7DGVLE5JDULFZFR3K52I/), [[5]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/6/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/scots-have-best-access-to-culture-in-uk-but-class-divide-exists-survey-suggests-QAHTKP7DGVLE5JDULFZFR3K52I/), [[4]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/5/), [[7]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/scotlands-museums-and-galleries-face-funding-gap)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/scots-have-best-access-to-culture-in-uk-but-class-divide-exists-survey-suggests-QAHTKP7DGVLE5JDULFZFR3K52I/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/> - The Scottish Household Survey 2023 reveals that 88% of adults in Scotland engaged with culture in the past year, either by attending cultural events or participating in activities. This figure has remained consistent since 2022. However, cultural engagement varies across local authorities, influenced by factors such as urban-rural distribution and access to cultural infrastructure. The survey also highlights disparities in attendance and participation among different population subgroups, emphasizing the need for equitable access to cultural opportunities.
3. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/3/> - In 2023, 76% of adults in Scotland attended a cultural event or visited a cultural place, an increase from 74% in 2022. The most common cultural attendance was at the cinema (50%), followed by live music events (36%) and visits to historic places (33%). Libraries were the most frequently visited cultural venues. Despite these figures, significant differences in attendance exist among various population subgroups, particularly among adults with no qualifications, older adults, those with lower incomes, and individuals with disabilities.
4. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/5/> - The 2023 survey indicates that 74% of adults in Scotland participated in a cultural activity, with reading being the most popular form (62%). Other activities included viewing performances online (21%) and crafts (18%). Participation levels varied across local authorities, with Edinburgh, South Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute, and East Lothian reporting the highest participation rates. Disparities in participation were also noted among different population subgroups, highlighting the need for targeted initiatives to promote cultural engagement.
5. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cultural-engagement-scotland-2023-findings-scottish-household-survey/pages/6/> - Satisfaction with Local Authority cultural services in Scotland remained high in 2023, with 91% of library users, 90% of museum and gallery visitors, and 88% of theatre and concert hall attendees expressing satisfaction. These figures have improved since 2022, particularly for theatres and concert halls, where satisfaction increased from 85% to 88%, and for museums and galleries, where satisfaction rose from 87% to 90%. However, satisfaction levels among all adults, including non-users, were lower, indicating potential barriers to access.
6. <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/research/national-survey-for-scotlands-museums-galleries/> - The National Survey for Scotland’s Museums and Galleries, commissioned by Museums Galleries Scotland and conducted by DC Research in mid-2022, provides essential information about the sector. It highlights the impact of the pandemic, with visits dropping from 12.8 million in 2019-20 to 5.2 million in 2021-22. The survey also reveals that 64% of museums and galleries actively engage in health and wellbeing initiatives, and over half have plans to increase their online collections, indicating a commitment to community engagement and adaptation.
7. <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/scotlands-museums-and-galleries-face-funding-gap> - A survey by Museums Galleries Scotland found that 11% of Scottish museums and galleries feel at risk of closure in the next twelve months. The survey also revealed that 14% of respondents have less than one month's reserves, and 28% have less than three months' reserves. Financial challenges, including rising costs and public sector funding cuts, are leading to a reduction in services and outreach programmes, affecting the sector's sustainability and ability to deliver community benefits.