

Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund

2024 Review Key Findings

Introduction

This paper summarises the findings of research undertaken as part of a review of the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund in spring 2024. We want to thank and credit the seven researchers and their networks who contributed generously to the research and share their insights into the future priorities for funding museum participatory and community-led practice. The findings have influenced changes to the fund – including becoming the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund – and will be useful for others in the museum sector (funders, policymakers and practitioners) to incorporate into their own work.

Between 2011 and 2024, the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund has awarded £14m in 191 grants to museums. It began as a fund to research, conserve and use stored museum collections and has evolved in hand with strategies at the Museums Association and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. From 2023 we began offering core as well as project funding, with a focus on funding museums and their community partners for inclusive collections and participation work. The fund supports social and climate justice using museum collections, in ways that are relevant to local contexts and relationships. In 2023 we also enhanced our networking and learning dissemination, for example introducing action learning sets for the early phase of a funding period.

Approach

Our review of the Collections Fund was to understand the impact of our funding in the context of the wider UK museum sector and the society in which it exists, and to develop recommendations for the future of the fund. We know that the ongoing cost of living crisis has resulted in precarity for museums, especially local authority and former local authority museums. National policy differences and devolved budgets alter financial impact in some areas and change the context of how campaigns such as decolonisation and climate justice are dealt with. This context makes the purpose of the Collections Fund all the more relevant: to develop creative, confident communities and help museums to change lives through inclusive and participatory collections work.

We commissioned a group of seven researchers to consult their networks and provide a short provocation piece on the opportunities and barriers for UK museums to support the development of creative, confident communities. Four of our researchers were from the museums sector and had provided insights for a previous review of the fund in 2022. The remaining three researchers were from community organisations who had worked with

museums. Each of the seven researchers shared their provocation paper with the MA and the group and the group then met with a facilitator (Eleri Butler) to discuss their findings, draw conclusions and make recommendations for the future of the fund.

Eleri has also facilitated action learning sets of our grantees since 2023 as well as undertaking further consultation via a grantee questionnaire and with community partners working with museums that we have funded. This was supported by internal evaluation and data drawn from individual grant reports.

What We Heard

The seven researchers articulated recommendations for future funding that were consistent with all the other elements of our review:

The fund should enable museums to focus on people

Museums should become more of a social and cultural space for action, activism and transformation. This is especially pertinent when undertaking decolonisation work.

“Don’t give us your experts on our culture and tradition. Give us our experts, if you don’t know them, we will lead you to them!” Takura Makoni, ACSONI

The researchers recommended that the MA should consider a name change to reflect this; ensure that the application process is accessible and require participatory budgeting and inclusive recruitment be included in planned work. Additionally, researchers recommended that the fund should enable museums to fund capital work to make their spaces accessible (e.g. Changing Places toilets).

Community organisations should have more of a stake in funded work

Museums still tend to look for communities to engage on the museum’s terms and for communities to understand their slow nature with complex governance and responsibility for buildings and collections. Community partners argue that museums need them and that curatorial approaches can be a barrier to activism.

There was a recommendation for the Collections Fund to award grants to community groups directly, making it possible for them to take their proposals to museums and encourage early partnerships to develop work together.

“It’s about the right people in the right room...it’s about getting people on a hook – a hook they didn’t know existed.” Alison Paterson, Blackhall Community Centre.

Alongside this the researchers emphasised the need to pay community partners for their time and expertise; to make sure that their voices are recognised; and to make relationships between museums and communities relational rather than transactional. Our internal evaluation supported this as we are seeing more applications built on equitable working relationships, though this is still far from the norm.

There is a need to fund over longer periods or mitigate against the risks of short-term funding

The researchers from community organisations highlighted the risks of short-term relationships from their own experiences, in terms of a lack of trust and a failure to meet the potential social outcomes of working together. There is also a risk of tokenism if a commitment to make longer term changes in the way museums work is not made.

“Projects need to plan for inclusive engagement and legacy, the museum needs to make provision to continue funding work from a museum’s core budget once the short-term project ends.” PurpleSTARS co-researchers.

Beyond a recommendation for funders support longer term grants, researchers emphasised that museums should plan more for the legacy of their funded work and be required to evidence this in their application.

The wellbeing of staff needs to be considered

This was mentioned by researchers and particularly highlighted by grantees in our action learning sets. There was a call for the fund to require supervisory support and an emphasis that undertaking participatory and values-led work can be difficult with the potential for project staff to feel isolated. We also heard the ways in which funding requirements are effective levers for changes in practice and so see the importance of our role in ensuring that wellbeing support is provided.

What We'll Do

We will relaunch the fund as the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund in December 2024 and the next deadline for expressions of interest will be 05 February 2025. While the purpose of the fund remains the same - supporting work with museum collections to improve inclusion and equitable working with community partners, the way that we fund is being updated to make partnership applications easier and to link fixed-term work to long term thinking and relationships. The fund will place more emphasis on equitable working, supporting wellbeing and legacy planning.

We're not able to apply all of our researchers' recommendations in the new iteration of the fund, but we'll continue to share learning from the fund and will produce resources that

can help applicants and others in the sector. We will continue to review our processes with both museums and community organisations in order to evaluate our impact and effectiveness.

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