

**Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, run by Museums Association**

## **Practice Insights**

**Spring 2024**

**Julia Hoffbrand**

**& Eleri Butler**

Eleri Butler Consultancy

## Introduction

The Museums Association's vision is a society in which inclusive, participatory, and sustainable museums are at the heart of their communities.

Through the *Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund* (the Collections Fund), run by the Museums Association, museums are encouraged and supported to change lives every day, by focusing on social and climate justice and by leading practice that centres community participation, equity and inclusion.

The Collections Fund has a dual focus on inclusion and collections, which means museums are supported to improve their inclusive collections and participatory practice with, and sometimes led by, community partners.

Genuine participation and co-production to support social and climate justice, in ways that are relevant to local communities, takes time and commitment to develop and sustain. Embedding inclusion into an organisation's core work also helps ensure the longevity of community relationships and the work's impact.

Many UK museums have demonstrated leading work in community engagement that supports inclusive collections, and that embeds diversity and equity in practice. Many museums use the self-assessment framework developed by the Museums Association, *Power to the People*, which simultaneously supports museums starting to build relationships with community partners, and those that already have deep and meaningful participation, to continually improve their approach.

The Museums Association is committed to amplifying leading practice and enhancing learning from Collections Fund grantees to share this with the wider museum sector, so that new grantees and others can learn and build from practice across the network. By running Action Learning Sets with new Collections Fund grantees, the Museums Association also helps share learning, focus on action, and foregrounds leading practice in funded museums.

Some case studies from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund are already [available online](#) .

This ***Practice Insights*** paper complements these by sharing good practice provided by a self-selecting sample of museum grantees. It also includes some themes from Action Learning Sets and some practical questions for museums, that help reinforce the journey towards embedding community engagement and participatory practice.

Whilst the place, size, and scope of museums delivering the Collections Fund vary, they all have one thing in common: they share a strong commitment to effective, impactful, and sustainable participatory practice, inclusion, and social and climate justice to create lasting change in communities.

## Practice insights: common themes

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*“This is not a project with a beginning and an end but part of a continuous journey to change lives.”*

*(Collections Fund grantee)*

### The benefit of flexible funding for core costs

One of the benefits of the new phase of the Collections Fund is that it funds core costs associated with delivering inclusive collections and participation work.

Museums can allocate the funding flexibly to progress their strategic aims relating to equity, inclusion and being community-led in ways that are relevant to local contexts and community relationships. Embedding this work into core funding helps ensure that the work and its legacy are integrated across the museum into organisational systems, structures and practice.

Embedding this work into core funding also reinforces that the work is part of a museum’s ongoing strategic development, rather than a discrete project separate from the museum’s other work. Several museums felt this core funding has accelerated their inclusive work becoming integral to their identity – to it becoming simply who they are and what they do.

The shift to more flexible and core funding helps the work to be recognised as a collective organisational responsibility, and can assist in integrating it into supervisory systems and leadership processes. This has also helped relieve the overwhelming sense of responsibility for the work’s success that those leading community engagement often feel, when much of the transformation needed is a shared organisational goal.

Flexible funding also helps support flexibility in delivery as circumstances change, and the provision of relevant, targeted reporting systems, without being too onerous on museums and communities. Simplified reporting on collective impact can also help create a sense of unity and purpose in a region, of being on a continuous journey to change people’s lives for the better, which itself is a valuable shared goal. It was noted that success should be measured by how the museum space makes people feel, as much as by anything else that was achieved.

Some museums leading on social justice and decolonisation observed that their objectives may be impacted adversely by national policy or legislative change. They recognised the value that collective institutional and community advocacy can bring in strengthening leadership and responsibility nationally for decolonisation and anti-racism across sectors and by governments.

### Questions to consider for museums -

1. *Can you influence or raise awareness of the benefits of investing in core costs with other funders, to encourage continuation of core funding opportunities and a shared approach for investment into social and climate justice work?*
2. *Do you evidence the impact of this core-funded work as simply as possible?*
3. *Does the core-funded work you do improve how people feel, when at work and when using the museum?*
4. *Do you prioritise the importance of supervisory support for employees delivering or responsible for community participation work?*
5. *Has this responsibility for participatory practice been integrated across the work of several teams and is it visible in your leadership and supervision systems?*
6. *Can you ensure the legacy from this funding continues and gets embedded into and across your organisational systems and processes?*

***“We’ve moved away from working with communities on projects and have just become a platform for communities and partners to say what they want to say and showcase how they want to say it.”***  
(Collections Fund grantee)

## **How we work is as important as what we do**

Another benefit of delivering the Collections Fund is that it helps museums to change their ways of thinking about communities and collections, and to implement new approaches.

Many museums said that the funding has helped them turn traditional museum thinking on its head and ‘unlearn’ traditional practice, with one observing that community engagement and participatory practice is not additional to its curatorial practice; it *is* its curatorial practice. The funding has helped reinforce recognition that public collections belong to communities, and that communities hold expertise and enable museums to stay relevant and meaningful.

The funding has also given museums the confidence and opportunity to be ambitious and bold, and experiment with new creative approaches to making collections accessible, empowering and relevant. It has enabled some museums to move from a model of asking communities to contribute to their work, to models where they engage with communities extensively, meet them where they are, build relationships and trust, get to know them and what they want. They listen and are led by communities and share decision-making.

The funding has helped some museums strengthen organisational and senior leadership support for their community work, which in turn has positively impacted their appetite for taking risks alongside communities. The funding can also help museums improve their processes and approaches to engaging with communities that they may have traditionally found hard to engage with.

Some museums highlighted that funding can help museums review other barriers to community engagement, for example, the accessibility or otherwise of organisational processes like procurement and onboarding systems that create barriers to engagement for small organisations.

Museums have also identified that they need to support staff, volunteers and community partners in their social justice work by providing specialist training on issues like anti-racism and trauma-responsive approaches and practice. Several now routinely provide this, and in one museum, its community partner is empowered to run this training. Other museums are grappling with how to ensure their organisations are better prepared for the challenges that meaningful engagement with community members brings.

### **Questions to consider for museums -**

- 1. Have you embedded participatory practice into values, governance arrangements and operating systems?*
- 2. Can you change or mitigate organisational system barriers (financial, human resources or procurement) so that engagement with communities is streamlined and as easy as possible from the start?*
- 3. Have you taken all possible steps to ensure your museum is not hard to reach for individuals and communities in your area?*
- 4. Do you provide trauma-informed training to inform your work internally and externally?*
- 5. Do you amplify community experiences and leadership in your work, and can you open museum spaces to provide a platform for community action?*

***“We always say that it's not so much about these people needing us, it's us needing them.”*** (Collections Fund grantee)

***“Having shared values with our community, being led by partners, our willingness to meet partners where they are, not knowing what will happen but being open and ready to turn everything on its head, this is now integral to our identity, it’s part of who we are as a museum.”***

*(Collections Fund grantee)*

## **People and culture**

Some museums spoke of the benefits the change in approach has brought in relation to their people and culture, and how diversifying teams with different lived and professional experience through funding from the Collections Fund has greatly benefitted their scope of work and their reach.

This funding has led, for example, to some museums introducing values-driven recruitment to help find people with lived or professional experience to help connect with communities. Museums said that recruitment practices and plans should be as accessible and simple as possible, and positive action taken to widen the pool of interested applicants for positions. The funding helps employ community members to deliver the collaborative work, which also helps museums to better reflect the communities they operate in.

The funding has also helped values-driven work to be amplified across all levels of museums and has helped strengthen the value placed on depth, rather than breadth, of engagement. Some museums, for example, chose to engage deeply with a limited number of community groups rather than reach more people but have less impact.

Several museums said that having the organisation’s commitment to social justice in its strategic aims positively influenced the organisation’s culture. A common theme raised by several museums was how this funding can influence culture change, so that power shifts from being held internally by traditional positions within museums, towards communities. The funding was seen as a means by which co-design and co-production could become more embedded across the work of the museum.

Time was also identified as a vital aspect of achieving effective participatory practice. Time and space for thinking, for starting and continuing conversations, for meeting in person, for building relationships and trust, and time for travelling between community groups, was all recognised as being important, but at risk of being overlooked if the work isn’t planned well. Time for reflection and sharing learning, and time for training and upskilling teams with knowledge and skills to do this work well was also recognised as valuable and which this funding could assist with. So too was time for communities and museums to enjoy the process of learning and having fun together.

Museums commented on how key the commitment of their organisation and senior leadership team is to their inclusive work and how leadership can influence and inform whether the work underway is embedded across a range of projects to achieve a whole organisational approach to participatory practice and inclusion.

### **Questions to consider for museums -**

- 1. Does your recruitment process align with and ask questions about your values ?*
- 2. Do community members get involved in training or recruitment?*
- 3. Do you have systems in place to support and encourage people from community agencies in applying for your vacancies, or taking up secondments or placements?*
- 4. Do you allocate sufficient time in your planning, delivery and review processes to build trust and relationships with community members?*

***“You’re building a relationship to build trust and then you’re building a relationship to build a gallery.”***

*(Collections Fund grantee)*

***“[the museum ran] one writing workshop for the community. This gave so much confidence to me and other participants and that led to an ongoing writers group which meets regularly in that space. We now have plans with the local walking group, so it’s joined up different groups in the community. That’s all thanks to the initial workshop... it’s opened something for me that I didn’t know I had.”***

*(Community member working with a Museum)*

## **Community voices**

Community members involved in local museums spoke of the benefit of this funding for their community and for them individually. For example, it had enabled local people – whether in a remote rural area or city suburb - to explore colonialism and slavery in the local area, consider wider connections between the local and global and what decolonisation might mean for them.

The funding also meant that museums could engage with a wider group of people than those who traditionally visit a museum. By opening the museum’s space to communities to run workshops and groups, individuals could join a taster session which led to ongoing involvement in the museum’s work. It enabled local community members to access training to lead tours and walks, to bring to life local heritage, and it created arts and cultural connections for people who want to learn more about their local area.

Community members also identified the benefits that inclusion and participatory practice brought to the local area, because having a thriving local museum that operates as a community hub for local activities also benefits business and attracts tourism.

Paying community members for their time, expertise and skills was recognised by many community members as an important aspect of this work, which needed to be budgeted for from the outset. Some museums paid community members the same rate, others had a scale of reimbursement depending on the nature of work, whilst others used vouchers as remuneration, and made sure that refreshments, transport and childcare costs were covered too where relevant. This approach recognises that good practice has a cost, as does the knowledge and expertise community contributors bring.

Community members identified their engagement with Board members to be as important as involvement with employees, and that participatory practice should be evident across all parts of the museum. Communities may also be encouraged to apply to join, or be involved in recruiting, the Board membership.

### **Questions to consider for museums -**

- 1. Do you involve community members in decisions relating to exhibitions or wider Museum business, and can this be improved?*
- 2. Do you remunerate community members for their expertise and knowledge?*
- 3. Do you have a system to resolve any difficulties or challenges communities may experience in working with your organisation?*
- 4. How do you capture learning and reflection from your participatory practice?*
- 5. How does your community influence or inform what your organisation defines as success and in how you evaluate your work?*

***“The curator and director come to these meetings ... to actually discuss with us what the museum or what the art centre is going to do or is thinking of putting on and how we would like to maybe shape it or help to change it or do something about it.”***

*(Community member working with a Museum)*

## Practice insights: Case studies

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### Museums Northumberland (England)

#### **Community advisory panel**

#### ***Femmer to Firmer*** (*'femmer' means 'fragile' in Northumbrian dialect*)

The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund provided Museums Northumberland, through *Femmer to Firmer*, with an opportunity to collaborate with its local communities to amplify their voices and shape the future of the collections.

Museums Northumberland's collections are formed from separate collections at four sites, previously owned by different local authorities. Historic cataloguing issues meant that there was no complete inventory of what Museums Northumberland owned.

A team of community volunteers made a complete inventory of the collections. Others responded to Museum Northumberland's call-out to form a Community Panel to advise on and make decisions about disposals and to co-develop a Collections Development policy identifying themes and priorities for rationalisation, disposals and acquisitions reflecting Northumberland and its people.

The Panel's work was structured around regular sessions facilitated by museum staff. Conversations and consultation were key. From the outset staff involved Panel members to inform how they wanted sessions structured, which informed the timing and location of sessions so that those with different commitments and resources could take part, and expenses were met.

In sessions, using objects from the collection, members engaged with issues, ethics and practice relating to disposal and acquisition. People's stories and how they related to collections were explored across different parts of Northumberland. The Panel informed creation of hands-on sessions using objects from the collection.

Time was vital for effective collaboration. This included time to discuss objects in sessions and to share stories and knowledge, time to build relationships and trust, and time to establish objects' ownership and determine disposal routes.

Panel sessions also focused on museum staff sharing curatorial skills and knowledge and supporting the community to look after their collection.

Museums Northumberland prioritised staff time for working alongside Panel members as one team. Museum Board members were also knowledgeable about this work and it is exciting for *Femmer to Firmer* staff that other parts of Museums Northumberland have also benefitted from the value and expertise the Panel brings to its work. The Panel has since advised the retail team, and contributed advice on exhibitions and programming.

A new role of Community Connector to lead liaison with the Panel and wider community is now exploring with them how else they may want to influence and engage with the organisation, and the success of the Panel and its work has transformed the approach to future engagement for the museum.

Local communities' voices in acquisitions are written into the co-developed Collections Development policy. Panel members recently referred to it when it considered the offer of a group of paintings for the collection. With contextual information about the paintings provided by staff, and guided by their co-authored policy, they decided not to accept the donation.

## Horniman Museum and Gardens (England)

### ***Community engagement and participatory practice is curatorial approach*** **茶, चाय, Tea (Cha, Chai, Tea)**

The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund provided funding to the Horniman Museum to increase its audiences from London's South Asian and East and South-East Asian communities by co-producing a temporary exhibition, 茶, चाय, Tea (Cha, Chai, Tea), exploring the global history of tea and addressing the museum's colonial legacy, led by South Asian and East and South-East Asian community partners.

Turning traditional museum thinking on its head, the museum's first step, several months before applying for funding, was to consult extensively with community groups, asking what they would want to say and see in an exhibition around tea and its role in colonialism, and what stories they would want the objects to tell.

As a result, the museum reworked its understanding of the audience that it wanted to engage with it, and co-developed exhibition themes, narrative and interpretation.

Only after it had conducted this foundational consultation, did the museum invite community groups – who all work to create social impact - to collaborate, asking if they were interested in partnering within the scope of their own work.

Equally shared decision-making, and community-led and inclusive practice were key to collaboration. Each community partner was responsible for its own budget and for creating content for its chosen exhibition area. They led on every aspect of the exhibition, including its target audience, content, narrative, interpretation, design, text and title.

The museum had not expected that communities would decide it was the museum's responsibility to discuss colonialism and its impacts. Similarly, when a partner displayed its appropriately edited 14 minute film, the museum found - contrary to traditional museum thinking - that visitors stayed to watch it in full.

The funding enabled the museum to pay every participant fairly for their time, lived experience and skills. Partners shared copyright in their content and are free to use it in other contexts.

The museum sees its role as 'platforming' – being a platform from which communities can say what they want, how they want. Its team was led by its Senior Curator of Social Practice and it considers that participatory practice is not additional to its curatorial approach - it *is* its curatorial approach.

茶, चाय, Tea (Cha, Chai, Tea) showed the museum that a genuinely participatory model is effective in creating sustainable and meaningful community engagement and participatory practice, and that building money and time for it into core development costs means that full collaboration can begin from the start.

The success of this model for community-led curation is being evaluated and will inform future work across the museum. The museum is applying it to engage other local communities around contemporary collecting to reflect them.

## **Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales**

### ***Bringing collections to communities Valleys Re-Told***

The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund provided funding to Amgueddfa Cymru to facilitate local communities engaging with artworks in national and local collections, informed or inspired by the South Wales Valleys. The aim of its funded work, *Valleys Re-Told*, was to encourage and capture new knowledge and interpretations of artworks that reflect the people, culture, and identity of the South Wales Valleys.

Amgueddfa Cymru partnered with two local museums to engage local community groups and schools. Core to the work was getting to know communities and what they wanted, exploring new ways of doing things, and being comfortable with unknown outcomes. Amgueddfa Cymru recognised that it's not about communities needing museums, it's about museums needing communities.

Meeting groups where they are, finding a connection, and responding to their needs, was key. A group of young people, for example, were interested in vocational issues like who conserves the paintings. Another group connected to the social history of a particular photograph.

The work was led by a dedicated position skilled in making connections and building trust. Examples of some of the work included facilitating the loan from the national collection to a local art group of a painting painted in their village, to display their village library in an exhibition of members' work inspired by it. The museum team has also supported school pupils to create exhibitions inspired by the collections, at partner museums.

Amgueddfa Cymru also facilitated the loan of artworks to a community charity that wants to bring them back for local people and to display them in different local venues, including at a disused mine's changing room. Loaning artworks to community groups is complicated and has involved sharing curatorial skills and knowledge and clarifying how much responsibility a community partner is willing to take.

Questioning traditional museum practice and trying to make communities' requests happen was central. The museum described its approach metaphorically as co-creating 'desire lines' where communities want to go, rather than following traditional museum road markings.

The team conducted ongoing evaluation and reflection, amended processes as needed, and staff kept a reflective journal which will inform reflection and evaluation. Early collaborations purposefully involved engaging communities on how to sustain the relationship after funding ended – how to leave them with the tools, knowledge and contacts to work independently, whilst remaining available to help as needed.

*Valleys Re-Told* has enabled communities to take ownership what they want to do. One group, for example, invited an Amgueddfa Cymru director and their local Welsh Government politician to view their loaned painting in its local setting.

Working with communities has reignited joy in the collections for Amgueddfa Cymru, and colleagues report that it is now easier to get artworks out to communities. New roles are being developed so that they embed community engagement across Amgueddfa Cymru museums, and policies have been reviewed so they embed this vision in practice.

*Valleys Re-Told* has created a ripple effect and other community groups are approaching Amgueddfa Cymru to collaborate.

## National Museums Northern Ireland

### ***Bringing marginalised communities' voices to the centre of collections Global Voices, Local Choices***

The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund provided an opportunity for National Museums NI to deliver its creative inclusive decolonisation work, *Global Voices, Local Choices*, bring diverse cultures and perspectives into Northern Ireland's local and national museums, and empower marginalised communities to make choices relating to Ulster Museum's World Cultures collections and how they are interpreted.

National Museums NI partnered with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI), Northern Ireland Museums Council and five local museums. Six community groups took part, each participating in a series of workshops at their local museum and in the Inclusive Global Histories gallery at Ulster Museum.

The groups worked with ACSONI, the museum and creative facilitators to reflect on the meaning and cultural significance of World Cultures objects that connect to their history, identity and culture. Group members' conversations in sessions together encouraged greater understanding of each other.

Each group selected a World Cultures object that was meaningful to its members, and in several professionally facilitated creative sessions each group developed a display inspired by it. These included writing, music and artwork.

National Museums NI consulted partners and participants at all stages of the work and responded flexibly to their feedback and advice, for example, changing the order in which sessions were held, and holding back objects from handling that might trigger trauma.

Travelling across regions was a vital part of connecting geographically distant museums, meeting local groups, building trust and relationships and encouraging groups to participate. It was important to provide hospitality and reimburse expenses for participants and National Museums NI commissioned anti-racism and trauma-informed training for museum staff, provided by ACSONI.

Museum partners were at different stages of their participatory practice journeys and some had not anticipated the time and resources that the work would require. Strong partnerships and relationships were formed and all want to work together again.

Engagement with the work has given group members a voice in the museum and has helped them develop a sense of being part of something. Deep relationships and friendships have been formed and some of the groups and local museums are now working together on their own programmes independently of National Museums NI.

Like ripples in a pond, other community groups are now approaching National Museums NI to collaborate. National Museums NI has embedded social engagement curation in its structure.

The benefits for National Museums NI have been many, for example, curators and conservators have learned culturally appropriate ways to handle World Cultures objects, and it has recently refreshed a gallery, relying predominantly on feedback from communities. It will ask some of its community partners to participate in wider strategic pieces of work like its vision and plans for the future of all its sites.