

The report below was written as part of reviewing the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund in April 2026, ahead of renewing the fund with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for the period January 2027-December 2029. It summarises the MA’s findings and gives context to our decisions about the future of the fund. It has been edited from the original review report only to remove links to internal or confidential data.

**Review of the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund
Museums Association, April 2026**

“It was felt that [partnership projects grants] had reshaped what museums are, who they serve, and how they work, by placing communities and their delivery firmly at the centre.”

From Insights report

“[Core grants] provided recipients with the means to build meaningful relationships with local/regional and national organisations, and it had supported the introduction of new approaches and contributions from artists and community members.”

From Insights report

“EFCCF-funded work often led to impacts that extended beyond individual activities or outputs, specifically changes in internal working, partnerships, collections practice, access, and, in some cases, climate-aware action.... In many cases, the most durable legacy was not a single output, but an ongoing relationship, repeated collaboration, or a more participatory way of working.”

From Impact report

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What we did

The Museums Association has completed a review of the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund, exploring its progress and impact since its launch in January 2025 and building on earlier work as the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund (2011-2024). This iteration of the fund is supported by EFF with a funding agreement running until December 2026; and the MA will make an application for funding from 2027 onwards, based on the findings summarised in the sections below.

In designing the Communities and Collections Fund we set a direction of travel for the fund to support inclusive and community-led collections work in museums, towards social and climate justice. This was informed by research with museum and community organisation contributors in 2024, as well as the MA's Museums Change Lives campaign and EFF's strategic aims for Creative Confident Communities. The first grants with the new criteria for the Communities and Collections Fund were awarded in June 2025 and so far we have made 13 grants totalling £1,265,584, with much of the funded work in its early stage. Of the grants awarded, eight are for partnership project grants, where museums and community organisations who already work together apply for a collections project they have codesigned; and five are core grants to museums to develop inclusive and community-led collections work. It is in this context that we designed a review with the following components:

- MA data about which organisations engage with the fund; how projected outcomes from funded work map to Creative Confident Communities; and analysis of comparable funding for museums.
- Relevant findings from our Empowering Collections research about sector-level change towards inclusive and participatory collections work in museums. This is research explores change in collections practice in UK museums since we undertook comparable research in 2019 and sets recommendations for work in the next 5-10 years. The full report will be published in June 2026.
- An Insights report of feedback from the facilitators of action learning sets of grantees, including consultation with community organisations involved in the most recent grants.
- Impact research (published) looking back over past grants from the Collections Fund to identify long-term outcomes; and features shared by some of the grantees that have secured a strong legacy from our funding.

What we learned

The evolution of the fund has succeeded in positioning the fund as supporting developmental, leading work. 94% of grants completed since 2023 have met or exceeded their funding outcomes; and a broad range of community partners are involved in grants, e.g. wildlife trusts, prisons and community centres. Insights from grantees emphasise the flexible, values-led approach of the fund and say of partnership project grants, “It was felt that this new grant had reshaped what museums are, who they serve, and how they work, by placing communities and their delivery firmly at the

centre.” And the impact research highlights, “EFCCF-funded work often led to impacts that extended beyond individual activities or outputs, specifically changes in internal working, partnerships, collections practice, access, and, in some cases, climate-aware action.”

Three case studies of recent grants demonstrate our impact:

- [Manchester Jewish Museum](#) received a core grant in 2025. This grant exemplifies the roles museums can have to bring communities together and overcome divisions.
- [Durham University Museums](#), Auckland Youth Community Centre, Blackhall Community Centre and Teesdale Community Resource Hub received a partnership project grant in 2025. This grant exemplifies how museums can act as anchor organisations in a place, facilitating community-led work.
- [Whithorn Museum](#) and Building Futures Galloway received a partnership grant in 2025. This grant exemplifies museums as place-based catalysts acting on local needs, in this case opportunities for young people in a rural context with poor access to further education and training.

Community organisation grantees have benefitted from being formally involved in the fund and from an expectation that they are equal partners on funded work. While community organisation representatives report a good experience with the MA, there is more we can do to support equitable access as our experience grows, for example in terms of:

- the language we use in guidance to avoid hierarchy or jargon, and to centre people
- where we host events, including MA events beyond the fund
- and emphasising that community organisations can receive and manage grant funds.

We can also see from the grantee insights that partnership project grants are supporting ambitious work because they are building on the trusted relationships that museum and community organisation partnerships already have.

Museum grantees have experienced a range of benefits from the fund including: more inclusive and equitable working cultures, e.g. moving from delivery partnerships with communities to collaborative relationships; organisational change towards values-led practice and using short term funding for long term social outcomes; and raising ambitions for museum participation in local and regional civic agendas. Core grants are in high demand for the flexibility this offers museums and because other museum funding for organisational development towards inclusion is rare. We can better focus our guidance to identify the level of embedded change we aim to support with core grants. For example, the impact research identifies some of the features of museums that have seen strong legacy from our funding, including leadership and governing body support, local advocacy and explicitly aligning funded work to strategy and purpose.

Community-led programming and design is common in applications to the fund and inclusive collections work in UK museums has increased demonstrably. Of the 11 recommendations in Empowering Collections 2019, museums report the greatest progress in democratising and decolonising collections work and using collections projects to create social impact; and applicants are articulate in referencing their strategic aims in social terms. In addition, the impact research identifies adoption of decolonised and equitable collections practices in funded museums (page 12), more museums are operating in place-based partnerships (e.g. [Mansfield Museum](#)) and our grantees report that our support and frameworks (e.g. [Power to the People](#)) help them to move from a museum-centred approach, to beginning with people- and community-led agendas.

The museum funding crisis and polarisation across society have created an existential crisis for museums where future resilience and relevance will come from being part of communities. As business models change, museums need to move towards community- and place-based agendas; and to actively work towards social cohesion. Communities and Collections Fund grants are demonstrating this potential (see [case studies](#)) and have the potential to help more museums operate confidently as part of local and regional, multi-agency partnerships.

Museums Association support makes a key difference to the ambition, impact and legacy of funded work. This area of work has developed from advising applicants and coordinating learning dissemination in the early years of the Collections Fund to a programme of: action learning sets for new grantees to develop their work; a peer support network that spans online and in person meetings; a learning framework for MA-led evaluation; adoption of the Power to the People framework; coaching to support legacy and equitable access to the fund; and publications to support sector development. The insights report describes the many benefits of the support we offer, but there is scope to set a more coherent and efficient path through our support. We also want to improve equity for community and museum partners as we have more community organisations joining the fund.

Suggestions for the future of the fund

Findings of the review have broadly matched our expectations in terms of the need, demand, impact and potential for this work in and with museums. However, the research has also shown where we can go further towards equitable access and supporting long-term developmental change in how UK museums help to strengthen local communities.

What might stay the same

Research findings suggest maintaining the fund at an equivalent size, in terms of individual grant thresholds and overall size of the fund. The scale and positioning of the fund are working well as fewer funders are operating in this space; and we fund around 20% of applications that come in at the EOI stage (after coaching calls). Impact research shows the long-term value of the funded work for participants, audiences and organisations and Empowering Collections research shows that our grants are leading the UK museum sector and contributing to long-term sector-wide change, e.g. on democratisation of collections practice.

We suggest continuing the format of the fund, in terms of partnership project and core grants and the schedule of deadlines and assessment. This provides stability for potential applicants in a flexible, personal process that works for widening access to the fund for people with different fundraising experience and capacity. Although we only have a year of grants to reflect on, partnership project and core grants seem to be achieving different things: partnership project grants are supporting established, equitable partnerships to be ambitious, lead change and contribute to local agendas; and core grants are supporting museums to embed change and build capacity that allows them to operate as citizen- and community-centred organisations.

What might change

We would like to update funding outcomes for the MA to move closer to EFF aims for Creative Confident Communities and reflect this in application guidance and materials. This will centre people and communities, rather than museums, to move further towards equity between museums and community partners in the fund. It will also recognise museums as civic spaces, in response to the loss of many other civic spaces in recent years, and support them to become parts of local and regional civic networks (for their resilience and ability to strengthen communities). This change in language will run through the fund.

Fund the MA over a longer period, for stability in our offer and to support longer term evaluation and learning. This review has followed quite quickly after major changes to the fund at the start of 2025 and has prompted constructive improvement within the overall purpose of the fund. With longer term funding we would include evaluation to retain the benefit of this reflective practice, but on a more manageable scale.

Update application guidance to better differentiate what we look for in partnership project and core grants. We have awarded funds to outstanding partnership project and core grants, but each round (so far) we also receive several core applications that lack a real understanding of the embedded change needed to facilitate community-led aims. Using feedback in the Insights and Impact reports,

we will, for example: provide core grant applicants with features we would like them to have to show their readiness for funding; specify that core grant applicants should think differently to project deliverables, e.g. using the Power to the People framework; and emphasise that community partners can lead the application process and manage the funds on a project.

Adapt support from the MA for applicants and grantees, to support the impact and legacy of funded work. This aims to provide equity to community organisations and museums involved in grants now that more community organisations are involved, e.g. through participation in action learning sets, where we host events and the language used in fund materials. We currently offer the support in the table below and suggest the amendments in italics to ensure the offer is clear and efficient for everyone that we work with:

Advisory and coaching calls	With MA staff to support access to the fund for people with varying experience; improve applications; and ensure applications are appropriate to the fund. On demand.
Externally facilitated action learning sets	Cohorts for each funding round for their first year, to work through evaluation plans, Power to the People framework and legacy plans. <i>These will include community partners in future; and the last meeting will include transition to MA grantee network.</i>
Grantee peer network	Annual programme of online meetings and regional in person study days sharing case studies in depth. <i>Online meetings will cover a “curriculum” of key themes: impact measurement, comms planning and support, wellbeing, legacy. Option to create an online Teams channel for peer support and network comms.</i>
End of grant conversation and support	MA evaluation and coaching. <i>Make clear that past grantees can stay in the grantee network, e.g. to support legacy.</i>
Learning dissemination: events and publications	MA conferences, events, training (including online) and creation of resources. <i>Focus on updating core resources in next funding period.</i>

Case Study – Core Funding at Manchester Jewish Museum

In June 2025 Manchester Jewish Museum was awarded a core grant of £100,000 to support collective healing between Manchester’s Jewish and Muslim communities in the context of ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

The museum is situated in Cheetham Hill, an area with 42% Muslim community. The museum’s values include celebrating diversity, promoting acceptance and to be relevant and have an impact on audiences, neighbourhood and society. They have a commitment to increase engagement with people from global majority backgrounds and more diverse communities, in particular those who live locally to the museum. They have been working to increase inclusion in recent years, hosting ESOL workshops and through programmes such as their co-created [Holocaust Memorial Day](#) programme.

Recent events in the Middle East have deeply impacted local Jewish and Muslim communities and have brought most community cohesion work between these communities to a halt. There have been increased levels of both antisemitic incidents and Islamophobic assaults in 2023 and 2024 and there has been a negative impact on community relations and wellbeing.

The museum will use the funding to deliver over 100 facilitated events and activities to identify divisive subjects, share personal perspectives and use the collection as a dialogue for debate and reflection. At least ten partnerships with local organisations will be formed to help them to reach audiences. To protect the wellbeing of everyone involved, all staff will be upskilled on conflict resolution, trauma conscious practice and empathetic listening and will be supported with wellbeing check-ins and resources from the Mental Health Foundation and the Oglesby Trust’s Wellness Wheel. They plan to include relaxation, reflection and joy to participant sessions and will use the “scratch” approach to regularly review the process.

Case Study – Partnership Funding for Durham University Museums, Auckland Youth Community Centre, Blackhall Community Centre & Teesdale Community Resource Hub (TCR)

In June 2025 this partnership received a grant of £99,996 for Street Museum 2, a project to empower communities in the North-East to design and lead work combining local and personal heritage with global history using museum collections.

The project builds on five years of collaboration between the partner organisations that began during the Covid-19 lockdowns with [Street Gallery](#) and then [Street Museum](#) (which brought on board

Blackhall Community Centre) and [Street Cosmos](#) (including the other partners). Each project has seen an evolution in place-based knowledge and equitable practice. They have a shared commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion and have developed systems of shared decision making. Street Museum 2 is designed to deepen and expand upon this work: working in three places simultaneously with each community venue holding its own budget and sharing a project post to coordinate work.

The project is engaging around 3,000 participants from socio-economically deprived areas of the North-East where cost-of-living pressures have deepened inequality and limited access to culture. They aim to build cultural confidence, raise aspirations and foster a sense of ownership over heritage and local stories and will provide paid opportunities. Each community centre has knowledge of localised issues and has the experience, skills, training and support networks to ensure that participants are cared for. For younger participants this project will demonstrate that universities and museums are spaces for them. For the community centres the project will create a lasting network as well as a replicable model for community-led civic engagement. For the university the work will embed equity, co-curation, and shared governance into core practice.

Case study - Partnership funding for Whithorn Museum and Building Futures Galloway

In June 2025, this partnership was awarded £100,000 for a two-year skills project to engage excluded young people to create a full-scale, research-led, medieval carpenter's workshop offering accredited non-academic pathways into heritage and traditional building skills.

The partnership builds on previous work, Whithorn Rebuilds, that worked with non-attenders and vulnerable young people from the organisation's local high school (Douglas Ewart) to enable them to sample opportunities in heritage construction skills, which are in nationally short supply. With other partners Dumfries and Galloway Youth Work, the museum understood local problems of rural geography that prevented access to further education and alternative career pathways and resulted in poor school attendance and attainment alongside high unemployment. The success of that project led to Building Futures Galloway being established as a separate youth employability charity focused on providing in-work training to disadvantaged young people and the expansion of Building Futures' work to include other sites across Galloway.

With the carpenter's workshop, Whithorn has found a way to sustain their work and to continue to address the problem of youth unemployment locally and regionally, by offering young people accredited learning in joinery and blacksmithing, while working on a full-scale public project. Many

of the young people attending are on part-time school timetables or are non-attenders often due to difficult home lives or social anxiety.

For young people, the opportunity the project offers is significant. Pupils with additional support needs are regular attendees and the school has reported improved engagement with other areas of the curriculum. For the 18-25-year-olds employed through Building Futures, the programme has enabled them to develop communication skills and confidence as they tutor pupils only a few years younger than themselves. 11 young people have so far been employed by Building Futures, as well as five work placements and positive onwards steps for a number of vulnerable young people in construction qualifications and traditional skills like stonemasonry. The deputy head of the Douglas Ewart High School reported that “the pupils who have attended have seen a reduction in police involvement and negative sanctions at school as their feeling of self-worth and achievement has increased.”