

Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, run by Museums Association

Practice Insights

Winter 2024

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A purple brushstroke graphic with a rough, hand-painted edge, containing the text 'Eleri Butler Consultancy' in white.

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 [online](#)¹.

The first [Practice Insights briefing](#) in Spring 2024 included some themes from Action Learning Sets and some practical questions for museums, that help reinforce the journey towards embedding community engagement and participatory practice.

This second ***Practice Insights*** briefing provides additional good practice 'case studies' provided by a self-selecting sample of museum grantees.

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.

¹ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/funding/efccf/>

The Booth Museum of Natural History, Brighton & Hove Museums (England)

Community engagement and participatory practice through work and play - Discover our Dioramas

The Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton was funded to engage with local under-10s to co-design the collection's first new diorama since the 1930s. The Museum was founded by Edward Booth and holds his large collection of dioramas of British birds.

The *Discover our Dioramas* team's first step was to consult extensively with under-10s, their carers and educators. The aim was to get to know these audiences and learn what they wanted to see on display, how they connected to nature, and their thoughts on climate change and climate anxiety. Audience research was conducted for three months within the Museum and out and about in Brighton & Hove, using 'pop ups', focus groups, observations and voting stations. The team built on this over the next 18 months, organising events and activities. An important discovery was that the public wanted to know what diorama and taxidermy meant – neither are words used in everyday conversation.

The team involved engagement, front of house and curatorial colleagues, led by the Head of Learning & Engagement, and turning around traditional ways of thinking about the collections and metaphorically throwing everything up into the air and seeing what landed. Emphasis was on being playful, experimenting, learning, reflecting and evaluating as consultation and conversations happened. Feedback highlighted that young audiences wanted to connect with the natural world and explore climate changes, and to feel at home in the Museum.

Some colleagues hadn't been involved in impactful community engagement and participatory work before. To build mutual trust in the engagement and participatory process the team spent time using community engagement methods within the Museum itself - including lots of conversations and cups of tea.

Local residents and business owners were invited into the space as neighbours. The Museum's approach, encapsulated by the motto 'it's just a museum', became less formal and authoritative, and more focused on creating joy and having fun. The physical environment in the Museum was transformed into a more welcoming space for families, with a range of SEN resources - ear defenders, weighted blankets, torches and fidget toys - that were accessible for children with a range of learning needs, at any time. These also proved popular with adult visitors.

The new diorama, "Life in a Garden", is now on display, encapsulating the themes and ideas which emerged from the consultation. It portrays a 2020s urban garden with a bird feeder, populated with creatures sharing the same ecosystem. The diorama encourages conversations about the natural world, eco systems and climate change.

Following this successful approach, colleagues have requested that the 'Team Booth' approach is applied across Brighton & Hove Museums sites.

A Community Connector post has been created to match communities' needs with the Museum's resources by developing relationships with our immediate neighbours, rolling out SEN resources on more sites, and creating 'cosy corners'. Brighton & Hove Museums is currently reviewing making what people want to see in its museums a key thread in its collections development policy.

² Available at Museums Association Website:

<https://media.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2024/10/16115453/Practice-insights-May-2024-to-MA.pdf>

The Scottish Crannog Centre, Aberfeldy (Scotland)

From skill-building, respite and craft work to strong strategic partnerships with NGOs.

The Scottish Crannog Centre received funding to engage communities with prehistoric pottery collections, with a particular focus on women impacted by domestic abuse and their families, refugees and people seeking asylum, and autistic young people.

The Centre engaged from the outset with local community services, including a charity supporting survivors of domestic abuse, and a charity supporting refugees and asylum seekers. The funded work included delivering a series of creative engagement activities inspired by the collections, which offered skill building, respite, and craft and creative work.

At first curatorial staff wanted to focus on traditional curatorial practices. Many conversations, meetings, and reflection with engagement colleagues helped change traditional ways of thinking about collections, and forged a commitment across the Centre to meaningful co-creation. The shared values of the Centre's team, and the shared roles and communication between colleagues helped accelerate the change.

Effective consultation and building trusting relationships was fundamental to the work. Staff held frequent meetings with community partners to understand what they needed, and reflected on and evaluated every session. For example, after a session during which women made clay objects, staff saw that they had nothing in which to carry their creations home. Next time carrier bags were brought in by staff but after further reflection, they provided attractive gift bags from the Centre's shop.

The Centre worked flexibly, always striving to accommodate partners' requests. A team from the Centre, who shared similar lived experience, worked with women impacted by domestic abuse and helped build connections and trust. Feedback also led to doing more off-site work with groups to reduce accessibility barriers, introducing respite trips for community partner staff, hiring coaches to bring groups to the Centre and providing lunches.

The Centre collaborated with community partners to co-create a new museum exhibition to tell diverse stories to diverse audiences. Collaboration worked both ways. A community partner redesigned its aftercare programme for clients, and with the Centre's input, they incorporated the Centre's sessions into the programme.

As the work has developed, it is no longer referred to as a 'project' because it is long term and has already gone beyond the initial project. The Centre also responded to emerging needs and priorities and worked with funders to reallocate resources as circumstances changed.

The funded work has sparked conversations. During a shared lunch, a participant offered to bring home-made pakoras and make chai on an open fire at the Centre's open day. He felt safe to ask the Centre to hire a coach to bring his family and friends. He wanted to tell his story, and he felt that it would be accepted and that he would be supported to do so.

The Centre's strong relationships with individual community services has led to four strategic partnerships that are incredibly valuable to the Centre. These partnerships provide a strong foundation for participatory practice, and enables future collaboration to maximise the potential of its work. Quoting the words of a colleague at another organisation, the Centre noted that ***"the risks are tiny, but the rewards are everything in this way of working."***

The Scottish Crannog Centre won the Visitor Welcome Award in the Museum and Heritage Awards 2023 and the Most Sustainable Museum Project at the Museum and Heritage Awards 2024.

Marvels & Mayhem, Showtown, Blackpool (England)

Co-creating an internationally significant collection.

Through its funding of *Marvels & Mayhem*, the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund provided Blackpool Museum Project (now Showtown) with an opportunity to enhance understanding and knowledge of the internationally significant Blackpool Tower Circus archive collection, and to engage with the circus community, local audiences and teachers and schools.

The collection is a business archive holding posters, contracts, photographs and other records relating to the Blackpool Tower Circus. The team wanted to uncover the experiential stories behind this material to engage audiences with it and to inform development of a new museum for Blackpool.

Connecting with the circus community was essential to unlocking these stories and, as a new museum, the team had to earn trust from the outset. Local retired performers were invited to form a network, from which a circus community network developed. A Stakeholder and Engagement Co-ordinator built trusting relationships with these networks, and events and workshops were held where the circus community recorded stories and delivered talks sharing their knowledge. The networks grew rapidly by word of mouth and members donated and loaned objects for the new museum. The team also engaged teachers and pupils, created a school's pack about the collection and contributed to Blackpool's Arts and Libraries Festival of Words.

Alongside the engagement team's collaboration with the circus community, local volunteers at Blackpool Heritage Centre (now Showtown History Centre) listed the collection and cleaned and rehoused its photographs. This was key to making the collection accessible for developing the new museum, and for engaging communities.

Documentation work and circus community engagement began at the same time but the documentation team found itself racing to provide accessible collection material about which the circus community could share their knowledge. As work progressed, the team learned that to maximise work being undertaken by the circus community network, basic documentation of the collection needed to be in place first.

During the work, damage to the Heritage Centre, Covid-19 and a change in venue for the new museum, put the circus community network on hold. However, the delay provided an opportunity to catch up with documentation and for the circus community network activities to embed themselves. Documentation volunteers continued to work remotely, using collection material digitised by the team, so maintaining enthusiasm and workflows.

A health and social care strand of work that had been part of the original *Marvels & Mayhem* application became impossible due to the pandemic. However, during collections work the team identified material relating to Little People performing in the Circus and has subsequently partnered with the charity Little People UK to co-produce new stories inspired by it. The Collection Fund's flexibility was key to enabling this change in *Marvels & Mayhem's* scope.

The collection is now documented, rehoused and accessible, and is an internationally important destination for researchers into circus. Building on the research and understanding of its collections that *Marvels & Mayhem* enabled, Showtown recently secured another internationally significant circus collection.

Showtown is now implementing the operational model of delivery used for *Marvels & Mayhem* - working collaboratively, network development and co-production - in its other work, for example, in a new collaboration about Blackpool during World War II.