

Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund

Lessons Learned: June 2025

Introduction

The MA received expressions of interest for the first round of the new Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund in February 2025. Ahead of the deadline for the next funding round, this blog explores some of the patterns, strengths and weaknesses among the applications received and how we have adapted our approach to build on these lessons learned.

With the launch of the Communities and Collections Fund (previously the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund) we offer two types of grant:

- Core funding to support museums that have established strategic aims for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and that are ready to use their collections to support social and climate justice in ways that are relevant to local contexts and relationships
- Partnership project funding to support museums and community organisations to work equitably on inclusive project work with collections.

Number of applications

We received 26 Expressions of Interest (EOI) to the first round of funding which was lower than we usually would see. Before submitting we recommend that organisations contact us for a conversation about their idea. The purpose of this is to ensure that all applications meet the basic criteria and to offer coaching to strengthen ideas. This provides some equity for those organisations with less in-house experience of submitting grant applications as well as community organisations who may be less familiar with our practice and expectations.

In total we received 50 enquiries about the fund. These were in the form of phone calls, emails and online meetings. Of these 50 enquiries, 24 submitted expressions of interest forms. Of the two who didn't contact us prior to applying, one failed to meet several criteria and one was shortlisted.

We advised seven organisations not to apply as they did not sufficiently meet the criteria. A further seven decided, after advice, that later rounds of this fund would be a better fit. This shows that our pre-application conversations are successful as a method of ensuring that organisations use their fundraising resources sensibly. We're also aware that as we have moved our EOI deadlines earlier (to February and July each year) to allow more time



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for development of second stage applications, some people struggled to meet the deadline this time.

Expressions of Interest Received - Core

Of the 26 Expressions of Interest we received, 18 were for core grants and eight for partnership project grants. Only five of the core grants applications were shortlisted. Many core applications achieved middling assessment scores, fitting the basic criteria but not addressing legacy or making a strong enough case for how the work would accelerate core work around DEI. This might in part be due to the reliance that museums have had on short-term project funding making core grants harder to conceptualise. Our guidance documents and EOI forms could have provided more clarity around this so we have included it in all advisory calls for the upcoming deadlines. We will revisit the written guidance for 2026 to make it clear that organisations must evidence their strategic aims around DEI and to help applicants clearly articulate the potential for legacy from their work.

Expressions of Interest Received - Partnership

In general, the partnership applications received were much stronger with six out of the eight being shortlisted. People enquiring about this fund were sent out a copy of our [Working Equitably](#) guidance and we saw this reflected in the nature of the partnership project applications. Additionally, most applicants brought partners to the initial application conversation showing that they had developed the idea together. The Expression of Interest form included sections for all partner organisations received and these had been completed well, even from those who had multiple partners. Therefore, we will not make any changes to forms or guidance for partnership project grants.

Conclusion

Through applications to the first round of the Communities and Collections Fund, we can see that many museums are already evolving their partnerships to work equitably for inclusion. The resources we have produced on Wellbeing and Equitable Working will support even more of this work. We can also see how adept community organisations and museums are at developing project work together.

Whilst lower scores for core applications could be attributed to it being easier for a project to stand out as a good idea in a 'why us, why now' sense, we did manage to shortlist some excellent proposals from museums that see inclusive collections work at the heart of how their organisations develop. These demonstrated a coherent sense of purpose and a link between collections, societal issues and audiences. A tightening up of our guidance will help core grant applications in future rounds.