

Digital Innovation and Engagement

Guidance for applicants

Summary

The Museums Association alongside UKRI and AHRC are offering a series of grants, between £25,000-£50,000 for one-year projects that support museums to explore digital innovation and to evaluate, refine, and build on their recent digital engagement. The new fund will enable museums and galleries to kick-start, scale up, and evaluate the innovations they've so adeptly designed to connect collections to audiences through the Covid-19 pandemic.

What we are looking for

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the UK's cultural sector particularly hard with museums and galleries having to temporarily close. As difficult as the pandemic continues to be, it has also precipitated vital and exciting change in the sector with many museums and galleries rushing to offer up their content, and to reach audiences, in a variety of different and creative ways. The crisis has acted as a catalyst for digital innovation and transformation for many museums. It has brought about some of the culture change called for in the MA's Empowering Collections report: to see an online audience as an audience in and of itself as opposed to an 'add on' to existing, physical audiences.

Museums have also enjoyed a global reach for their work during the COVID-19 crisis, with social media in particular enabling museums of all sizes, to reach new audiences, here in the UK and internationally. Some museums have refocused on local audiences, for example where they previously relied on visits from tourists. And through necessity, many museums have found ways to sustain their social role in communities through digital connections. To a large extent museums' success online has been fuelled by a more informal tone and approach and more agile content creation.

Digital platforms mean museums can offer varied access points for audiences; online, remote, on site and with varying levels of participation. As society lives with the pandemic, the flexible nature of this delivery is key to museums' value and sustainability.

We are looking for applicants that can use our support to extend their digital innovation to either engage new audiences or to embed their digital practice to connect their audiences to collections. This means we're particularly interested in museums that have made changes to their audience engagement during lockdown; who have seen the benefits of this creativity and who are now looking to build on it.

We want to see how innovation in areas such as remote co-production, placemaking, community wellbeing and gamification can affect longer term change in the sector. We're also aware of the challenges of creating sustainable online delivery and income generation; retaining a community of volunteers and participants; and blending real life and digital offers. Given these challenges and the potential of this area of delivery, we're interested in applicants' approaches to research and evaluation; scaling up practice; and sharing learning through partnerships and other forms of dissemination. Partnership projects are welcome where it shares the benefits of funding, and/or where it supports delivery.

Grants will be awarded from an expression of interest submitted by 21 December 2020, with a shortlist invited to make a second stage application. If you have an idea, please contact the Museums Association for an informal discussion on eligibility and for advice on developing your application. Shortlisted museums and galleries will be invited to make a second stage application (due by 22 February 2021), and successful applicants will be offered funding to begin their projects in Spring 2021.

Where the fund comes from

2020 has been an extraordinary year, one that has had, and will continue to have, significant long-term impacts on how museums function, their communities and their role in society.

Following consultation with the sector, the new partnership between UKRI, AHRC and the MA will support museums during this unprecedented time of change and help them to creatively explore and innovate with their communities.

UKRI commissioned creative design agency The Liminal Space to research and analyse the impact of global drivers (Covid-19, Black Lives Matter and Climate Change) and shifting habits in society on the values and behaviours of the Museum of the Future. The report [Mindsets for the Museum of the Future](#) was published in November 2020.

In setting out a vision for The Museum of the Future we propose Five Mindsets that museums could embrace in order to stay relevant, innovative and meaningful for future audiences and generations: Plural Perspectives, Nomadic and Accessible, Community Connection, Meaningful Experience and Alive & Responsive.

Through Museums Change Lives, the MA has led sector thinking about the social impact of museums through active public participation, engaging with diverse communities, and sharing collections and knowledge.

The partnership between UKRI, AHRC and the MA uses the synergy between the Museum of the Future and Museums Change Lives as context for exploring how funding and networked support can help museums change their practice and develop new ways of operating.

During summer 2020, the MA made 26 Sustaining Engagement with Collections grants from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. Two thirds of applicants were from museums looking to interpret and share collections remotely; mainly online and using technologies such as 3D scans, podcasts, films, gamification and streaming. The most interesting applications came from museums trying something new and beginning to think about how their digital work should affect their long-term plans.

This funding call is a short-term response to need in the sector, that nevertheless embeds the social and community values of Museums Change Lives and the Museum of the Future.

Successful applicants will recognise elements of the Museum of the Future Mindsets and look for ways to apply them in the current context of their organisations and operational needs.

Application process

The application process and deadlines for this funding call are:

- The funding call opens on **11 November 2020**, following the launch of the Mindsets for Museums of the Future, at MA Conference.
- Interested museums should contact the MA to discuss their eligibility and ideas throughout November and up to the EOI deadline.
- Museums and galleries that have been recommended to apply should submit an expression of interest on our short form by 5pm on **Monday 21 December 2020**.
- In the week commencing 18 January 2020, a shortlist of EOI applicants will be invited to make a second stage application.
- Second stage applications will be submitted by 5pm on **22 February 2021**. Applicants are welcome to discuss and develop their application with MA staff.
- A selection committee will make the final decisions by the end of **March 2021**.
- Funds will be released when grantees sign off project plans and outcomes with the MA, within three months of grant award.
- Grantees will join the MA's Collections Network. The network meets four times per year, currently online. Typically the first part of the meeting is a closed session for network members to share learning and offer peer support, and the later session is open for all MA members and themed on relevant aspects of collections and engagement practice.

Resources and Case Studies

The following links give a range of projects and discussion of ideas that demonstrate our approach to this funding call. They might help you to shape your own ideas or give you a foundation on which to work:

Resources:

- [Museums Change Lives](#)
- [Mindsets for the Museum of the Future](#)
- [Manifesto for Museum Learning and Engagement](#)
- [Empowering Collections](#)
- [Decolonising Museums](#)
- [Measuring Socially Engaged Practice](#)
- [Power to the People: participatory practice framework](#)

Case studies:

- [Platt Hall](#) adapted their plans and experimented with online collections chats as part of trialling social prescribing events
- [Leeds Museums and Galleries](#) took an informal tone in their podcast series
- [The National Videogame Museum](#) won the Kids in Museums award for best website activity for their game tutorial videos during lockdown
- [Manchester Museum](#) began their Periscope Egyptology films in lockdown and are continuing them through their Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund project
- [The Museum of Zoology at Cambridge University](#) focused on place
- [Gamification](#) can be a tool to develop understanding and start conversations
- [Creswell Crags](#) are using 3D scanning technologies to broaden access to their caves as part of an Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund project, though it's not finished yet
- [Salisbury Museum](#) has started a volunteer blog to retain engagement with the museum
- [The National Holocaust Centre](#) has developed The Journey, an interactive story app and exhibition with linked content for class and home lessons.

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Essential criteria

All applications must meet the criteria below:

- Applicants, or lead applicants in a partnership, must be institutional members of the Museums Association and/or Accredited museums (or formally working towards Accreditation, or able to demonstrate equivalent long-term care of and access to their collections).
- The project must seek to engage at least one underrepresented audience/community as defined by the applicant. The applicant should refer to evidence of need or demand from their underserved audience.
- The project must use an existing museum collection to engage and inspire audiences/communities.
- The project must build on and demonstrate an understanding of existing innovation for audience engagement. This can be your own audience engagement, for example digital engagement as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, or a thorough review of examples of best practice to kick start your own innovative engagement activities.
- The project must include robust plans for evaluation and learning dissemination, including participation in the MA's Collections Network and scheme level evaluation.
- Applicants must demonstrate that their project falls outside 'business as usual', but fits into the organisation(s) long-term plans, mission and vision.

Desirable strengths

Applicants should make a case for their project based on one or more of the following strengths:

- The innovation or creativity of the project, given the operating context of the applicant
- Use of innovative methodologies to develop the project and its outcomes
- The link between the collection, the audience/community and how the project will be delivered
- The relevance and potential of project partners, both within the museum sector and beyond
- The potential for the project to develop practice in the applying museum(s) and/or in the museum sector

Exclusions

Applicants should not apply with projects that focus on:

- Capital costs including equipment and refurbishment. Where hardware, materials or servicing costs are necessary to enable a project to happen, they can be included as less than 20% of the project budget where they are fully costed and justified.
- Projects that are wholly outsourced, or that lack integration with an applicant's long-term plans and development.
- Collections digitisation or digital upgrades. Where back-of-house work to prepare a museum for engagement with collections is necessary to enable

the project to happen, it can be included as less than 20% of the project where it is fully costed and justified.

- Grants to individuals or that will benefit only one person.
- Work that does not have a direct benefit in the UK.
- The promotion of a particular religion or political party.
- Work that has already taken place.
- General appeals or circulars.