

Community-led art and creativity – 2025 review: Invitation to tender

1. Summary

We are looking to work with an external consultant from October 2025 to January 2026, to carry out a short review to inform our work on “Community-led art and creativity”. We estimate the work will take 27 days, and have a budget of £20,000. We are looking for someone with experience in evaluation and research, who has knowledge of the cultural and community sectors, is good at listening, comfortable working with varied sources of information, and can summarise their findings clearly and simply.

If you are available for this project, beginning in October 2025, please send a CV (including day rates) and links to your work to communications@esmeefairbairn.org.uk by 5pm on Monday 22 September.

2. Background and context

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation’s strategy was launched in October 2020, setting out ten year impact goals and five year priorities. In 2023 we decided to extend the strategy and the funding priorities to the end of 2027. As we pass the midway point, we want to: look back at where we started; assess where we are in 2025; and use what we learn about the changing context for our strategy in Community-led art and creativity, and what progress our work and funding has made so far, to inform our future work.

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation’s 2020 Community-led art and creativity strategy

Culture and creativity bring people together and strengthen communities. They are intrinsic to how we understand and express values, experiences, meaning and hopes for the future.

The shared vision that results from community-led, cross-sector collaboration demonstrates the potential of creative partnerships in delivering social, environmental, and economic wellbeing.

Long-term outcomes:

- Local people and local artists lead creative and cultural activity in their communities.
- A collaborative approach to creativity and culture enables people to work together to strengthen their community.
- Local and regional cultural strategies are shaped by citizens and impact wider decision making and agendas for change.

We have 82 active grants and social investments under our ‘Community-led art and creativity’ priority (and a further 69 have been made since 2020 which are now closed). We support a range of approaches to building community power and leadership in arts and creativity such as co-creation, participatory decision-making and citizen assemblies.

Esmée Fairbairn's strategy: <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/about-esmee/strategy/>
Community-led art and creativity priority: <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/our-aims/creative-confident-communities/community-led-art-creativity/>
Further guidance on our long-term outcomes for Community-led art and creativity: <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/guidance-for-support/creative-confident-communities-priorities/#community-led-art-creativity>

3. Review questions

We know that our actions and funding are one part of a complex process of change. So our mid-strategy review will cover the context for our work, as well as its progress so far.

1. The changing context for our goals:
 - a. What was the external context for our Community-led art and creativity strategy pre-2020?
 - b. In what ways is it better or worse in 2025?
2. The need for our support: what's changed in the funding situation for Community-led art and creativity from 2020 to 2025?
3. The opportunities for progress – what are the levers for change in 2025?
4. What are the blockers for progress in 2025?
5. What difference has our work and funding made since 2020, and where is it struggling?
6. What feedback is there on the way Esmée is working in this space?

4. Audience and use

Esmée wants to use what we learn from this review to make changes in how we deliver our strategy, so the main audience is our staff and trustees. We also want to share the review with the organisations we fund, and the wider sector, so they are an important secondary audience.

5. Method and approach

We have commissioned reviews for our [Nature Friendly Farming](#) and [Freshwater](#) priorities and would like to take a similar approach to bring external challenge into this review, by a) working with an independent consultant, and b) going beyond the organisations we support to get the thoughts of people who share our goals but may have different views of how to get there.

The review will involve:

- **Desk research (15% of project time):** this should begin with the context for this work in 2020 and be updated for 2025 as the review progresses. Key themes will be agreed.
- **A review of key learning (15%)** from Esmée's funding (both grants and social investments).
- **Interviews or group discussions (20%)** with key stakeholders including Esmee staff, funded organisations, and public bodies (e.g., arts councils and local authorities).
- **A validation workshop** to test initial findings with a smaller group of stakeholders, and Esmée.
- **Report writing and editing (40%).**

6. Esmée's role

The review will be managed by Philippa Wilkinson, Learning Manager. The communications and learning team at Esmée will provide mid- and end-of- grant learning from grants and social investments, along with funding recommendation documents and progress reports, where useful. We will identify the key stakeholders in discussion with the consultant, make introductions, and help with setting up meetings.

We will hold a kick-off meeting with Alison Holdom, Funding Manager Lead for Creative, Confident Communities. We would like to review the findings after the initial writing stage, giving time for edits. We will share the report internally, and we will work with our designers to prepare a version for publication. If there are substantial edits needed for an external audience, we would agree this with the consultant as an additional cost to this contract.

7. Budget and deliverables

We estimate the work will take 27 days (based on 4 days for desk research, 4 for reviewing key learning from our funding, 7 for interviews and the validation workshop, 8 for writing, 2 for editing, and 2 for admin), and our budget is £20,000 including VAT. Deliverables:

- Report for our staff and trustees with recommendations to inform our future work (c. 20 pages)
- An executive summary giving key learning points for Trustees (2-4 pages of A4)
- Anonymised notes from interviews, and other relevant useful research shared in rough form.

8. Experience

We are looking for a consultant with:

- Relevant experience in evaluation and research.
- Knowledge of participatory and community arts and the wider cultural sector.
- Knowledge of the voluntary and community sector, including place-based working, and an understanding of local ecosystems, from grassroots activity to local decision-makers.
- Strong communication and listening skills.
- Analytical skills, including the ability to work with varied sources of information, and summarise findings clearly and simply.
- We are unlikely to appoint individual consultants working on their own but are open to tenders from pairs/groups of consultants as well as organisations.

9. Suggested timetable

We plan to share findings of the review at our Trustee board meeting in February 2026, so although the exact plan can be flexible, we will need a final report by 30 January 2026.

Week beginning	
1 September	Invitation to Tender out
22 September	Deadline for responses
22 and 29 September	Assess bids

Week beginning	
6 October	Interviews & Reviewer appointed
20 October	Kick off meeting and document sharing
27 October, 3, 10 November	Desk research and setting up interviews
17, 24 November, 1 December	Interviews or group discussions
8 December	Validation workshop
15 December, 5 January	Writing
12 January	Draft submitted for review by Esmée
19 and 26 January	Edits
Friday 30 January	Delivery

10. Confidentiality and conflicts of interest

As Esmée wants to learn as much as possible from the interviews or group discussions with stakeholders, we will need to agree a suitable format so that interviewees can respond honestly, but Esmée can fully understand the detail of progress being made. We would discuss this with the reviewer at the kick-off meeting.

If you have any involvement with work in the arts and community space, or are involved in any work funded by Esmée, let us know so that we can think about how any conflicts of interest can be managed.

11. Registering your interest

If you are available for this project from October 2025 – January 2026, email your details, including any potential conflicts of interest, and attach a CV (including day rates) and links to examples of your work to communications@esmeefairbairn.org.uk by 5pm on Monday 22 September.