

Looking beyond the mainstream

Strands

The Main Fund apart, we also allocate support to specific strands of work. These change over time. But they consistently express Esmée Fairbairn's desire to make a difference in special areas of interest.

In 2008, we focused on four issues – each highly relevant to contemporary concerns in the UK. They were:

- Biodiversity
- New Approaches to Learning
- Food
- Museum and Heritage Collections

Some examples of work funded through the Strands during the first year are:

Biodiversity

Roehampton University:

Biodiversity begins with the most basic forms of life. That is why we are providing support for a year-long survey of groundwater organisms in Devon, Dorset and Wales. This work, for which we are providing a grant of £76,088, will also form the basis for designing subsequent surveys for other areas.

Marine Biological Association:

Artificial structures in the marine environment such as sea defences, wind farms or wave farms can serve an important additional purpose. With slight modifications in surface texture, they can also provide habitat niches for a wide variety of species. A grant of £195,000 over three years is supporting a research project into these efforts.

New Approaches to Learning Mathematics in Education and Industry:

With widespread disquiet about the standard of mathematics among school leavers in the UK, a group of maths educators and funders have joined forces to design, test, evaluate and roll out a new approach to GCSE teaching. Based on a model used in Holland, it puts maths in contexts students understand and has substantially raised levels of pupil achievement. Funding of £178,000 will support the development and trialling of a new curriculum.

University of York:

Many children find the move from primary to secondary school a challenge. For vulnerable learners, that challenge can be particularly daunting. To help them, the University's Centre for Reading and Language has devised a programme of regular sessions that develop pupils' emotional literacy and resilience. A grant of £77,410 is funding the testing phases.

Food

Local Food Links:

Despite well-publicised initiatives, the quality of most school meals remains poor. In Dorset, Local Food Links is changing that with help from the Foundation. Working with schools and local farmers, the organisation now supplies high quality, interesting, balanced and nutritious menus mostly produced from sustainable or organic sources. A new £99,202 grant over two years will extend the programme from eight schools to 22 and also expand services to include residential homes for the elderly.

Research into Ageing:

As many as 85% of older people in long term care suffer from malnutrition. Part of the problem is diminishing pleasure in food as the perceptions of taste and smell deteriorate with age. A new research project, to which Esmée Fairbairn is contributing £70,000 over three years, aims to overcome this problem by applying state-of-the-art flavour chemistry to optimise naturally occurring taste combinations and to explore the use of natural flavour enhancers. The aim is to improve food enjoyment and balance enhanced taste with clinical nutritional needs.

Museum & Heritage Collections

Falmouth Art Gallery:

How important is the nature and condition of a frame to the painting it holds? For many artists, the frame was considered to be an integral part of the work of art. Recognising this, Falmouth Art Gallery, which has a collection of works by artists such as Burne-Jones, G F Watts and Ben Nicholson, is embarking on a programme to catalogue and conserve the frames on all major paintings in its collection, which attracts 50,000 visitors annually. The Foundation is helping with a grant of £56,820.

Culture and Sport Glasgow:

The Burrell Collection, one of the city's most renowned cultural attractions, is a major repository of medieval tapestries. Yet this collection, one of the most important in the UK, has never been properly catalogued. The Foundation is helping to remedy that situation with a grant of £91,500. Concentrating on some 50 English, Swiss/German and Franco/Flemish works, the three-year project will photograph the tapestries (making the images available online) and report on their condition so that conservation work can be prioritised.

Finance fund

In some cases, organisations can be best served by investments rather than grants. Esmée Fairbairn recognises this – particularly for organisations that can demonstrate the capacity to manage the demands of non-grant funding. In such cases, support can include loans, guarantees, equity or quasi-equity finance depending on the specific needs of the organisation or the requirements of the project to be funded.

The CLT fund:

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) provide permanently affordable housing, with an emphasis on meeting that need in rural areas. They do this by enabling occupiers to pay for the use of their property at reasonable rates while locking in the value of land, planning gain and other equity benefits on behalf of future occupiers. Since CLTs are community-owned, the benefits continue in perpetuity.

However, finding funds for CLT schemes is often difficult. Commercial lenders consider the risks to be greater than for other housing developments since CLTs tend to have weak balance sheets and their lead individuals often lack sufficient relevant experience. To help fill the gap, the Foundation has worked with the Tudor Trust and Venturesome to set up the Community Land Trust Fund, with the aim of establishing around 30 operational CLTs and the construction of around 150 affordable homes over the course of the next four years. Esmée Fairbairn has allocated £125,000 to provide technical support and £875,000 in the form of initial development capital, of which we expect to recover 90% six years after the initial investment.

Big Issue Invest

Social Enterprise Fund:

Working with intermediary funds allows the Foundation to invest in a wide range of organisations while reducing the need to build in-house infrastructure to identify and manage these investments. Esmée Fairbairn's involvement with Big Issue provides a good example.

This Social Enterprise Fund, in the form of an unregulated Collective Investment Scheme, will provide capital financing for a wide range of social enterprises with significant community or environmental impact. Although this is the first fund structure for Big Issue Invest, the organisation has extensive experience in social enterprise investment earning reasonable rates of return.

Consequently, the Foundation plans to become a founder investor with a sum of £750,000 for a 10-year period.