



The Dead Plant Society

Application to the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund
Leeds Museums and Galleries and Space2
November 2024

What is the purpose of this grant?

LMG will work with the Leeds charity Space2 to take our herbarium into East Leeds. They will work with us to connect LMG's collections with the social and historical stories of the area and use a range of creative approaches to help these links come alive for the wider community.

This project will use our collections to help local communities respond to the climate emergency. It will also be a model for working equitably with community organisations and linking collections with real-world social and environmental issues.

This application has been written with, and the project will be led by, Space2.

Why should this organisation, or partnership where relevant, undertake the work?



Leeds Museums and Galleries' key long-term plans and strategic aims are laid out in our ['Deepening Connections, Widening Impact'](#) strategy document for 2022-2027. Our mission is "to work with communities to share stories from our past and present to shape a better future for the people of Leeds."

This project aligns beautifully with our mission, as well as providing an excellent template for future work:

- "to work with communities": we are asking a community organisation to sculpt and deliver the project.
- "to share stories from our past...": our herbarium has specimens from Leeds dating back to the 1700s.
- "...and present": we hope to accession new Leeds material into the collection.
- "to shape a better future for the people of Leeds.": at its heart, this project's aim is to help a community positively affect their lives, climate change, and the decline in our local biodiversity.

Other relevant aims from the Deepening Connections, Widening Impact strategy include creating "deeper connections with the people we serve using the collections ... we care for", ensuring that we "engage our audiences and use collections to inspire and support behaviour change to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergency", and that we will "work with our community partners to design and deliver a service-wide community engagement programme with collections ... at the heart." These reiterate the value of this project to LMG in accelerating our progress towards our strategic aims and long-term plans.

LMG's [Environmental Sustainability Policy](#) is also relevant here as we are committed to recognising 'our particular responsibility ... to ensure that the environmental sustainability and biodiversity messages ... are accurate and can have a significant impact on our visitor's attitudes and behaviour.'

Our [Collections Development Policy](#) is also clear that we will maximise the potential of the collections by: providing better access to them, embedding them at the heart of all our activities, developing knowledge in partnership with others and sharing that knowledge widely.

Developing our diversity, equity and inclusion practice

LMG has a long and pro-active commitment to developing our diversity, equity and inclusion practice. LMG's Deepening Connections, Widening Impact strategy document, amongst other EDI strategies, states clearly that LMG and Leeds City Council will "take further action to oppose racism (historic and present day) in all its forms and ensure that our practice truly reflects the diversity of the society we serve." A significant outcome of this strategy document is an aim to "have an audience and workforce that is fully representative and reflective of the city." As part of this we aim to "be more vocal about LMG's work in relation to diversity, inclusion and anti-racism."

Our [Access Commitment Statement](#) reiterates this by affirming that we will work "with the people and communities of Leeds to ensure that everyone is (and feels) represented, heard, and seen within marketing, collections, exhibitions, learning and community programmes, using the principle of 'nothing about us without us.'"

This project's aims augment all of LMG's EDI strategies and work. They were specifically designed with the intention of improving opportunities for all of the project's partners and participants.

In a time of need

If you visit the 'Life on Earth' gallery at Leeds City Museum there is a piece of sandstone with a line drawn on it. Visitors are encouraged to run their fingers over the line. If everyone does a tiny bit, then together we can cut a rock in half with our bare hands. The same is true of combating our environmental challenges and that is why projects of this nature are so timely, relevant and in demand.

[Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating.](#) Many people can be [paralysed by the size of the problem.](#) [The link between climate change and biodiversity loss](#) is well documented. This project aims to engage communities by helping understand their local biodiversity and then cultivating the desire to protect and enhance it.



Why Space2?

This project proposal developed from many conversations with Space2 over the last two years. An enthusiasm for their work, and theirs for ours, made clear a strong desire for a collaborative project and the shared understanding of the important, and broad, impact of such an undertaking.

Space2 is an arts and social change charity based in a deprived neighbourhood, Gipton in East Leeds. Space2 has co-created a distinctive participatory arts practice work that is multi-disciplinary, supported by specialist artists with experience of working with an equitable, caring, compassionate ethos.

Their work has an environmental sustainability focus, addressing climate justice through the power of arts and heritage, culture, and storytelling. They have collaborated nationally and internationally to create shared stories that shape local conversations and action, enable creative change supporting global climate justice, and facilitate meaningful interactions between communities, green spaces, land and growing.



Space2 has a strong commitment to the rich history of East Leeds and communities leading key heritage projects in the area and bringing stories from the community to life through performances, exhibitions, events, and digital collections. They delivered projects such as East Side Story, exploring the stories of local green space, Wykebeck Way and Gipton the Musical culminating in large-scale shows. Heritage Lottery Funded projects including the current Gipton StoryMaps and award-winning, Glowing Embers, recruit and train community curators.

As well as working directly with their own participant and volunteer cohort, Space2 has a history of working with other local charities and community groups, including those who work with migrant communities. Through recent heritage projects they have co-produced activities which have encouraged local people to bring their diverse range of perspectives and experiences into conversation with historical artefacts – for example, working with LMG's Temple

Newsam house collections and work which celebrated the NHS's 70th birthday through the lens of the Windrush generation and other working-class communities.

Space2's extensive experience of cross-sector work marries participatory practice with wider strategic aims for the area and sector. Learning is frequently supported by collaboration with universities and shared through city-wide and cross-sector platforms; publications and presentations at relevant international and national conferences. LMG also has a long history of participation in national and international conferences, training events and workshops. Through LMG's many networks, like West Yorkshire Local Authority Museum Partnership; English Civic Museums Network and the Natural Sciences Collections Association, as well as through blogs and other publications, we would share the learning outcomes of this innovative work with the wider sector.

What collection will you work on? Why have you chosen it?

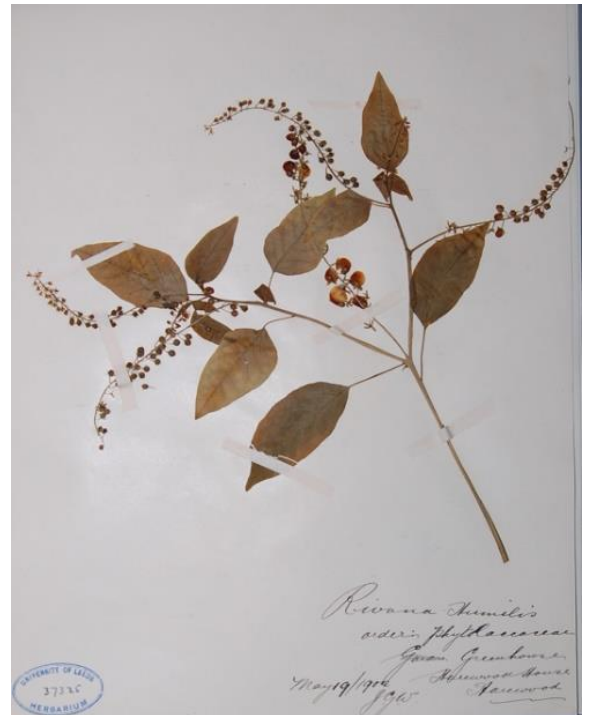
LMG has a large plant collection, including the recently acquired University of Leeds herbarium. This means we have approximately 250,000 specimens, almost all with data on where and when they were collected. The natural science collections at Leeds are ACE Designated and are staffed by a natural science curator. This means the collection is serviced by professional collections managers backed up by robust museum processes and a large network of council staff.

Despite all the amazing stories and data associated with our plants, they are a famously difficult area of the collection to use. Unlike vibrant shells or intricate bones, dried plants are incredibly delicate, brown and light sensitive. They therefore are rarely put on display or used in workshops. This

project is a great opportunity to really put these plants to work as a gateway for investigating local biodiversity loss, as well as showing off this significant collection to a new audience.

This project was conceived after various workshops involving Space2 participants and the plant collection at Leeds. It grew out of these meetings as it was clear that participants really enjoyed their interaction with the plants, particularly when discussions arose about when and where they were collected.

Space2 are the designated community anchor organisation for their neighbourhood as part of the Leeds Community Anchor network. As part of this role, they have recently undertaken a community listening exercise, with individual conversations and focus groups exploring local people's perceptions on the place they live and collective opportunities for action. One finding from this was that the local community held complex sets of views of the green spaces which comprise the Wyke Beck Way; how they were managed and maintained and how accessible they were. These views intersected with experiences of migration, belonging and climate justice. For example, people from migrant communities reported a sense of green spaces being the first community space which they felt they could access safely, and in which they felt connection and belonging. People from the settled communities also held appreciation for these spaces but reported some frustrations about the changing nature of land management and planting in areas which had been 'rewilded' as flood alleviation schemes (a response to increased flooding caused by climate change), linked both with a sense of personal safety (e.g. large plants obstructing paths and views) and tidiness. Looking at historical plant specimens from this area in a way which is genuinely led by local people and uses creativity as a tool for encouraging and valuing diverse perspectives, will allow these issues and ideas to be explored more deeply and collectively, and provide a model for the many other places and communities holding a similarly complex relationship with their natural environment.



The creative community of local people which Space2 works with are also ready for the next stage in a conversation about resource use and sustainability. From the Dead Plant Society to Gipton Growers (a group who maintain and develop a community garden using sustainable principles) to Clothing Rebellion (a group who learn and share skills in the upcycling of used clothing and textiles), Space2 works closely with many local people who already care deeply and are taking action to develop locally rooted, ethical uses of local resources. Investigating the plant collection will connect this activity with learning around the historical uses of local plants and herbs, highlighting and celebrating the knowledge still held in parts of the communities about traditional uses of plants and opening a conversation about why these forms of knowledge have been historically hidden or under-represented.

In short, the plant collection is an ideal match for the diverse expertise and interests of LMG, Space2 and the communities and audiences we work with, and is hugely fertile for inspiring wider conversations and actions around climate and social justice.



Who is the work for? Where is the social impact?

This project will be rooted in Gipton, Leeds working in partnership with Space2 and their Dead Plant Society. 94% of residents live in areas described as the most deprived in England (<10% of areas, nationally). Entrenched poverty is compounded by high rates of social isolation, leading to poor social networks and low civic participation. Educational attainment and skill levels are also low, placing importance on programmes facilitating empowerment and civic engagement.

Gipton is an area of higher than average and increasing ethnic diversity (GP Data 2022). The Gipton and Harehills ward has recently been the site of recent civil unrest and far right activity. This points to the urgency of work which encourages a conversation about place and is led by a diverse range of local people, using creativity as a way of exploring the rich complexities of communities whilst linking with global contexts, as a means of countering narratives which seek to simplify issues, divide communities and perpetuate racism and discrimination.

With poor air quality and extreme weather disproportionately impacting deprived communities, East Leeds is particularly affected by the climate crisis. The Biological Inequities Index shows East Leeds as one of the most inequitable areas in Northern England. This places greater importance on work which uses heritage to raise awareness of climate change, particularly in inclusive ways which are led by the enthusiasm and insight of local people. This sits alongside Space2's Greening Gipton project to co-design, promote and advocate for nature-based solutions, achievable for the local community to adopt and lay the foundations for longer-term community-led climate resilience and sustainability.

As previously stated, people with different life experiences living locally, particularly in relation to migration, have shared different responses to local green spaces. This project seeks to bring diverse local people together to share their responses to co-create common connections and aspirations for local green spaces, whilst better understanding its historical and social contexts, through hands-on exploration of the museum's collection. Plant collections in particular are important for this work as they have very little cultural knowledge tied to them and they are more universally understandable. Integral to this approach is an environmental thread that encourages place-based climate readiness and resilience and development of skills and knowledge that better connect local people to nature and ways to nurture and enjoy local green spaces.

This project will connect to other local partners, bringing an imperative to decolonise existing narratives through rich and diverse perspectives and responses, whilst seeking a shared joy and community history, including Give a Gift (supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Harehills); Feel Good Factor, serving predominantly African and Caribbean communities in E&NE Leeds and South Asian Women's Centre, Shantona.

This is an ambitious project as it hands over power to a standalone community group. Whilst LMG has experience of this, this will be one of the first examples here of asking a completely separate community group (i.e. one that has not been set up by the museum) to deliver a project with our collections. We are looking forward to learning from the experience and hope to develop our organisational practice because of it.

Space2's distinctive participatory creative practice places a parity of status to collaborating curators, artists and community members to create authentic, relevant and representative work through multi-disciplinary activities. This approach will be embedded across our project, enabling genuine co-production of the project, its content and delivery. An essential element of this approach is to

recognise the multiple roles that community participants can play, and identify what training can enable all those involved in this creative and social process.

What does success look like?

This project will use the herbarium at LMG to:

- give communities a greater sense of belonging and shared ownership over the natural heritage of their area, and of the city's museums which house and curate heritage.
- increase knowledge of the natural heritage and history of the area and understand how this intersects with issues of social justice such as climate change, racism and poverty.
- inspire and empower people to take individual and collective action to address climate change.

We expect around 350 people to participate directly in responding to and interpreting the collection, via group activities, walks and 'bio snapshot' events. At least 4000 people will be reached and impacted through pop up exhibitions and sharing of project updates and resources on social media, conferences and websites. One of the legacies of this project will be an enhanced ability to reach a wider, non-traditional museum audience.

What will you do?

This project will be directed and led by Space2 and the members of the Dead Plant Society, with LMG supporting through access to plant collections, an eye on accurate knowledge development and botanical help and training. This project will cement our relationship with Space2 and give us a template and learning experience to help us collaborate with other charities and community groups in the future.

The project will fund a PT Assistant Curator of Plants and a PT Space2-employed Dead Plant Society co-ordinator who will work together with the communities of East Leeds. They will interrogate LMG's plant collection, linking with the wider social and historical stories of the area in the context of the modern climate emergency. A particular area of focus will be the Wyke Beck Way, a green corridor running from Roundhay Park to Temple Newsam House.

The Dead Plant Society will meet weekly offering a range of activities that include museum sessions working with our collection; regular seasonal walks and co-curating and creating different ways to share findings, stories and ideas with the wider community at annual events like Seasons of Light; community fairs and planned project events. They will also undertake 'bio snapshot' events twice a year to bring comparison of local flora to the collection and increased insight to the impact of climate crisis locally.

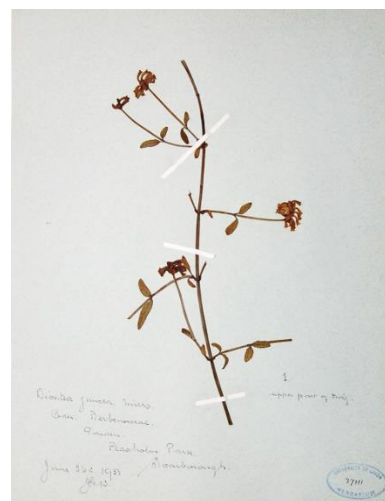
Although our joint approach to coproduction means that the activities and outputs from this process will emerge over time, we anticipate the following, informed by community feedback gathered by Space2:

- Community cataloguing and research sessions at Leeds Discovery Centre – with the Dead Plant Society and other community groups being trained and supported to work through the collections which are from the area of focus, put them in taxonomic order, evaluate their importance or dispose of specimens that do not meet our acquisitions policy.
- Regular walks and annual community engagement events in local green spaces, inviting local people to participate in taking a biodiversity snapshot of current flora in local green spaces,

and compare their findings with historical examples from the collection – noting how local flora has changed over time and exploring some of the social and historical context for this. This will open wider conversation and learning about the changes in land ownership, climate and biodiversity.

- Create a Wykebeck Community Herbarium, with pressings collected from local green spaces by the Dead Plant Society presented alongside their historical counterparts (where present) - a gift to future residents of the area and beyond as a snapshot of a landscape and community in flux as it is buffeted by overlapping ecological and social crises, and a symbol of hope for recovery and healing. Parts of this collection will be accessioned into LMG's holdings.
- Work with local artists and community groups responding creatively to the collection in a variety of forms and the wider learning around the social and historical contexts it suggests (e.g. poetry, grass weaving, natural dyeing).
- Pop up exhibitions, curated by the Dead Plant Society and wider Space2 community and featuring specimens from the collection, works in progress of the Wykebeck Community Herbarium, historical information and the creative responses and interpretations. Built into these events will be an emphasis on parity of status – we will celebrate the unique sets of expertise brought by each person and community involved in the project – from participants to curators, artists to historians.

Space2 will facilitate a community steering group for the project, comprised of participants representing the diversity of the local community, the Space2 coordinator and the Assistant Curator of Plants, which will meet quarterly to review the themes emerging through the work so far, reflect on the activity and use this to steer the priorities of the work. As mentioned above, as well as working directly with their own diverse participant and volunteer cohort, Space2 is partners with a number of organisations who work with and represent a range of communities including those most impacted by racism and climate change. They will work with groups of local people linked with these organisations, including them in each of the streams of work detailed above.



We will ensure the project has long term sustainability and relevance by:

- sharing learning with the museum sector and arts sector through relevant sectoral activities and events, particularly around having a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges of genuinely equitable work with communities and community organisations.
- exploring opportunities to host elements of the work produced by communities in LMG exhibition spaces.
- sharing work with local networks e.g. Gipton Neighbourhood Improvement Partnership to embed the understanding withing local area. LMG will be able to use this innovative project to inform future work and future applications to funders. It will give a deeper understanding of what it means to “co-curate” and collaborate with our communities and will be a major learning exercise for both LMG and Space2.