

Written evidence submitted by the National Space Centre (AST0044)

Precis

I very much enjoyed giving evidence alongside Dame Maggie Aderin-Pocock at the Committee session on Wednesday 17 April 2024. One line of questioning related to funding and how science and discovery centres might be able to increase their impact were support to be made available. I raised three issues over the course of the session that might benefit from some summary information. This short paper provides some context and adds a fourth need relating to the Association for Science & Discovery Centres (ASDC).

1. Science & Discovery Centres: sustaining ageing buildings v charitable impact

- 1.1 Science & Discovery Centres are charities that are capable of building reserves to invest in both (a) building/capital projects and (b) education and community engagement programmes.
- 1.2 Centres have done well to recover after the pandemic wiped out reserves. Much of the current focus is on commercial activity to remain sustainable at a time when the cost of employment, utilities and insurance has risen dramatically. Free provision to audiences in disadvantaged communities is restricted as a consequence and the *science for all* philosophy is compromised.
- 1.3 Thirteen Centres opened with Millennium Commission funding with building components with a 25 years' life expectancy. Other/older centres have the same/accentuated challenges. Each centre has its own story of failing or obsolete parts and plant, and the limited ability to allocate reserves. The problem for most is not immediate: centres are sharing their experiences via ASDC in order to take a proactive approach to planning for the next few years.
- 1.4 The Arts Council is, on behalf of DCMS, helping non-national accredited museums with the Museum Estate & Development (MEND) fund that is helping to tackle exactly these challenges. It is in its fourth (and last) round of funding. Science & Discovery Centres do not qualify. Further, current DCMS 'culture infrastructure' research into the maintenance needs for museums, theatres and heritage destinations excludes Science & Discovery Centres.
- 1.5 Centres are working, via ASDC, to assess the need and determine whether it has to be tackled on a case-by-case basis or whether there is a shared challenge and a joined-up approach to a solution. They are looking specially, for example, at how centres might replace obsolete chillers and boilers with heat pumps on the basis that this appears to be a common problem with an exciting, low carbon outcome. It would welcome the opportunity to conduct the same infrastructure research as DCMS has commissioned for other cultural venues (see 1.4) and to substantiate the need with a view to proposing a parallel programme to MEND. £50m is the initial estimate.

2. STEM skills development for young people

- 2.1 Science & Discovery Centres are dominated by school groups on term-time weekdays and families at weekends and during the school holidays. During these family periods they employ science communicators to deliver live presentations and meet visitors on a one-to-one or one-to-several basis to engage them in citizen science projects and active research. Most science communicators are university students: local role models who can chat to young people about their aspirations, share their own experiences and discuss STEM pathway options.

- 2.2 Students benefit from the chance to develop transferable skills and build confidence. Each costs circa £10k pa to employ and train in the full knowledge that their employment will be fleeting before the student graduates and progresses to their chosen career. Science & Discovery Centres are currently limited in the reserves they have available to invest in a resource that has no direct income stream, but are keen to ensure diverse representation in the role models that they put on stage in this way and that can be helped further on their journey into employment.
- 2.3 The UK Space Agency, in partnership with the Satellite Applications Catapult, runs a Space Placements In Industry (SPIN) placement award scheme which allows employers to engage students in projects over a minimum eight week period. Science & Discovery Centres can apply even though the scheme is not entirely aligned to their purposes. An extension of this scheme, or a parallel scheme, that allows students to act as communicators in centres at no/low cost to the centre itself would be highly impactful. £1.0m (or £0.5m on a 50% matched funding basis) would help 100 students to work in a centre and develop their employability skills before progressing in their chosen career.

3. UK Space Agency: Inspiration Programme/Space to Learn

- 3.1 The UK Space Agency has invested funds in in four major educational projects including
- a £1.845m *Space to Learn* contract with the National Space Centre's National Space Academy to deliver space masterclasses, space camps and careers conferences - free of charge - in disadvantaged communities across the UK. The most recent space camp to be agreed will take place at the Saxavord Spaceport for the children of the Shetland Islands. The programme runs until May 2025. The National Space Academy programme will engage 45,000 students and is being externally evaluated by a company called ERS Ltd.
- Programmes are fully booked and early feedback is very encouraging. It would be wonderful if *Space to Learn* were to continue beyond its current term on the same, or bigger, scale.
- with additional support from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), funds for 22 Science & Discovery Centres to deliver *Our World from Space*, presenting the relevance of UK space science to the health and sustainability of our home planet to 300,000 people in family and school audiences. It supports young people from diverse communities, engages with marginalised communities and reaches into rural and remote regions through funded outreach. The programme runs until March 2025. Again, it would be highly impactful if *Our World from Space* were to continue.

4.0 Association for Science & Discovery Centres (ASDC)

- 4.1 The evidence session made mention of the benefits of working in collaboration. Science & Discovery Centres are brought together by ASDC to share best practice and speak as one. It employs four people and costs £250,000 to run, but only receives £60k pa in fees from a cash-poor membership. It covers the remainder by securing projects from the UK Space Agency, STFC and NERC who pay for their messages to be conveyed across membership sites via shared programme content and delivery methods.
- 4.2 A contribution to core funding would allow staff to commit more time to collective action in environmental sustainability, EDIA (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility) and support strategic partnerships across the sector that facilitate innovation for the public benefit.

24 April 2024