

Written evidence submitted by Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum

Location: Widnes, Cheshire

1. Executive Summary

- We are an independent charity. We receive no funding from national or local government. Our funding primarily comes from our visitors with some support from local chemical and science-based companies who provide sponsorship, many linked to supporting school visits from the local area.
- Without visitors we are not financially viable! The government **furlough** scheme has been a **lifeline** in the **short term**. 95% of Catalyst staff are furloughed pending a re-opening date.
- Post re-opening, however, expected visitor numbers will be much lower than in previous years, perhaps at 25% or 50% for several months. This will **challenge our viability** in the **medium term** if we are expected to stand alone without Government support.
- We are located in one of the **UK's most deprived wards** within Halton Borough Council.
- Our **future society** needs **Science Centres** like ours to **inspire** and **educate** children and their carers, so they become / are supported to be our future scientists, mathematicians, modellers, Engineers, space explorers and so on.
- We work with our **local community** to support **disadvantaged groups** and working in collaboration with local MIND groups with those dealing with **mental health** challenges.

2. Main Body of Submission:

2.1 I am the Chief Executive Officer of Catalyst which has operated on the site for over 30 years. We employ 19 staff across Education, Visitor Services, Café, Marketing, Cleaning, Maintenance, Finance, Archivist and Community Liaison.

2.2 Catalyst provides a safe place of discovery for all, a place where visitors, especially children, see chemistry and science (STEM) coming to life through a unique blend of interactive exhibits and displays. We are also a museum and display a fascinating insight into the region's industrial and social history through our birth of an industry gallery.

2.3 Our Education offer runs science / chemistry-based workshops that schools are unable to provide for themselves. We have a busy week-day schools programme and at the weekend and school holidays public visitors take the opportunity to have these hands-on experiences.

2.4 Our younger visitors enjoy the interactive exhibits and workshops and our heritage offer is enjoyed particularly by adult groups. Our new Planetarium will offer a look into the sky's and beyond not normally available outside of the major cities. We have a Café and buy all our produce from local sources to support our local suppliers.

2.5 We work with our local community and have recently opened a Changing places facility and are installing new disabled ramps to ensure we are truly inclusive in all we offer.

2.6 Our community work includes working with a local charity 'MIND', Halton on supporting those with mental health challenges. We believe programmes like these, will be in greater demand post the 'stay at home' policy. We work with many disadvantaged groups locally who can use our centre to build confidence, develop key skills and have a fun day out. We work to allow access to science related play, experiments that many local families would not normally consider is for them. STEM is for all, not just a select few in our society.

3. Impact of Covid:19

3.1 The government announcements on mass gatherings, social distancing saw our **income drop to Zero in 3 days**, we closed to the public on 20th March 2020. All our school programme and sleepovers for uniformed groups in our glass observatory were all cancelled from a day ahead through to August.

3.2 Our insurance is refusing to cover this loss of revenue due to the Pandemic not starting within a mile of our building!

3.3 We are 80% through completing a £1M capital upgrade to our interactive exhibits, reception, Café, Theatre and Studio's before our closure. This funding from the Inspiring Science Fund (Wellcome Trust and UK RI) was intended to future proof our operations and early signs were that it was going to do that. We have no current reserves to fall back on.

3.4 We desperately need to put in place a '**Resilience Team**' that allows a sub-set of our team to work on how we make our **uncertain future more sustainable** for up to two years or allows us to open on a partial basis to particularly support our local community until the impact of this virus has passed. We cannot do this at the moment due to the restrictions of the furlough scheme.

3.5 When we re-open we expect visitors to be at **very low levels** for perhaps 9 months. We need to have some government support to allow us to trade, build up our visitor base again and during this period look to re-design our business model to allow more flexibility in the future. We need £20,000 / month to allow us to do this.