

## Written evidence submitted by We The Curious

# Written Evidence Submission for DCMS Committee Parliamentary Inquiry into the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors - We The Curious

### Introduction to We The Curious

We The Curious is an educational science centre in Bristol. As a registered charity, we are a vibrant part of Bristol's cultural landscape, welcoming half a million visitors a year to our city-centre exhibition and event spaces and generating income in the region of £6m a year. Our outdoor community spaces span 11 acres and have an annual footfall of over 5 million people. We employ 157 staff and have a thriving volunteer scheme with over 150 active volunteers. As a member of the Association of Science and Discovery Centres (ASDC) we contribute to engaging and educating 20 million people with science annually, across the UK.

We work with disadvantaged communities, schools and universities to remove the barriers to STEM that so exacerbate educational inequality. We strive for a connected, creative, compassionate and resilient society where everyone can participate in the scientific process and search for solutions to humanity's greatest challenges. We seek to achieve this by empowering our communities to investigate and respond to the issues that have impacted their lives, from climate change to racial discrimination, poverty to pandemics. We are breaking down barriers between art and science and making public engagement more inclusive through an open source science programme that empowers the public to participate in active university research. We are working with international university researchers to further best practice and evidence in inclusive science learning and we are leading the way in environmental sustainability, pledging to become carbon neutral by 2030.

Our charitable objectives to educate and inform have never been more vital to society. We must continue working with our audiences online to promote the role of science in saving and improving lives during this crisis, whilst continuing to inspire the next generation of scientists to create a resilient future for all. Science centres recognise the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) to the national economy - the absolute necessity of science in our modern world has never been more apparent. With the right support we can continue to engage people in that conversation.

### The immediate impact of Covid-19 on culture sector charities and science centres in particular

- **This pandemic not only threatens the health and wellbeing of our communities, it threatens the education, security and opportunities of children and young people.** Without intervention it will leave a devastating legacy of socio-economic deprivation for thousands of forgotten families.

- With just 9% of children from the most deprived ward of Bristol progressing to higher education compared to 100% in the most affluent ward<sup>1</sup>, **we know that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not afforded the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers**<sup>2</sup>. They are also far less likely to be able to access online learning resources whilst schools are closed<sup>3</sup>.
- **Deepening educational inequality will stifle the potential of thousands of disadvantaged young people to pursue interests and careers in science, technology, engineering, art and maths (STEAM)**. We can help. We have the resources, connections and the staff to bring schools, community groups, other charities and businesses together, to lessen the impact of this crisis on families and young people – but only if more is done to financially support charities in these unprecedented times.

We The Curious usually operates on the basis of a financially sustainable mixed income model, made up of trading, retail, fundraising and ticket sales. We closed our city centre exhibition space and venue on 18<sup>th</sup> March, **depleting our income from £500,000 a month to zero, while still incurring costs**. This is the most serious financial crisis that charities have ever faced, with the NCVO estimating that it will cost the charity sector £4bn over the first three months of the national lockdown<sup>4</sup>. As the lockdown is extended, it is set to cost the sector even more.

We have had to immediately suspend many of the projects we have been working on to improve participation in creative scientific disciplines. This includes our pioneering work experience and trainee programme for school leavers from schools in areas of deprivation, our curriculum-led education workshops that attract 70,000 school children a year and the launch of a youth steering group that would amplify children and young people's voices in our organisational decision making. As a charity, we operate for the public benefit and when we are unable to provide services that people rely on, our communities bear the brunt of that impact.

- **We have placed 75% of our 157 staff on furlough**, making as full use of the government job retention scheme as we can. This scheme has been the sole lifeline of our charity. However, in addition to the resilience team staying on, our fixed costs, such as 24/7 security and essential maintenance for our 11-acre Grade II listed estate and the **continued operation of our car park for free use by NHS staff and key workers**, is still resulting in **monthly outgoings of £225,000**.
- We are in the final stages of a £6m capital redevelopment project that will totally transform our indoor site. This has been funded by a £3m Inspiring Science grant from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Wellcome Trust, as well as over a dozen generous donations from individuals and other trust and foundation supporters, including the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Several other science centres are also yet to complete their capital redevelopment projects funded by the same scheme. Building work on our site has begun and must continue, otherwise our international suppliers and contractors will charge penalties

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2018/october/educational-inequality.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/New-investigation-into-GCSE-subjects-reveals-the-stark-extent-that-disadvantaged-pupils-are-being-left-behind>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/only-2-teachers-working-most-disadvantaged-communities-believe-all-their-pupils-have>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/2752-government-support-for-charities-ncvo-reaction>

for manufacturing delays and storage of our new exhibition. **A three-month delay could result in anything up to half a million pounds in fees. We are therefore unable to furlough the staff working on this project.** If we were to do so, these fees would outweigh the compensation from the job retention scheme, inflicting a catastrophic blow to the charity's finances.

- Based on previous experience of short-term closures and backed up by data from ALVA<sup>5</sup>, **it is highly likely that visitor confidence, therefore all associated income will take at least 18 months to return to pre-closure levels as we are an indoor, hands-on venue. School visit income will also take a long time to bounce back.** This means we are likely to feel the economic impact of closure long after the lockdown has been lifted. Visitor numbers post-lockdown are likely to be restricted further by social distancing measures.
- Many of **our business tenants who rent units on our estate are unable to pay their rental charges**, resulting in a further loss of vital income. If any of these tenants go into administration as a result of the crisis, we could be left with no rental income and vastly increased building maintenance costs for several months.
- **With no income expected until reopening in November to cover fixed costs, we are now reliant on our diminishing cash flow**, which have taken years of prudent financial management to accumulate. We are unable to spend restricted reserves that are tied up in fixed assets, such as our building. We are forecast to end November 2020 with around two months' available cashflow.

During this period our priorities are to look after the wellbeing of our staff, provide valuable online content for the public, maintain our city-centre estate, and continue to develop our new exhibition for when we reopen to the public. **We are fortunate to have financial reserves but with ongoing operating costs and no income they will soon be depleted, leaving the charity in serious jeopardy.**

## **Impact of Government Support and how it could be adapted to better support the charity sector**

- **The Association of Science and Discovery Centres are calling for DCMS to release a £25m Emergency Resilience Fund** to rescue our sector from this crisis but it has not yet been guaranteed. **A national campaign, #sciencecentresforourfuture<sup>6</sup> has been launched**, backed by leading scientists including Prof Alice Roberts<sup>7</sup> and several MP's. Chris Skidmore MP recently wrote about it and supported the call for funding in an article for The Times<sup>8</sup>. The value of science centres has never been clearer or more urgent, but we have also never been more at risk. **We call on DCMS to engage in the national campaign and ensure that science centres can access the funding needed to pull them through this crisis.**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ALVA-attractions-recovery-tracker-wave-1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://future.sciencecentres.org.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23ScienceCentresForOurFuture>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scientific-literacy-is-being-neglected-just-when-we-need-it-most-jq82n9ggj>

- **Job Retention Scheme** – this scheme has prevented redundancies in many charities across the UK but with the changes to the scheme expected later this year we fear the worst is still ahead of us. Many charities in the culture, tourism and leisure sector will be asked to contribute more towards their salary bill at a time when they are still unable to reopen. ***We ask the government to consider what additional support will be made available or how the CJRS can be tailored to the needs of the culture, tourism and leisure sector whilst social distancing measures prevent their viable reopening.*** There is a very real risk that many of our much-loved cultural venues, museums and heritage sites will be pushed into unsustainable financial hardship just as the rest of the economy is getting back on its feet.
- **DCMS emergency grants distributed through Arts Council England** - The science centre visitor experience is made up of hands-on, practical experiments, presentations by experienced facilitators and talks and events that bring together lots of smaller organisations, universities and individual collaborators. The absence of a curated collection means we are not all eligible for museums accreditation, blocking us from the majority of Arts Council England funding, including their recently announced emergency fund. ***We ask DCMS to reconsider the museums accreditation scheme, to make culture funding available to all science centres, now and in the future.***
- **Charity emergency funding announced by the Chancellor on 8 April** - We are also ineligible for all the emergency government funding for charities announced on 8 April because our charity does not qualify as being on the frontline of the crisis. ***We urge DCMS to develop a support strategy for culture-sector charities that will play a major role in combatting the longer-term social impacts of the lockdown in the months and years ahead, by increasing funding and loosening the criteria for the charity stabilisation fund.***
- **Business Bank Loans** - Whereas many businesses will benefit from loan schemes announced by the government, many charities are either not eligible or are unable to take up the offer. ***Debt accrued at this early stage in the crisis could be financially detrimental later, as it is unlikely we will be able to return to our break-even business model within the financial year, let alone generate a surplus to pay back loans.***
- **Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Scheme** – we are not eligible for this scheme because we have a property with a rateable value over £50,999. Our large estate does not equate to large profits – it is in fact the overheads and committed costs from our estate that jeopardise our future whilst we are unable to generate income. ***We ask the government to consider removing the property rateable value cap for charities in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector.***

## **Lessons to be learned and how charities may evolve after the Covid-19 crisis to deal with future challenges**

The funding announced so far to support charities through this crisis has been very welcome. Charities increasingly provide services that were previously part of the public

sector and support the government in achieving their socio-economic goals, to improve the lives of the British public. However, **the funding announced so far falls well short of the £4bn shortfall costed by the NCVO**. Whilst it is right that the focus should be on health and social care charities in protecting vulnerable people, many more charities in other sectors will require support in the months ahead to avoid the collapse of British cultural institutions. **The economic impacts of this crisis will be felt in the charity sector for years to come – many in the culture, tourism and leisure sector have their darkest days ahead of them.**

Science centres have always struggled to access support from DCMS despite being a cornerstone of Bristol's cultural tourism offer. Science centres have been awarded occasional grants through BEIS, however we believe that in the longer-term, **DCMS should consult with Arts Council England to reconsider whether science centres can be made eligible for the museum's accreditation scheme**. Museums and science centres share a common vision and yet museums and science centres have always been treated as very much separate from one another. There is greater strength to be found in unity in times like these. In many ways our sectors can learn from one another to become more mutually resilient.

There is still time for DCMS to address these longer-term needs for charities in the culture sector. **DCMS must ensure that additional support is made available for venues in the leisure, tourism and culture sector once the Job Retention Scheme ends**, especially if social distancing measures continue to be held in place. We call on DCMS to **engage with the #sciencecentresforourfuture campaign and release the funding needed to support science centres through this crisis**.

## Summary

Science has driven so much of the UK's COVID-19 response. This is not the time to lose our world-leading science centres, with staff and expertise in these socially vital areas. We are needed now more than ever to help people make sense of what is happening and to inspire future generations of scientists, technologists, mathematicians and engineers, from epidemiologists and vaccine researchers, to data modelers and climate scientists. We have a role to play in bringing stability and normality back into the daily lives of children, young people, teachers and parents through online content and educational resources. We also have a duty to support our community partners and the young adults participating in our creative skills and careers programmes, who have had their exams cancelled and offers of work placements retracted.

We have done everything we could have done to independently free ourselves of this crisis. We urge the government to look again at its measures to support the charity sector and agree to a funding package for science centres, giving cultural organisations dedicated to STEM the same access to funding as museums and the arts.

If this support is granted, we can look ahead to the longer-term role we have to play in the months and years ahead, to ensure everyone has equitable access to STEM education and learning opportunities that will empower, inspire and educate for generations to come.