Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 May 2008

[Mr. Roger Gale *in the Chair*]

Science and Discovery Centres (Funding)

[Relevant documents: Eleventh Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006-07, HC 903-I, and the Government response, HC 214.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be new adjourned.*—[Alison Seabeck.]*

Mr. Roger Gale (in the Chair): I gently remind those present that this is a debate about science and discovery centres, as in the terms of the report before us, and not the funding of science, although a certain amount of leeway might be allowed.

2.30 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Thank you very much for your wise counsel, Mr. Gale. It is lovely to be introducing this debate in your presence. I am sure that none of my colleagues wishes to stretch your patience, or that of our vast audience, in discussing these matters. I am extremely pleased to open this debate on the subject of the eleventh report of the former Science and Technology Committee, published in October 2007, to which I shall certainly confine my remarks. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) who not only encouraged the Committee to conduct this inquiry, but, as a director of the Bolton technology innovation centre, has been a committed advocate of science and discovery centres and their vital role in the science agenda.

There are more than 100 science centres in the UK, attracting some 19.5 million visitors a year. They range in size from huge centres, such as the Science Museum in London and the Eden Project in Cornwall, to very small ones, such as the Armagh Planetarium in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Seabird Centre in the firth of Forth, both of which are ideal. I mentioned the one in Scotland for the benefit of my colleague, the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson).

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North) (Lab): Good. You're safe now.

Mr. Willis: Indeed. I always have to mention Scotland—usually Dundee—to get me off the hook for the following 15 minutes.

As a network, the science and discovery centres represent a unique opportunity to foster scientific curiosity and a genuine, long-lasting sense of excitement and interest in science. Every branch of science, technology and engineering is catered for by an army of professional science communicators and enthusiastic volunteers, who have two key objectives: to switch

young people on to science and related career opportunities; and to engage the wider public in cutting-edge and often controversial science issues. It was interesting that on Monday, before the Second Reading of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, representatives of the Centre for Life,

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in Newcastle, visited the House and gave a presentation to Members of Parliament of some very interesting, simple and explanatory information about research into embryonic stem cells. That demonstrated the sorts of activities in which many science centres are involved.

The Committee decided to conduct the inquiry for three reasons: first, because the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East constantly said that we should. The second reason was the widespread concern over the financial security and future of science centres. Of the 18 science centres given capital grants by the Millennium Commission, two have already closed—the Earth Centre, in Doncaster, and the Big Idea, in Ayrshire. Furthermore, the Explore-At-Bristol centre has partially closed after it shut down its “wildwalk” facility and IMAX attraction. Since our inquiry, yet another has closed—the Inspire in Norwich—about which no doubt the hon. Member for Norwich, North will want to say more later. In addition, the future of Jodrell Bank—everyone in this Chamber will be familiar with it—which set up one of the first science centres in the world, back in 1965, hangs in the balance. Catalyst, at Widnes, which during this academic year delivered 575 science lessons to more than 17,000 children, struggles to survive and has been within a few days of closure on several occasions in the past five years, despite tremendous involvement from the chemical industry, local authorities and Members of this House.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by the financial plight of the science centres. After all, Lord Sainsbury—a great devotee and promoter of science and the then Science Minister—told the Committee in October 2006 that the projected revenues for the millennium centres, in particular, were

> “extremely optimistic, bordering on fantasy”.

The third reason why we looked at this subject was to examine what role science centres had within the Government’s agenda for science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—to which, to their credit, they remain highly committed. They have acknowledged the important role that science centres play in promoting to young people STEM subjects and careers in science. Yet the bulk of our recommendations on science centres were rejected out of hand by the Government, and science centres continue to struggle.

My task this afternoon is to provide an overview of the key themes covered in the report, to give a brief update on relevant developments and to highlight some of the outstanding issues to be addressed by the Government. I am delighted that three members of the former Committee are with us this afternoon—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, four members—I apologise to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), who has just arrived. I am also delighted to be joined by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), who is a member of the new Committee.

We need to consider the funding stream. We recognised that the majority of science centres lacked stable funding, and that if centres were to remain vibrant and to attract new exhibits and new audiences, stable funding was essential. We noted that funding regimes in England contrasted starkly with those in the devolved Administrations. Indeed, we were impressed with the Scottish model of policy exchange and co-ordinated funding, backed by a £2.5 million per year grant to four designated co-ordinated centres.

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We did propose a Scottish model for the rest of the UK. Centres are hugely varied, geographically widespread and have differing missions and structures, so different solutions need to be explored, rather than simply importing a model from elsewhere. Instead, we sought to find a potential funding stream for science centres and identified that if the distinction between science centres and museums could be successfully challenged, there might be a satisfactory solution. Museums come in many different flavours, but the thing that they all have in common is that they house collections. The gold standard for museums is the Museums and Libraries Archive Council's accreditation scheme, which sets nationally agreed standards for UK museums in user services, governance, visitor facilities and collections management.

Some science centres house collections, and a few science centres, such as Thinktank in Birmingham, are accredited under the MLA scheme. However, most do not house collections and are precluded, therefore, from receiving accreditation. However, the accreditation scheme itself recognises that learning

> "is a core purpose of museums."

In other words, support for museums is based on the fact that the collections that they keep are beneficial to society through education and public engagement. We suggested, therefore, that the accreditation scheme be divided into two parts: first, to focus on collections; and secondly, to focus on public engagement and education.

Given that only accredited museums can receive central Government funding, such a move would essentially divide the £320 million funding stream for museums from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport into two streams: one directed to collections and collection management, and the other to public engagement activities. That simple yet workable solution would mean that institutions that carry out the "core purpose of museums" without actually being museums—because they do not hold collections—could access funding that would enable them to carry out their valuable role in society. It is a simple solution that would solve many of the centres' problems. However, the Government dismissed the suggestion on three grounds, each of which is flawed.

First, the Government attempted to downgrade the importance of learning in the role of museums. They said:

> "Education activity is the focus of only one limited element within a section on wider user services."

That was uncharacteristically disingenuous of the Minister—or of the official who wrote the report. Of the four key elements of the accreditation system, three are relevant to science centres—user services, governance and visitor facilities—and only one is usually not, which is collections management. The MLA makes it clear that educational activity is key to the role of museums. The fact that learning is, within the Government's tight definition of "museum", related to collections, does not diminish the reality that it is the very educational benefits that museums offer that makes them attractive to fund in the first place.

The second reason why the Government dismissed our suggestion was that they felt that it was impractical because accreditation does not automatically ensure funding. That was a diversion. Only accredited museums

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can receive DCMS funding. We did not presume that if science centres were to be accredited, they would automatically receive funding because not all accredited museums receive funding. We simply suggested that accreditation would open up to science centres a funding stream currently not available to them. Again, that seems a perfectly reasonable point of view.

The third reason why the Government dismissed our suggestion was that the MLA is a non-departmental public body and that

> "DCMS operates in accordance with the arms-length principle and believes that MLA is best placed to determine priorities for the sector."

That is mere obfuscation. The MLA was set up by the Government to set standards for institutions that house collections. Our report suggests that the MLA's remit should be altered, which is something that only the Government can do. Therefore, the Government's intervention is absolutely crucial if that scheme is going to happen; the MLA cannot do it on its own.

It is a shame that the Government have dismissed our suggestion to realign the accreditation scheme and split the funding stream. Such a move would increase transparency, and enable the Government to meet the objectives more effectively. In the light of the Department's misunderstanding of our recommendation—because that is what I think it is—we would like the Minister to reconsider and perhaps to suggest a better way to rework the accreditation scheme.

We also proposed other ways in which the Government could help science centres. First, to prevent existing science centres from closing and to help those struggling financially, we suggested making available competitively awarded short-term funding. Secondly, we asked the Government to consider reducing the VAT rate on admissions fees to science and other educational centres. Thirdly, we urged our local authorities to offer 100 per cent. business rate

relief to science centres. The Government wickedly rejected out of hand the first suggestion on the ground that a science centre that is

> "failing in financial terms could not be an effective delivery agent or Government partner."

That depends on what we mean by "failing". I suspect that the hon. Members for Bolton, South-East and for Norwich, North would beg to differ. The Government, through DCMS, already fund science centres that are part of science museums. Science centres earn on average 63 per cent. of their core costs through commercial activities, while science museums fund only 16.5 per cent. of their costs through commercial activities. Is the Minister saying that all the science museums are failing? Of course he is not; he is far too intelligent a man to make such a ridiculous claim. Science museums are not set up to make money. They exist to provide educational services and to inspire the next generation of scientists and engineers. Science centres should be thought of in exactly the same light as museums.

Our fear about impending closures of science centres was well founded. Inspire, in Norwich, announced last week that due to a lack of sustainable funding it will be forced to close in September. Is the Government letting this resource disappear because Inspire does not add value to Norwich and the surrounding districts? Perhaps the Minister feels that because we have a distinguished scientist representing Norwich, North and a distinguished mathematician representing Norwich, South—the right

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hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke)—some people in Norwich are already sufficiently inspired to take up science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Dr. Gibson: Where did you get that?

Mr. Willis: I said that perhaps that was the case. It may even be that we do not need more scientists or engineers coming from the region. I thought that the hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, was querying the fact that he was a distinguished scientist, not that the right hon. Member for Norwich, South was a distinguished mathematician.

The Committee's second suggestion to help financial viability was that the Government should consider reducing VAT on admission fees. That was rejected on the ground that

> "reduced rates of VAT are used sparingly, and only when they provide the best-targeted and most cost-effective support for Government objectives and priorities."

That is an eminently sensible policy. We did not ask the Government to reduce the VAT burden for science centres, but to consider whether reducing the VAT burden on educational centres may be a cost-effective way of encouraging public engagement in STEM issues. To simply dismiss the suggestion without even engaging with it smacked of an unwillingness to engage with the seriousness of the situation in which science centres find themselves. Will the

Minister say whether he has had any conversations with the Treasury over the VAT issue? If he has not, will he give this proposal full consideration and a more reasoned response?

Our third suggestion—that local authorities offer 100 per cent. business rate relief to science centres, as they are entitled to do—has, to the best of my knowledge, also fallen on deaf ears. That is a sad reflection on so-called joined-up thinking.

The Government's refusal to accept any of our recommendations on funding options seems to indicate a fundamental misinterpretation of our report; that is the most generous comment that I can make. We were careful not to make simple calls for increased funds, because they would rightly have been rejected. Except in the case of our call for emergency funds to prevent precipitous closures of struggling science centres, we placed an important caveat on each of our funding suggestions:

> "Long-term support for science centres should not be made unless independent evidence of effectiveness is obtained."

That was a very fair comment by the Committee.

Here, we found a real problem. During our inquiry, we were surprised to find that although science centres claim to play an important role in society, they have not convincingly demonstrated that they have achieved their goals. Academics from Cardiff university outlined the current body of evidence and commented:

> "There are very few studies of the effect that science centres have on students' career choice."

They went on to say:

> "Although science centres have put many programmes in place that benefit society, on the whole, they have not developed the methodology to measure the impact they have at a societal level."

In our report, we recommended that Ecsite-uk, which enthusiastically represents some 70 centres, work to produce a benchmarking toolkit for science centres, so that data for science centres across the UK are collected in a more rigorous manner.

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It is good news that that process is already well under way. Ecsite immediately took up the challenge; however, in view of its proximity to the sector, we recommended that the Government commission independent research on the effectiveness of science centres and other STEM initiatives. To its credit, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills agreed to do so and said that it would start the work at the beginning of 2008. It is now the middle of May and I understand that the research has not even been commissioned. Perhaps

the Minister can explain the delay—I am sure that he has been busy doing other things—and share with us the terms of reference for the research, how much it will cost and how long it will take to complete, because it is important to all the science centres that that information be available.

We also found evidence that the level of co-ordination among science centres, and between science centres and other organisations, was variable. Many science centres co-ordinate policy particularly well with the education sector. The Eden Project in Cornwall, for example, runs professional development courses for teachers. Magna, in Rotherham, designs competitions and science projects in schools and colleges to retain interest sparked during visits. Others work well with individual scientists and universities.

Some centres work well together, for example to produce touring exhibitions. However, we discovered that there was huge room for improvement, and identified the Scottish science centre network as an example of best practice in co-ordination and co-operation. We therefore recommended that Ecsite-uk, on behalf of the science centre community, should examine the co-ordination and collaboration mechanisms in Scotland and internationally, with a view to producing best practice guidance to promote co-ordination between science centres across the whole UK.

Ecsite-uk, again to its credit, has been busy with the benchmarking exercise for data collection and has also asked for examples of best practice from the chief executive officers of the science centres. Those examples were published in Ecsite's recent report, which I understand will form the basis for taking forward the Committee's recommendation.

Our final recommendation was that the Minister should take up responsibility for science centres. His ready and enthusiastic acceptance of the recommendation that DIUS should act as

> "first point of contact and, in effect, policy lead in relation to issues on science centres"

was welcome. However, I remain concerned about how proactive DIUS is being on the issue. One science centre has already announced its closure since the publication of our report, and another, in which the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East is heavily involved—the Bolton technical innovation centre—has recently been transferred to local education authority hands.

Pending research on the effectiveness of science centres compared with other initiatives, they may emerge as an extremely valuable resource for the UK in inspiring the next generation of scientists and engineers. It will be an enormous shame if, when that research is completed and the Minister has done his work, there is nothing left to co-ordinate because all the centres have closed.

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2.52 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I am a great believer in children and adults alike experiencing the excitement of science and the discoveries that it can bring, to the benefit of our society. That is brought about in a number of ways. For 29 years, I trod the boards and toured the country, as well as places as far away as Naples and Copenhagen, trying to communicate science to people who were not necessarily scientists. I know a great deal about this subject, and welcome the inquiry.

Television is a powerful means of communication, and there have been some excellent science programmes such as the splendid “Horizon” series. Such programmes are often available to view on the internet, either at home or in the classroom. Unfortunately, they are expensive to put together, and they are decreasing in number, especially on mainstream television channels.

Children and families like to get out and about at the weekends and in the school holidays, and science and discovery centres provide them with excellent venues for educational visits. The centres encourage young people to take an interest in science subjects at school and inspire them to follow a science or engineering career. Part of their role is to communicate science to the general public and explain to them the benefits of investment in science, engineering and technology. According to the recent report by Ecsite-uk, which has been mentioned, a very large number of people— 19.5 million—visited our science and discovery centres, in which I include museums, in 2005-06. The Government are trying to encourage more women into science, and interestingly, 56 per cent. of those 19.5 million visitors were female. Of course, teachers also use many of the science and discovery centres to enhance their teaching.

The centres are enormously varied in their provisions. Aquariums, zoos, bird sanctuaries and museums such as the Science and Natural History museums here in London and planetariums such as that at Jodrell Bank are probably the most popular venues, followed by heritage centres. Science festivals such as the one held annually in Edinburgh are also a big attraction. Because of the popularity of those attractions, they can raise funding through entrance charges, but many of them need subsidising even so.

Our Committee listed 101 attractions that can loosely be called science and discovery centres, and gave the website addresses of all of them. They include, in alphabetical order: BUGS—biodiversity underpinning global survival—at London zoo; Brocks Hill environment centre and country park; Catalyst; the Centre for Alternative Technology; the Centre for Life; Ceramica; CONKERS; The Deep; the Discovery museum; the Ecos Centre; the Eden project; Eureka!—The Museum For Children; Explore-At-Bristol; the Glasgow Science Centre; INTECH; the Living Rainforest; the Magna Science Adventure Centre; Making It! discovery centre; the millennium seed bank; the National Botanic Garden of Wales; the National Marine Aquarium; the National Space Centre; Nature’s World; Our Dynamic Earth; the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester; the Scottish Seabird Centre; Sensation Dundee; the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Centre; Thinktank at Millennium point; the Water of Leith visitor centre;

and whowhatwherewhenwhy, known as W5, at Belfast. I should add: no more Christmas cards, please, I get enough.

I list those centres merely to indicate the wide variety of centres in every corner of the United Kingdom. There is something for everybody within reach of their own home, and entry to many of the centres is free. Every interest is covered, and many of them include interactive displays. They are not just static exhibitions. Some of them, such as the Railway museum in York and the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, house important national themed collections.

There are as many reasons for centres starting up as there are names or places for them. Benjamin Franklin house, which includes a hands-on science centre, is based on the life of one of our most famous scientists. Bletchley Park was the home of our famous world war two code breakers. Catalyst was bred out of the chemical industry in the Runcorn-Widnes area. Ceramica, in Stoke-on-Trent, is a celebration of its world-famous pottery industry, and the Magna Science Adventure centre is set in the Templeborough steelworks in Rotherham.

As the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), indicated, for the past four years I have been chairman of the board of the Bolton technical innovation centre—Bolton TIC, as we prefer to call it. It was founded as a partnership between the Northwest Regional Development Agency, Bolton council and Mount St. Joseph's school. Paul Abbott, a Bolton teacher who was engaged in enthusing young people about the excitement of science, engineering and technology throughout his teaching career at the school, had a brilliant idea a few years ago and discussed it initially with David Puttnam, who was the chairman of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts at the time.

Paul wanted to create the equivalent of a music centre for pupils interested in STEM subjects—a big science club, if you like. The regional development agency was convinced by the idea and invested £2.5 million in a futuristic-looking and attractive new building in my constituency. It is Britain's first junior incubator, as far as we know, and we have fitted it out with £500,000 of state-of-the-art equipment.

Initially, we debated whether to fit open IT systems, with open-access software, across the building. Eventually, we decided in favour of that. It contains a plethora of IT equipment, and the computer-aided design packages are extremely advanced. A pupil can design a three-dimensional object and then print it out as a prototype on a rapid prototyping machine, which is essentially a three-dimensional printer. Bolton TIC received one of the first high-definition, colour 3D printers to be seen anywhere in Europe. Children aged from nine to 19 have access to that equipment. They do not just stand there while somebody else shows them how it works.

Bolton TIC also has a suite of haptic arms, which can convert three-dimensional objects into computer images and do much more besides. There is a flight simulator and a lecture theatre that can show three-dimensional films. There is a virtual planetarium. There are also laser and water cutters and a sinter station, everything required to build cars, rockets, remote-controlled surface or underwater vehicles, aircraft and so on. The NWRDA has recently provided the TIC with a £10,000 grant to

build the largest rocket that we have ever built there. One of the members of staff, Robin Hague, previously worked on the Starchaser rocket project.

We do not just build those rockets; we fire them. Of course, we must know about logistics. We do not want to knock any aircraft from Manchester, Blackpool or John Lennon airport in Liverpool out of the sky. We must liaise with the local airports and also with the meteorology experts, because we need to know what the cloud base is on such and such a day. Of course, we also have to find the right firing point. Incidentally, these rockets are recovered by parachute.

Dr. Gibson: My hon. Friend mentioned the fact that the TIC has received £10,000 from the local regional development agency. Has he estimated how much the regional development agency gives to science in general in his part of the country? Is that £10,000 all of its contribution, or is there more?

Dr. Iddon: I do not carry the figure around in my head, of course, but I can tell my hon. Friend that the NWRDA, through the Northwest Science Council, is very generous towards science. In fact, dare I say that it is looking after the interests of Daresbury at the moment? However, I will not stray into that area, Mr. Gale; I have taken the warning.

At Bolton TIC, a pupil can invent, design and manufacture. An artist in residence, Iain Cant, has helped to bridge that difficult gap between science and the arts. He is partly responsible for the world's largest single stone sculpture, which can now be seen at the Eden project in Cornwall. That sculpture was designed and prototyped using equipment at the Bolton TIC. The Bolton Wireless Club, the Bolton Aero-modelling Club and the Bolton Astronomical Society have all been given access to the building, provided that they encourage children to join their clubs.

As I have said, Bolton TIC is for all children aged between nine and 19, and not just those from Bolton but from across the region. The plan was to open it beyond school hours: in the evenings, at the weekends, and throughout the school holidays. Bolton TIC is situated in one of the most deprived wards in the country, so we were able to win neighbourhood renewal funding worth £300,000 to purchase a bus that conveys children from all the schools in the area to and from the TIC.

Paul Abbott has built up a network of science communicators across the north-west. He knows who is willing to bring into the TIC equipment that the TIC does not already own: robots, lasers and so on. Many meetings, conferences and competitions for children are held in the building by a variety of learned societies, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry and other organisations promoting science and engineering. Professor Colin Pillinger, of Beagle fame, recently helped me to launch a series of lectures for children and the general public. Those lectures were very popular indeed.

Ideally Bolton TIC, which we have always seen as a regional asset, requires £500,000-worth of revenue funding per annum, but in the past four years we have managed to run it on just

£300,000 per annum. Conference business has provided £80,000 per annum and the rest has had to be raised through grants and sponsorship. The Department for Education and Skills funded the

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TIC for the past two years through its Excellence in Cities programme, but efforts to maintain funding at that very high level finally ran out at the end of March this year. On 1 April 2008, the board of the TIC and the NWRDA decided on a seamless transfer of the asset to Bolton council and the project will be known in future as Bolton science and technology centre. Bolton council has dedicated £300,000 to the centre for each of the next two years, when the future of the project will have to be evaluated again.

The NWRDA and the former board of Bolton TIC have been assured that the original ethos of this exciting project, which is the first junior incubator in Britain, will not be lost and that the building will continue to be used to add value to the education of schoolchildren from Bolton and the entire region. I wish the project well in the future. I also want to take this opportunity to thank all the staff at the TIC and my fellow board directors who have struggled during the past four years to keep the project open for the benefit of local children.

If a TIC works in the north-west, why cannot we have one in every region? There has been a lot of interest already in this concept; rather than having individual science clubs in each individual school in a town, it is a big science club for a town. I ask the Minister, “Isn’t that better?” Young people play better music when they congregate together in music centres and I maintain that the same is true with science in Bolton TIC. So I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to look carefully at this innovative project.

Just as there are 101 reasons for the start-up of science centres, the funding of them is equally complex, as I have just tried to indicate. Right now, some of the centres are in danger of closing, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough pointed out. That is because of the complexity of the funding mechanisms. The people who run the centres spend inordinate amounts of time bidding for grants here, there and everywhere, and they are lucky if even 10 per cent. of the applications are successful. Furthermore, the funding is often short term rather than long term. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) will say more about the Inspire Discovery Centre in his town.

Recently I have been in correspondence with Adam Hart-Davis, one of our best communicators of science in the media, who has related the plight of Explore-at-Bristol to me. It has had to close two of its main attractions, one of them being the Imax cinema, and to make 45 staff redundant as a result of a shortage of funding. The Wellcome Trust recently awarded Explore-at-Bristol a £1.5 million grant to build a touring exhibition entitled “Inside DNA: A Genomic Revolution”, which will tour the UK when it has been built. The Wellcome Trust has obviously shown that it appreciates the work done by Explore-at-Bristol.

Of the 18 centres that received £450 million from the Millennium Commission at the turn of the century, several are currently finding it difficult to survive. As the hon. Gentleman indicated, two of those have already closed: the Earth Centre at Doncaster and the Big Idea in Ayrshire.

Further injections of capital have been awarded by ReDiscover. Some £33 million was provided by the Millennium Commission, the Wellcome Trust and the Wolfson Foundation in 2003. The stabilisation fund—£2 million awarded by the Government to stabilise millennium centres in financial difficulties—provided

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money in 2004. A further £1 million was awarded by the science centre enrichment activities grant scheme in 2006. All those sources of extra funding have kept many of these centres open. However, if those sources of funding are not replaced in the near future, many of the remaining centres will begin to close.

Until recently, there was no overall umbrella organisation that looked after the interests of all those organisations. It is true that museums do have an umbrella organisation already, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which is a non-departmental Government body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which museums can apply to for accreditation, as has been mentioned. However, the rest of the science and discovery centres remained unco-ordinated until the foundation of Ecsite-uk.

Ecsite-uk has now been formed and it has a growing membership, particularly among organisations that do not fit conveniently into any silo. I mention again the Bolton TIC as an example; it falls in the cracks between Departments. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the DCMS have recently awarded Ecsite-uk £750,000, specifically to enhance the financial viability of science and discovery centres in the 2006-08 period. I will be interested to learn from the Minister whether any results have come out of that study yet by Ecsite-uk.

As has been mentioned, the DIUS has commissioned research this year to establish how effective these centres are compared with other “delivery mechanisms”— that is the Department’s jargon, not mine—at helping the Government to meet both their science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, goals and their public engagement goals.

However, a recent review by Ecsite-uk of worldwide studies in this policy area has shown that science and discovery centres are extremely valuable. Cardiff university’s submission to our Committee has already been referred to, and the results from Cardiff appear to be positive. The Wellcome Trust published a review in 2006 on the effectiveness of the five millennium science centres that it funded, and it concluded that they:

> “provide considerable resources for their local regions, contributing to local regeneration, supporting formal education and acting as regional ‘hubs’ for science-based activities.”

Museums differ from science and discovery centres in that they house important local and national collections. Some museums, such as the amazingly successful Manchester museum of science and industry, house science and discovery centres. The Catalyst museum at Runcorn once housed a static display of items collected from the chemical industry in the surrounding area and was funded entirely by that industry. In recent times, it has built in a

school science laboratory and an interactive public science theatre. It also offers visitors daily demonstration lectures on a rolling basis and it houses three interactive galleries.

In that respect, I declare an interest because I am proud to be one of Catalyst's patrons. However, its future is by no means certain. It has twice been saved from closure by Halton borough council and the Northwest Regional Development Agency. Ineos Chlor, a large local chemical company, has recently also provided a large one-off grant to keep the museum open. However, that is all short-term funding, and the future of Catalyst is by no means sustainable without more help.

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The formation of science and discovery centres began about 20 years ago. The Exploratory in Bristol opened in 1983, Green's Mill and Science Centre in Nottingham opened in 1985 and Techniquest in Cardiff and the Launchpad in London's Science museum both opened in 1986. Those were pioneering establishments in this policy area.

Some centres receive far more visitors than others. For example, the National Space Centre near Leicester alone reaches 40,000 children every year through workshops and schools. Thousands of visitors come every year to look at its public displays and engage in its activities.

The DCMS provides revenue funding of £320 million, most of which is for museums. Funding also comes from the DIUS and DCSF, which was previously the Department for Education and Skills. Funding also comes from a variety of charities, and I have mentioned the Wellcome Trust and NESTA. There is also funding from the regional development agencies, such as that in the north-west, from local authorities, such as Halton borough council, and from industry and commerce.

Let me repeat, however, that much of that funding is extremely short term. There is a dire shortage of core funding outside the museum sector. Hardly any of the science and discovery centres can exist on the basis of their commercial activities alone. In most cases, their future business plans are not sustainable. It appears that they can generate a maximum of 78 to 80 per cent. of their income through commercial activities such as shops, cafes, restaurants, conference business, ticket sales and even car parks.

There is a need for a Department other than the DCMS to take ownership of the co-ordination and funding of centres. Our current Science Minister, who is with us today, showed some interest in that role when he came before the Committee, but the Government as a whole seem to have rejected our recommendation that they give serious consideration to taking it on.

We were disappointed that the previous Science Minister, Lord Sainsbury, felt that science and discovery centres should be self-financing through their own activities, despite the Government's strong commitment to STEM subjects. The Committee was disappointed by his response to a request for Government intervention in this policy area. He has seen for himself the excellent work that many centres do; indeed, I was with him when he visited Catalyst, for example.

In their response to the Committee's report, the Government said that

> "it would not be appropriate for any part of Government to take responsibility for them"—

science and discovery centres—

> "in the sense that Ministers take overall responsibility for the actions of Government Departments and Agencies."

The Government have also said that they regard centres as "independent organisations". Those remarks are disappointing, particularly given that so much public money—revenue and capital alike—is ploughed into keeping centres open year in, year out. Why can the Government not take a bigger interest?

Our report recommended that the Government waive VAT for science and discovery centres, including museums, because they provide education for their visitors in a way comparable to schools. As the Committee's Chairman said, however, the Government dismissed our proposal.

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Every year for five years, Bolton TIC has paid about £15,000 per annum in business rates to Bolton council. Imagine if it could invest that money, which it worked to hard to raise and which comes to more than £50,000, in the town's children, instead of paying it back to the council. I therefore implore the Minister to look more seriously at waiving business rates for all these centres.

The Wellcome Trust, which has given science and discovery centres £43 million for their public engagement activities in the past decade, is

> "concerned that the Government's response does not provide the strategic vision we argue the sector needs."

That is what we need—strategic vision. The devolved Governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and—the best example—the Parliament in Scotland are better at supporting these centres.

Core funding, which is difficult to raise, is required to help centres to renew their equipment and their interactive exhibits. Anyone who has visited a hands-on centre will know how enthusiastic children can put exhibits out of action almost by the hour. In any case, exhibits and hands-on experiments need to be kept at the cutting edge—that is what science and discovery are all about.

I am pleased that the Select Committee carried out this inquiry, because it has allowed a light to be shone in this dark corner of science policy. It has brought all the facts together so that there can be no misunderstanding about the difficulties that science and discovery centres are in.

I hope that the Government's review will allow them to conclude that these centres are worth supporting—perhaps through the newly created co-ordinating body Ecsite-uk—and that they will provide core funding to keep them all open. If the Government do not do that, there is no doubt that many centres will go out of business. That will happen at a time when countries such as Canada and Japan see centres as playing a key role in maintaining confidence in scientists and their discoveries. Science and discovery centres play a role in nurturing our future science and engineering talent. All that it takes to keep them open is political will.

3.17 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North) (Lab): I apologise for having to leave at four o'clock, but I have to be in another part of Westminster to take part in debate on whether we should privatise universities or keep them public. I and others will be taking on the vice-chancellor of Buckingham university, which is always a bit of fun.

I was not a member of the Committee, but I am proud to be associated with the report. I have read it, thought about it and talked about it to other people, and I congratulate the Committee on the way in which its Chairman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) have presented it.

I was extremely happy when the new Department was set up. I thought that that was a real initiative that we should be proud of. It was a bold step—and, gosh, do we need bold steps these days. It was bold and rather important step in the field of science, because it brought higher education and science together in the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

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Joined-up science policy is very important for this country and, linked with skills, it has allowed us to produce graduates with a sound practical knowledge base who can go into employment, provided that we know what industries are developing. We need graduates to go into industry with skills, innovatory ability and a degree of knowledge of the subjects, but we need to go a bit further than that: we need to explain issues to people at a much younger age, long before they are graduates. Science and discovery centres bridge a large part of that gap and can reach our young people.

The Minister and I were at a rather high-octane meeting with some very young people last night. Among other things, we discussed scientific understanding and policy determination in government. I know enthusiasm when I see it, and it is clear that large numbers of young people want to enter this arena to develop their science and make sure that science plays a central part in policy determination. The evidence base should be evidence based, and what better than science to achieve that? This is the 21st century. Nothing is better than catching people young, and I stand with Alex Ferguson when I say that. We must get them when they are young—they may not last long, but, by gosh, they can give a lot in the time they are in the profession.

There are specialist science and engineering schools now. It has been interesting to hear from the engineering greats with whom we on the Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills have spoken. They do not know how many schools there are in this country where it is possible to specialise in engineering, and that is probably true of science too. However, there are schools that specialise in those areas, and we must ensure that the people who enter them have some understanding of what science is about.

Colleagues from the Committee may remember some young engineers to whom we spoke during our recent engineering inquiry who had lots of friends who wanted to do science, but were tempted away from it by better money and conditions in industry. We must take that issue on, quite seriously. I do not think that everything is a matter of money; it is also a matter of conditions and recognition, of saying, “Well done,” and of making sure that there are jobs available for a large part of people’s lives in which they can develop their ideas. If we could get civil servants who knew a bit of science, we would not have some of the problems that we have in government now. The evidence base would be much better understood. I have said before that one can tell that many civil servants on Capitol hill have a scientific background.

Science captures the imagination. It is not just about David Attenborough and the wonderful things in his programmes. I am amazed by some of the features of life he shows us, as are others, I am sure—they capture the imagination. However, earlier this week we discussed stem cell research and Britain being ahead of the curve, and in that context it is no use if, in schools such as one I visited recently, the subject of stem cells is taught in religion, not science, classes. It is interesting that that is how that subject is seen in some schools. Of course that can and will be argued about in schools.

As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East said, discovery centres are places where young people can have fun on a rainy day—or a sunny day—and

learn about and experience science in an exciting way. I get quite turned on when I go in and try some of the things, although I do not understand much, because science is highly specialised. It is very good for adults to question how things happen, and there is nothing better than to spend an hour or so in those centres. They set young minds going for the future, and that is what we should be doing. Young people need to go into science, and they need to be excited to get those careers. There are competitive markets globally, and we must be engaged in them. If we capture them young and get their imagination involved, we shall hold our own.

This debate is not just about science funding; it is also about how Government and society relate to science and about the whole process, from early excitement about science to arriving in whatever scientific career or training people want, whether they go into the civil service, or research science or something else. The issue is national and local at the same time. We have been debating the merits of funding and how the Government might help to fund the centres. The young man who started the Inspire discovery centre in Norwich, who is now in Wales, I think, was here for the demonstration on Monday, when we were lobbied by scientists about

stem cell research. It was nice to meet again someone who spent eight or 10 years of his career trying to set up that science centre; he struggled, but it got there, and as he moves on there are difficulties in replacing someone of his ability. That should not happen. Those present for the debate know why it should not happen; the question is how to get out of that position and ensure that the excellence of what he set up is maintained.

I am keen on making Norwich a science city. People are cynical about them, but there are science cities in this country, such as Nottingham, Newcastle and York. There is no money attached to the status, but it pulls people together at all levels of society and gives them something to fight for and be determined about, not just at the business end but in the context of getting young people interested in the first place in becoming entrepreneurs and the business men and women of the future. It is a great idea. I asked the chief scientific adviser about them, and he did not know what a science city was; he asked whether one would just put up a sign at the entrance to the city saying, “Science city here”. The idea has not percolated outwards yet. I hope the Minister is listening when I say that we need another 12 or 15 science cities, to inspire the people at all levels who should be working together. Inspire in Norwich, which is threatened with closure, is a good example of how we can build around the scientific community, which is very big.

Dr. Iddon: I hope that my hon. Friend will tell us more about Inspire; I understand that it was started in a church—hence the name—and was part of regeneration work.

Dr. Gibson: Yes, Norwich is a city full of pubs and churches. I always get this wrong—even on my website—so shall not say which there are more of. Whatever I say I get it wrong, and a constituent always writes to me. However, Inspire is in a church, and is run by a company called Science Projects. It also runs the Observatory

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science centre at Herstmonceux castle, in Sussex. That is a huge complex run by Queen’s university of Canada, but the observatory has been turned into a science centre and is now extremely successful. Those two examples furnish us with a case study of centres that are closing or developing, and we should try to find out what success really means. The Observatory science centre has conferences and larger exhibitions. It has greater pull, with a huge stream of visitors, as well as discovery days and outdoor festivals. It is hard to organise those things for a church in the centre of Norwich where there is no parking—the parking restrictions in the centre of Norwich are a real problem. However, I know of a place where it could be done, and I hope that the press are listening.

We are working with the Norwich research park—a research council-funded organisation that is extremely successful. It is world class in plant sciences and the food industry, with food research being done at the Institute of Food Research. Those elements are beginning to merge, and I have an idea of something else that could merge with them. I have talked to the vice-chancellor and his staff, and they will meet Inspire representatives in the next few weeks. The institutes will meet them too, to try to work out a deal so that the place can be kept going. The work of Community University Engagement East is also proving fruitful. If I can get my regional development agency to take something like science really seriously—things in my

area are not as they are in the north-east or north-west, but are pretty low key—there will be money streams that could be merged together. If those things do not happen, we shall not have a centre.

I should like to move the centre out of the cold old church and put it into the wonderful building in Norwich called the Forum. It is quite stylish, with beautiful rooms, and was funded by lottery money. It ran an exhibition, which has had its day, called Origins, in which people were taught to speak in Norfolk language. Some people would like everyone from Norfolk to speak it, and I can understand why, but it is difficult for someone from Scotland or up north, for example, to understand. Anyhow, the Forum gets visitors and is a classic example of a place where everyone goes. It is perfect for a science centre and is right in the middle of the city. We want to get student volunteers involved there, because interaction between young students and other young people is an important factor in developing such places. The meeting I spoke of will take place, and I think that there will be some action in connection with the Inspire centre. I shall certainly spend a fair bit of time on it.

Another group of organisations about which we should think seriously is the trade union movement. An hour or so ago I met people from trade unions such as Unite and Prospect, which are not just defensive units that defend pay and conditions. They have always had an interest in bringing forward new ideas and strategies for the future. It seems to me that many of their members are in scientific research councils and universities. It would be a good project if the trade union movement were to combine with some other forces, with financial backing, to produce something good—six or seven projects or one big one; whatever was wanted. It would show that trade unionists and the people working in the relevant industries are offering to give something back, not only in their knowledge of what is happening in

science, but by contributing something to help young people. I put it to them, if they are listening, that they should try to get together. The TUC could front such a project: it could take money from different unions and ensure that such places flourish. Revenue streams are very important.

Many people in this Chamber will remember the discovery dome. Steve Pizzey, who ran the organisation in Norwich, took it around the country to festivals. It had 100,000 visitors in the first year alone. Some of us probably went to see it. It was exciting and fun, but one learned something as well. There were people, including young people, on hand to answer questions. It was an amazing success when it was in the centre of Norwich.

There is very good institute attached to Queen Mary university, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry called the Centre of the Cell, which makes deliberate efforts to help young people in the east end of London to understand science. For financial resources, it helps that it is attached to a university and so on. It is fronted by the director, Frances Balkwill, who is a professor at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry. She has written 13 books for children about science, AIDS and other things—very exciting—and she also happens to be very good at cancer research. It is good to see people at that level devoting

some of their time to bringing on youth. The Centre of the Cell is well worth a visit, and perhaps at some time the Select Committee could visit it to see how well it is doing.

The centre started off struggling for money. We helped—we had meetings in this place and everywhere—and eventually it got support. It will be hand to mouth for a bit, but it will get there because the people are determined to do what they are doing. There is hope, and examples of places where such things can be done.

Dr. Iddon: My hon. Friend mentioned a mobile science and discovery centre. Would he like to join me in congratulating those who have innovative ideas? The Institute of Physics, with its lab on a truck, produces mobile science and discovery centres. We should not forget them in this debate.

Dr. Gibson: I thank my hon. Friend. I will go even further and say that many of the societies—the Royal Society of Chemistry, with which he is affiliated, the Institute of Physics, the Institute of Biology and others—have put in a lot of effort, too. Working together, they could be part of an amalgam of people who are interested in this area. They just need to get into the same room and talk about such things, and see how much they will cost.

I want to say something about cost. The report said that £750,000 was given to Ecsite-uk. As Members will know, I am hot on statistics these days and I am keen to find out how they are gathered. We really need an inquiry into how Government Departments use, or do not use, statistics. In this case, however, the first question is whether £750,000 is a big sum of money. It sounds like a lot to the paupers in the House of Commons, but, at the end of the day, when I consider the 100 centres that have a turnover of £100,000 to £200,000 a year, and the £43 million contributed by the Wellcome Trust, I start to wonder whether £750,000 really is big beer.

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Many centres fend for themselves much of the time. They do not have business expertise—I absolutely acknowledge that—because of the nature of their work. They need a lot of expertise and help. I do not want to go into all the stuff about business plans, dynamism and so on, but we all know that places can be turned around if the right people move in. There is expertise in the country, and the Government may have to think about how to keep such places going.

We heard a bit about the Scottish model. Actually, I am getting bored with Scotland. Everything seems to be better there these days, and I am down here. Mesothelioma is better treated in Scotland, I am told, and care for the elderly is better, but then I am told that that is because the English give Scotland so much money and that we will have to take some back because things are done better there. I have never heard such nonsense in my life. There is a different attitude in those places and in centres to handling some of the problems with drugs and so on in the health arena.

I and, I am sure, members of the Select Committee have looked at the position around the world. It is absolutely amazing how some of the centres in the United States get money together with some local help and, of course, help from private sources. One that I have looked into in detail is in Birmingham, Alabama. The US seems to have centres everywhere. I do not know whether there is a correlation with the excellence of their research, but I would bet that many young people who eventually end up doing research, making discoveries and running businesses started off by getting that first touch of interest and enthusiasm by going around centres such as that one, which happens to specialise in dinosaurs. Dinosaurs seem to fascinate young people—we have the Natural History Museum, which is also full of them. We could have such centres if we had support from individuals and organisations right across the country.

I am not too happy with the Government's attitude, which suggests that science centres are not as important as museums or galleries, that they are separate and that we really should not support them. They refuse to have a Department with responsibility for them. I think that we should have a Minister with responsibility for science and discovery centres, in the same way that we have Ministers for museums, charities and so on. Ministers are always fighting about getting out of one part of Whitehall and into another. We need to grasp the nettle and start pushing for a Minister with the power to ensure that we get a national science centre. Science centres fit into the Government strategy, and we should make a louder noise about them. I hope that the Government will recognise that there is a strong case for their being part of the education process. This is where it starts, and where it finishes will depend on how well we start.

3.37 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who modestly said—in the context of how specialised scientists are, I believe—that he did not know much about science. I hope that that will not be mischievously misquoted back at him by the media. He was very clear that science is a broad subject. Science centres are so important because they expose young people to the breadth of the subject.

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Although I am speaking from the Front Bench now, I was and am a member of the Select Committee that conducted this inquiry. It was interesting to participate in it. It was short and sometimes sweet, and it certainly set out the problems that science centres face and the wonderful opportunities that a solution to those problems would offer to them, to the people whom they serve and to communities, and, indeed, to Government policy.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), rightly paid tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) for his initiative in pushing the inquiry forward. Whenever this is raised, I point out that it was I who got science centres on the agenda for our quarterly question session with the then

Minister for Science and Innovation, Lord Sainsbury of Turville, because I had been contacted by the science centre in Oxford, which expressed concern about the position that science centres generally were in. I remember being very disappointed by Lord Sainsbury's response at the time. As he put it—I am paraphrasing because I do not have the exact quote—the Government wanted to promote science learning through science learning centres and did not see any role for science centres. In essence, they had to live and die by the marketplace. I thought that that was the wrong approach to take, and I urged the Committee to look into the matter further. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East was able to persuade it to take on the inquiry.

In his introductory speech, the Chairman magnificently and succinctly identified the disappointing nature of the Government's response, particularly on the key issues relating to our three options on funding: the museums link, VAT, and emergency short-term capital-type funding to keep things going. I shall return to those things in a moment.

The value of the work done by science centres was brought home to me when the Newcastle Centre for Life kindly sent a team of science explainers to the House of Commons, where they set up their equipment—they had microscopes, models, interactive approaches and display boards—to enable members of the public and Members of Parliament to learn more about the exact nature of stem cells and hybrid embryo research. They were even kind enough to battle the elements and come outside for a photo call to show that scientists—those young explainers were all science-trained—have a role to play in explaining controversial issues to the public and the media.

If, as I hope, the controversial measures in the Government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill get through, it will be thanks in no small part to the efforts of the science community to engage with the public, the media and with parliamentarians to explain their science, what the research is about and some of the myths created, and to support individuals, including parliamentarians such as me, the Chairman of the Select Committee, other Members who have spoken today and Ministers, who support the proposals in the Bill.

I received a letter from the Centre for Life afterwards, explaining that science centres do well at presenting complex and potentially frightening science simply and neutrally through interactive displays and exhibitions.

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That unit in Newcastle takes the information out in a mobile way, as the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East mentioned. It is important that there is flexibility to enable it to take mobile displays to shopping areas and schools, because such displays help people to make sense of science, which is sometimes misrepresented in the media. We are not talking just about stem cells, of course, but nanotechnology, vaccinations and climate change, which are just some of the areas that science explainers at the Newcastle science centre have gone into. The Centre for Life is right to say that it does not expect money for nothing—funding—or money for anything simply because it exists. The Government should see that there is something worth while, in terms of policy and outcomes, in spending public money on keeping kids switched on to science.

The Centre for Life tells me that, and I accept that, there is evidence that young people switch off from science at certain points during their education, that science teaching in schools is clearly under-resourced and boring, and, therefore, that it is no wonder that so many take softer subjects such as media studies. Fewer students than we would like, and fewer than the country needs, are taking science subjects. Our problem with the supply of scientists starts in schools and among young people. Science centres can offer a more exciting, relevant and hands-on approach to science for young people that complements the curriculum work being done in schools.

The Centre for Life explainers pointed out that it can engage the public in cutting-edge, controversial subjects such as stem cell technology; that should be recognised by the Government in funding terms, where necessary. As hon. Members have heard me say before, it is more important than ever that science is explained. It is not a case of dealing with a population that is not as knowledgeable as it might be, or not as knowledgeable as that of other countries; rather, we are dealing with an active campaign against science—an active campaign of anti-science and pseudo-science—that needs to be countered by the facts and by explaining what scientists do. It is worrying that sometimes, the only time that young people hear about some of these technologies is in religious education lessons, as the hon. Member for Norwich, North said. We need an alternative place where young people can get the information.

The hon. Member for Bolton, South-East made a clear plea for action on the part of the Government. He is careful about demanding action from the Government and they ought to listen, because people such as him putting such a well-argued case for something to be done adds validity to that call. It was fascinating to hear about Bolton TIC. I felt the sudden urge to travel to the north-west—probably via Crewe—to Bolton and it might still happen. I was delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman is able, through his efforts and those of the local council, to keep Bolton TIC ticking. The hand-to-mouth existence of such organisations, involving little pots of money, is frustrating.

I am struck by the fact that the Wellcome Trust and Halton borough council, in the case of Catalyst, and Bolton metropolitan borough council have felt it worth while to provide support for science centres, whereas the Government have responded by saying that they did not feel that it was worth funding a science centre that was failing financially. I raised that point in my questions to

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Ministers during the evidence-taking session in the Select Committee on 11 July 2007, when I also asked the Wellcome Trust a question. The Government said in evidence that they

> “should not provide on-going subsidies for commercially unsuccessful science and discovery centres”.

That was astonishing, because they offer ongoing subsidies and financial support to commercially unsuccessful hospitals, schools, libraries and other things. The point is that these are not commercial enterprises. If the Minister’s view is that they should be commercial

enterprises—and that if they are not, then that is it—that would be clear, because then we may as well not wait for the outcome of the Government's research into their effectiveness in delivering Government policy.

The Wellcome Trust is not foolish about handing out its money, and local councils are not allowed by the Audit Commission and the district auditor to be foolish in handing out their money, yet they have thought that funding such centres is worth while. The corollary of the Government's view is that they will only subsidise commercially successful science and discovery centres: that is, they will only fund the ones that do not need the funding. It is astonishing that, in written evidence, the Government said what they did and followed it up with what the Committee Chairman said was a rather trite statement in response to our recommendation:

> "The Government's position has been and remains that funding failing institutions does not represent a good use of public money."

A number of schools in special measures would quiver if they heard that. It is not about funding failure, but about funding institutions to help them not fail. I have made the point, as did the Committee Chairman, that those institutions would not be failing if there were a fair, level playing field with other institutions.

That brings me to a point made by the Chairman during his introduction, which is the question of a level playing field in respect of museum funding. I do not need to repeat what he said about the unreasonableness and shallowness of the Government's response, which was not a valid response to the points that we made. Leaving aside museums, it is peculiar that a science centre's having a collection is the be all and end all in respect of whether they will receive funding. I accept that that is a factor: it is a role that some science centres play. However, the idea that the only thing worth funding is collections is not consistent with any rational view of the validity and importance of the role of science centres or, indeed, of any cultural centre. Other forms of funding are available for cultural centres that do not require them to have collections.

I asked the Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) on 11 July 2007, in question 80, whether there was a curiosity in this regard, because although there is a massive shortage of young people studying physics, chemistry and maths, the Government do not give ongoing revenue support to science and discovery centres, whereas the Department for Culture, Media and Sport gives massive, and welcome, support to art galleries and museums. I asked whether that was because there was a shortage of painters and young people who could become painters. That activity is funded.

That was light-hearted, but the fundamental problem is that if young people cannot afford entry fees to science centres, they will go where there is no entry fee.

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Young people from deprived areas in particular will not have a level playing field and an equal opportunity to go to places where they might be turned on to science, just as they might be

turned on to art in art galleries or history and related subjects in museums. I hope that the Minister will return to the matter and provide a valid answer, and I hope that funding might be available on an accreditation basis, regardless of whether a collection exists.

The hon. Member for Norwich, North rightly said that when capturing young people for science, it is critical to catch them young, particularly as we will not catch them with the offer of wealth. Science salaries are not what the brightest people can achieve outside science, in the City and in the purely commercial or corporate sector. We must rely on the fact that science is interesting, or—I do not want to ostracise people—even more interesting than accountancy, banking and other sectors where salaries and bonuses are high.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I do not want to deride accountants and solicitors, but the hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that 50 per cent. of leading business men and heads of FTSE 100 companies come from a scientific background. Science provides the impetus or foundation for careers in business, as well as in direct scientific research.

Dr. Harris: Absolutely, and the Committee noted during its current engineering inquiry that a significant number of chief executives of major companies are engineers. I am not concerned about people going into engineering, becoming successful, and then going into business, becoming successful and heading up companies. I am worried about people who take science subjects at school and go on to study them at university, but do not go into teaching, research or industry because they are lured by the debt-abolition "golden hellos" that City institutions offer to the brightest people. The hon. Member for Norwich, North was right to make the international comparisons between our science centres and those elsewhere in the world.

I return to the Government's response. Most of the key points were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough in his fine introduction to the debate. On VAT reduction, the Government did not address the recommendation, which was clear. It is short and it is worth quoting for the record:

> "We recommend that the Government give serious consideration to a reduced rate of VAT of 5% on admission fees to science and other educational centres, as permitted under Article 98 of the EU Council Directive...subject to independent research verifying the effectiveness of science centres in achieving Government policy objectives."

The Government did not address that. They confirmed that European VAT

> "agreements allow a reduced VAT rate of 5 per cent. to be applied to 'admissions to shows, theatres, circuses, fairs, amusement parks, concerts, museums, zoos, cinemas, exhibitions and similar cultural events and facilities,' where these"

services are not already

> "covered by the VAT exemption for cultural services."

When I first read that, I thought it was good because science centres tick many boxes and are more useful to Government policy than zoos, and certainly circuses. However, the Government concluded:

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> "While all taxes are kept under review...reduced rates of VAT are used sparingly, and only when they provide the best-targeted and most cost-effective support for Government objectives and priorities."

There was nothing to suggest that, following the research that we proposed in recommendation 4, the Government would consider the matter again or offer any comfort. Their response seemed to be a flat negative. Perhaps I have misunderstood, and perhaps when the research to which the Government referred in paragraph 12 of their response and to which my hon. Friend referred is under way—it was to be commissioned early in 2008, but this is no longer early 2008, so I await what the Minister says about progress in this area—the option of VAT or some other form of funding will be kept open.

We are fiddling while Rome burns, because more and more science centres are under threat and struggling. It cannot be good use of resources to keep funding them in the short term, and it is not fair on the staff in those centres to be faced with difficult decisions. We want centres to be able to plan for the future, to expand their activities, to identify what they are doing well and what the Government want them to do, and to do more of that. They cannot do that while there is doubt about funding. I urge the Government to be more constructive in their policy objective of persuading more young people to study STEM subjects and more members of the public to understand science issues.

I accept that there is a limited pot of funds, that museums, for example, jealously guard what they already have, and that if there are to be more gainers, there must be losers. I, for one, would prefer to have a combination of winners and losers than a continuation of the status quo, with these valuable centres struggling and some of them closing. It is vital that we make a success of them, and the fact that they were allowed to open on the basis of dodgy business plans through the Millennium Commission's funding process is no excuse for blaming them. Better checks should have been made to prevent inadequate business plans from getting off the ground. The fact is that that did not happen. These centres are in a dilemma, and there is now an expectation that they will be allowed to continue. I urge the Government to make that happen.

3.57 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am delighted to participate in this stimulating, exciting and crucial debate about the future of undergraduates, graduates and workers in STEM subjects in the UK economy, not only because I was a member of the Science and Technology Committee that prepared the report, under the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), but as my party's Front Bench spokesman on

science and technology. As someone with a science background who has built up businesses in the technology and scientific arena, the matter is close to my heart.

It became clear to me from our visits during our evidence sessions for the report that there is a vibrant world out there, with more than 100 centres in different parts of the country—underprivileged areas and affluent areas—that provide a great opportunity for people from all backgrounds to become engaged in science and

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excited about science, and to get their hands on scientific instruments, to play with them and to become involved with scientific experiments. I am certain that that leads to many young people instinctively taking up science subjects at school.

We visited the national space centre at Leicester, which is fascinating.

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): It is a great experience for children.

Adam Afriyie: It is a great centre. The youngsters come in teams and, after a lot of training, manage to fly a Challenger simulator. They each take a different role and get hands-on experience that shows them why science matters if they want to do exciting things such as being an astronaut, a pilot or a shuttle captain.

I am very comfortable with the idea that the centres contribute a lot not only to the education of STEM undergraduates and those taking STEM subjects at school, but eventually to the UK economy. They promise to inspire, to educate and to inform young people, which are vital objectives at a time when the Government are saying that the UK economy is crying out for STEM skills.

There was concern about the funding and effectiveness of the centres, because they are often not purely commercial, but semi-commercial. The centres are not ministerial creations; they have welled up from the insights and enthusiasm of social entrepreneurs, business men, academics, teachers and people who are perhaps retiring from their primary career. They provide educational benefits, but are not state-run operations or top-down Government creations. Yet, in many ways, Government policy on science and discovery centres affects the ability of the centres to survive and be commercially viable.

Ministers have always recognised that science centres have an important role to play and that funding is part of the support given to them. The former Departments of Trade and Industry and for Education and Skills provided £750,000 for Ecsite-uk—a network of science and discovery centres—to research the impact that centres were having. Most people welcomed that research. However, Ecsite-uk has not looked at what the Committee was crying out for; it has not considered the empirical evidence on the impact of the centres. For example, out of 10 youngsters who visit a centre, how many change their choice of subjects in school? Evidence on that is not available. Clearly, some of the recommendations from Ecsite-uk will, I hope, over time lead to some of that data becoming available. However, as of today, the Government cannot say they will not fund science and discovery centres because the evidence does not

show whether they make a contribution to the their overall objectives. We do not have the relevant evidence, so it is incredibly disappointing, frustrating and worrying that the science and discovery centres have been closing—one more has done so in the past few months. We simply do not know whether they perform a function in relation to our overall goals in society.

Let me make it clear that science centres have benefited from public money. As other hon. Members have said, 18 centres received £450 million from the Millennium Commission. The principle of funding the centres from Government has been established, so the Minister should not simply dismiss that notion and say that funding is

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anathema to the Government when it comes to independently operating organisations. In effect, there is already a public subsidy.

It is also important to point out that there is a danger of drawing artificial distinctions between museums and science and discovery centres. We should not move commas and semi-colons to define out or exclude science and discovery centres from the definition of bodies that provide public services. For example, we say that supporting collections is in the national interest, but that supporting the public engagement aspects of science and discovery centres is not, which is not a particularly helpful way to move forward. I hope that the Minister will explain the reasoning behind the almost specific exclusion of science and discovery centres from the funding that goes through the museums channel.

Will the Minister clarify the Government's relationship to science and innovation centres? How do they fit into the overall STEM narrative? I commend the Minister for speaking about the shortage of science skills in society and among the work force. Could he spend a few moments explaining how science and discovery centres will fit into the overall picture of encouraging engagement in science subjects at school?

As I have said, we currently have no idea whether science and discovery centres are viable. The Government have already said that they will not support unviable science centres, but what is an unviable science centre? Is it a centre that does not have enough visitors giving it money and is therefore unable to provide an overall operation, or is it a centre that provides a service to the Government but is unable to recoup enough money to provide that service? Will the Minister tell us what his definition is of an unviable science and discovery centre? As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has pointed out, a restriction on the flow of funds for the public good and for public engagement with museums and other educational establishments to the exclusion of science and discovery centres might make them unviable. Indeed, the Government may make these organisations unviable because of the way in which they fund existing institutions.

My main concern—especially as I come from a science background—is the lack of rigorous and reliable evidence to justify the lack of public support or continued public support. We currently do not know whether support should be forthcoming. One concern expressed in the Ecsite-uk report is about the lack of information on visitor numbers. The collection and analysis of data would help centres to focus on their core business and prepare effective applications

for funding. However, such data collection is expensive and money for data collection would detract from the capacity of centres to educate and inform in the way they do now. In reality, a solid evidence base remains merely an ambition. Perhaps the Minister will explain how that ambition will be fulfilled in the coming months. The Ecsite-uk report recommends improved data collection, so will the Minister say what progress has been made on that?

Beyond public support, many science and discovery centres are independent and already stand on their own two feet. There is a danger that if the Government were consistently to provide core funding to all science and discovery centres—a couple of Labour Back Benchers have called for that—they might lose their independence and unique qualities. They might also lose the control that they have over the outcomes that they deliver to

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society. I caution rushing headlong into complete Government core funding for every organisation. The energy and enthusiasm of the people who start these centres, which was most ably described by the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), make the centres successful and vibrant in the long run.

How does the Minister plan to help science and discovery centre budgets in the short and long terms? The short-term issue is that one or two more centres may be going out of operation in the next few months. What does the Minister plan to do in the short term to address those challenges, while we await the evidence that we hope will be forthcoming, if he has commissioned the research?

When UK schools are slipping in world science ranking tables, and a Government poll found that 59 per cent. of people feel uninformed about science, it is vital that the Government tackle the challenges to and remove the obstacles to the take-up of STEM subjects. Science and discovery centres certainly contribute to the task of capturing young people’s enthusiasm and helping science teachers to motivate their students. Given the lack of empirical evidence, it is difficult to know what the Government plan to do next and it is difficult for us to call on the Government to do something specific.

That is why I think the recommendations of the report are superb—they are clearly stated and clearly conditional. I was incredibly surprised at the almost off-hand dismissal of those clear recommendations in the Government’s response. In his eloquent, entertaining and amusing speech, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough made it clear that many of the rejections were completely unreasoned. Other hon. Members have pointed out that the rejections were illogical. I think they were pretty slapdash. Having heard the debate today, will the Minister go back and ask his Department to take some time to review those rejections and come back with a more comprehensive explanation of why the recommendations were rejected? Simply saying, “We are not doing that”, and setting up a straw man argument not only discredits the work of the Committee, but the work of the Parliament. I therefore urge the Minister to go back to the Department and answer the recommendations once again.

Currently, we are subsidising access to museums for overseas visitors. We do not differentiate between the people who come into museums, yet we could enhance social mobility and the

opportunities of some of the least well-off and most disadvantaged in our society by increasing access to science and discovery centres. Will the Minister explain that anomaly? Why do we subsidise overseas visitors to museums in the United Kingdom, yet charge our own citizens, often from the least well-off backgrounds, to gain access to science and discovery centres?

I am instinctively very enthusiastic about science and discovery centres, but if, when the research comes through, it shows that they contribute nothing to the overall agenda of encouraging people to go into science and if the evidence says that they work against that objective, I would withdraw my support for some of the recommendations. However, I suspect that if the Minister just gets a move on and commissions the research, we will find that the centres contribute an enormous amount to our society and economy. I urge him to get on with it and commission the research.

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4.11 pm

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) for introducing the debate. I am also grateful to the other contributors to it, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who, over a long period, have shown a deep interest in the issues under discussion.

Before I respond to the key points raised, I shall set out the Government's views on science centres and our plans for the future. I stress that it is a Government-wide view. We acknowledged in the response to the Select Committee's report that the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills will take the lead on science centre issues within Government, but we will work closely with the Departments for Culture, Media and Sport and for Children, Schools and Families, because they share an interest in that agenda. Indeed, both DIUS and the DCSF funded Ecsite-uk's recent science centre enrichment activity grant scheme, and officials from all three Departments maintain contact on the issues and worked together to formulate the response to the Committee's recommendations.

I am a bit disappointed by how negative hon. Members seem to feel the Government response was. I do not believe that to be the case, but Government funding is finite and we need strong, robust evidence that our interventions can make a difference, are well focused and serve the public interest. As hon. Members themselves argued, short-term financial fixes do not help the sector, the recreational visitor, or the educational user. We need to understand more fully the contribution, role and influence of science centres. The Committee recognised that fact back in October, when it agreed that a Government commitment to long-term revenue support for science centres should not be considered unless independent evidence of their effectiveness was obtained. I shall say something about that in a moment.

I have met and corresponded with representatives from several science centres and, before becoming Minister for Science and Innovation, I visited about 14 of them. I also met

representatives of Ecsite-uk earlier in the year to discuss its vision for the future. I therefore know about some of the problems and opportunities facing the sector. My Department continues to fund Ecsite-uk, and I trust that it will take forward important work on fostering and disseminating best practice in the sector.

As hon. Members will be aware, between November 2006 and March 2008, DIUS and the DCSF jointly provided almost £750,000 for a project to enhance financial sustainability and help the network to develop an approach to best practice and benchmarking. Of that funding, £250,000 came from the DCSF and the remaining £490,000 from DIUS. We never expected a magic bullet solution to emerge from the project, but I understand from the final reports that it has enabled significant outreach work to be conducted by the centres that were successful in their grant bids, and it has facilitated the development of consortiums that would benefit from the collaborations and new approaches to working together throughout the country. Results suggest that everyone involved, including children and teachers in targeted hard-to-reach schools, thought that they had benefited from the experience.

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As a result of the funding, Ecsite-uk has also completed a project to begin work on a new approach to benchmarking in the sector. Ecsite-uk has stressed that the project is not a panacea, but it feels positive and believes that it is a start and will help the sector to become more rigorous about best practice and measurement. A common theme in today's debate was the need for greater measurement and assessment of impact.

Several of the Select Committee's recommendations were directed at Ecsite-uk, and I again take the opportunity to encourage Ecsite-uk and individual science centres to work collaboratively, to learn from best practice, wherever it comes from, and to work to obtain greater diversity in funding streams. I know that there is a commitment in the sector to do that.

Comparisons were made with the museum sector—indeed, that was a major theme of the speech by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough. I understand the arguments about museums and the comparisons drawn between science centres and museums, whether they relate to their public engagement work or their funding. I stress that museums clearly have a public engagement role; they are not just about collections. However, it is important to dispel some misconceptions about museums and science centres. I do not think that those misconceptions are found among members of the Select Committee, but they might be found in the wider community.

The first misconception is that the two types of institution are essentially the same. It is true that a number of museums, perhaps most notably the natural history museum and the science museum, are affiliates of the Ecsite-uk network and can be classified as science or discovery centres. However, in the Government's mind, there is an important distinction between a museum and another type of visitor attraction: the possession of a collection, as we heard.

As my hon. Friends will be aware, the Museums Association gives this definition:

> "Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society."

I hope that it can be seen from that definition that a museum exists because of its collection. That is not its only role, but the collection is at the heart of its activities, whether it is inspiring and informing visitors or supporting the learning of schoolchildren, which a museum also undertakes. Museums have an equally important additional curatorial duty to maintain and preserve their collections for future generations. In contrast, science centres often have no permanent artefacts or items and aim to present science to the public via temporary exhibits or displays.

The second misconception arises from the fact that many people believe that the Government fund free access to all museums in England and are therefore duty-bound to fund a similar scheme for all science centres. The simple fact is that only a small number of museums in England are funded directly by central Government. The Museums Association estimates that there are about 2,000 museums in England. The vast majority either are funded by local authorities—689 museums in total—or are independent charities; that is the case for 811 museums. The policy on admission prices for those museums is a matter for the relevant council, its councillors and the local community, or the trustees of the organisation, depending on its status.

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The DCMS is the Department with lead responsibility for museums in England and it directly sponsors only 21 museums, 13 of which are defined as national by virtue of the importance of their collections. DCMS supports those national museums for their pre-eminent national collections, which are held by the museums in trust for the nation and for future generations. Of those 21 museums, nine could be categorised as science centres. It is not the case that DCMS does not give equal treatment to science and the arts when funding our national museums.

Dr. Evan Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Ian Pearson: I shall first annoy the hon. Gentleman a little. I do not accept the argument that science centres fall into the same category as schools and hospitals; nor do I accept the argument that DCMS favours the arts over the sciences, given that in nine of the 21 museums that it funds, science is the key, or even the total, component.

Dr. Harris: I hope that the Minister is willing to place in the Library or to give us an analysis of those nine museums in the Library, showing whether they are funded because they are science museums, or whether funding still comes back to the collections issue. The question is not really about numbers, but about whether there is enough flexibility in Government funding to capture what is good, regardless of the strict rules that may apply.

Ian Pearson: It does come back to the collections issue. I am happy to provide whatever additional information I can, but the simple fact is that DCMS funds only 21 museums out of more than 2,000 nationwide. It is not realistic to argue that the 100 or so science centres in the United Kingdom should be able to access the funding that those 21 museums currently get from the Department but that the other 2,000 museums that are not funded by the Department cannot access.

Mr. Willis: I hope that the Minister will not be uncharacteristically disingenuous again. He is not responding to what our report said, nor to what my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said. The report did not say that we expected every science centre to be funded by the Government. We said that those that were MLA accredited in the same way as the museums would be eligible for that funding. However, it would be entirely up to the sponsoring organisations to decide whether they could be grant-aided. That is what happens now.

As for whether science centres should be regarded in the same way as schools and hospitals, that was not my hon. Friend's point. He was commenting on commercial viability being the criteria by which the Government will decide whether the centres will be allowed to continue. Both in the report and in response to the Minister's predecessor, Lord Sainsbury, we commented strongly on the fact that that was not the criteria that the Government had set for the STEM agenda—an objective that science centres were trying to fulfil.

Ian Pearson: I am sure that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) is more than capable of defending himself. I shall speak directly about the STEM agenda in a moment.

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Science centres are not the only means of engaging the population with science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Indeed, all three Departments have already made a significant investment, reaching many millions of children and adults as a result. The House will doubtless be aware that DIUS—and previously the DTI—has supported more than 18,000 science and engineering ambassadors, the BA crest awards, national science and engineering week, and the Sciencewise programme; those are just a few examples. We are also working closely with the DCMS and the Natural History museum in their Darwin200 celebrations.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families is funding a wide range of activities to engage and inspire young people in science. Among them are science and engineering clubs. The DCMS is already funding 250 such clubs, and it will be setting up another 250 this autumn. It has also commissioned a programme of support and guidance aimed at increasing the number of young people continuing their study of STEM subjects post-16. Alongside that, the DCSF has begun a three-year STEM communications campaign to inform pupils, parents and others of the wide-ranging and exciting opportunities that are open to students when they study STEM subjects and achieve qualifications. A lot of work is involved in the STEM agenda.

Due to sustained increases in Government funding for education, a far higher level of money per pupil is going to our schools. Schools have the capacity to take children on school visits as part of the curriculum. I am keen for science centres to promote themselves—for instance, so that schoolchildren in the midlands are encouraged to go to Thinktank or the National Space Centre rather than to Alton Towers or Legoland. That would be far better for them, but it is up to science centres to promote themselves to schools.

Given the wide-ranging activities that are taking place on the STEM agenda, DIUS has committed itself to undertaking research into the effectiveness and impact of science centres, a commitment that we made in the Government response in January. I know that that is eagerly anticipated within the sector. It seemed right for Ecsite-uk to complete and publish its results, which it did last month.

We are now in a position to build on that work and to develop the strongest possible evidence base on which to make future decisions. I know that some believe that we should have commissioned the research before, but our judgment was that we wanted to see the findings from Ecsite-uk's work before taking the next step. We are now ready to launch a call for proposals.

We know from the recently completed Research Councils UK-DIUS survey of public attitudes to science and Ecsite-uk's figures that significant numbers visit science and discovery centres. That is not up for debate, but we need a measurable impact of their contributions, and a more in-depth understanding of that contribution relative to the many and varied initiatives and offerings that are already out there. That is something that the Select Committee pressed us to do and we will do it.

On research, as we indicated in our response to the Committee, researchers will consider the relative contributions of our delivery partners to our science and society goals. We will want them to assess existing evidence, and to suggest the best way in which we can unravel the complexities of the contribution, value for money and effectiveness of the initiatives now in place.

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The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough asked about timing. I hope that we will be able to commission that work within the next few weeks. I have been talking to officials about the time scale for the project. I would like a draft final report to be published in September, and a final report in October. My officials, however, advise me that that might be "A little quick, Minister", and that science centres might need more time to get the information to the consultants who are to be appointed to undertake that work.

I shall ask my officials to talk to Ecsite-uk about establishing a reasonable time scale for the project. If the feeling of the science centre community is that it will not get the work done to the required level until December, I shall happily agree. However, like the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), I want to get on with it.

Adam Afriyie: I am marginally reassured by hearing that the Minister, too, is keen to commission the research. Why should he assume that Ecsite-uk will do the next round of research—although it is possible that he gave that impression but did not mean to? I urge him to consider using a completely independent researcher rather have it conducted by someone within the industry.

Ian Pearson: I can see other hon. Members nodding at that suggestion. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government intend to appoint a contractor from our framework contractors which has experience in undertaking economic evaluation studies. That is the sort of hard information that we want.

Dr. Evan Harris: Does the Minister intend to consult the Committee on the terms of reference for the research when he has the information he requires to go forward?

Ian Pearson: I should be happy to make available the study's terms of reference to the Committee. I suggest that we do that quickly, but I will be more than happy to share the information.

Hon. Members asked how the study fits into the overall strategy. The Government hope to publish a consultation document in the next few weeks that will lead to the development of a science and society strategy. We have said in the past few months that we want to refresh our vision for science and society. We want a society that is excited about science, values its importance to our economic and social well-being, and supports a representative, well-qualified work force. We want to look at how science centres fit into that strategy—the research that we are commissioning will be an important part of the science and society work that we do in future. I encourage science and discovery centres to participate in the consultation phase of the science and society strategy when it is launched so that we have an informed debate on all aspects of it.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough fairly summarised the Committee's report, but it is not true that the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council does not see education as an important role. It develops generic learning outcomes for museums. Ecsite-uk is committed to using and promoting that tool within the science community. Museums perform multiple roles, as I outlined.

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We have not rejected out of hand the Committee's proposals and I apologise for any adverse tone in our response—it was not intentional. We want to take research forward and we are responding positively to the Committee's recommendation that we do so. I strongly agreed with the hon. Gentleman when he said that science centres are varied and that they will require different solutions. My instinct—I want first to see the evidence of the impact study—tells me that different solutions are likely to be required.

On VAT, I can confirm that officials spoke to Revenue and Customs about the report, so it is aware of the Committee's deliberations. As is known, local authorities have discretion on rates

and I encourage them to consider using it when it comes to science centres, because of the contribution that they can make to local and regional economies.

Dr. Iddon: I have a point on VAT that did not appear on the report. When we purchased our £500,000-worth of equipment for Bolton Technical Innovation Centre, we paid 17.5 per cent. VAT, yet the school next door pays zero-rated VAT when it purchases equipment. I plead with the Minister to look into the of possibility making centres that provide a lot of educational material zero-VAT rated, as schools are.

Ian Pearson: I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments and his commitment to science centres. However, science centres are not schools, and they should not be treated as such. Their status varies—some will be companies limited by guarantee, some will have charitable status, and some will not. The complications of the structures have consequences under EU VAT rules, but I heard what he said and I shall reflect further on the matter.

My hon. Friend also talked about the wide variety of science and discovery centres in the UK—I agree with him on that—and the importance of promoting science to women. The Government are strongly committed to that. I had the opportunity to present a certificate to the 18,000th science and engineering ambassador, who is a woman; actually, 56 per cent. of our ambassadors are women. We help fund the women in science and education programme and have a UK resource centre for women. Getting more women interested in taking science subjects and pursuing science careers is high on our agenda.

I enjoyed what my hon. Friend said about 3-D printers and building and firing rockets, and how such things enthuse young people. He also spoke about Catalyst and the problems of funding centres. I am sure that they will want to participate in the research that we are commissioning to demonstrate the impact that they have on their local and regional communities.

My hon. Friend mentioned the role that regional development agencies play in science cities. The UK's science cities are beginning to play an important part in regional economies. I feel proud of the Government's record of developing major projects such as science and innovation campuses and collaborative research and development. He came up with an interesting suggestion when he said that there should be a big science club in every town rather than a science club in every school. It was an interesting idea—certainly, we will look at how better to network science clubs. I should like to take the idea away and reflect on it, and I shall ask our consultants to consider the idea in future.

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Dr. Iddon: I am pleased that the Minister said that. It will take a long time at the current rate to spread science clubs throughout the entire country or even within a town. Only one school in our town benefits at the moment. If we cannot develop a big science club for the town, it would be better if children from other schools who are interested in science and technology could go to the school that has been provided with money, so that all children have access to a club, rather than just those in a single school.

Ian Pearson: We could pursue a number of different options. Certainly, I am happy to consider all the options and to speak to my colleagues in the DCSF about them.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the funding problems that Expore-At-Bristol has been having. As he will be aware, it received funding for two years from DIUS and the DCSF combined and has been part of the consortium project of the £750,000 funding that was provided through Ecsite-uk. At the moment, the DCSF is funding a science and learning centre co-located there. I am aware of some of the exciting work done at Explore-At-Bristol. I hope that the people there will want to work with the consultants that we appoint and demonstrate the impact that they are having.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North talked about catching them young, with which I agree completely. He also talked about how we as a Government and a society relate to science. Again, we will cover that in significant detail in our science and society strategy. He called for more science centres. I was pleased that he sees the value of science centres across our economy. Norwich has major centres of excellence, including the John Innes centre and the Institute of Food Research, and there are exciting plans for the development of a world-class cluster in the Norwich area.

My hon. Friend also spoke at some length about Inspire, a project in his constituency that is finding itself in difficulty. I congratulate him—he is not here at the moment, but I am sure that he will read his speech, and possibly my reply—on his work to bring partners together and broker creative solutions. I think that I covered his question, “How does this fit into the Government strategy?” when I said that we want to evaluate science centres fully and see them as part of a coherent picture in our new science and society strategy.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon made a thoughtful contribution. I mention in passing that Science Oxford, a science centre in his area, has benefited from consortium money provided by Ecsite-uk. I think that he is under a misapprehension that science centres should be seen as the same as schools and hospitals. We do not expect schools and hospitals to make a profit, but we do expect them to operate within their budgets, and I would expect science centres as well to operate effectively within the budgets available.

Dr. Evan Harris: I am grateful for the opportunity to fend for myself and to probe the Minister on that point. I think that he will accept that I was not saying that science centres ought a priori to be funded because they are public services, like schools and hospitals; rather, requiring them to be commercially successful in order to be funded is not reasonable when they perform a public good and/or achieve Government objectives. That was my point, and I think that he recognises that.

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Ian Pearson: I recognise that there is a distinction to be made between commercial success and financial sustainability. We want science centres to be financially sustainable. We do not expect them to make a profit and return dividends to shareholders, but we want them to be

viable. Science centres that received Millennium Commission funding or the £2 million in funding provided by the Government between 2004 and 2006 did so on the basis that they would be financially sustainable or, at the very least, work towards financial viability.

The hon. Gentleman also said that he would be happy to see winners and losers when it comes to the DCMS funding applied to museums. He needs to think carefully about that. Opening up the DCMS budget, which goes to some of the UK's national treasures, to science centres and perhaps other museums, would be opening up a can of worms. I am convinced that that would not be in the UK's best interests. He might want to think about that.

Adam Afriyie *rose—*

Ian Pearson: I was just coming to the hon. Gentleman, so I will give way to him.

Adam Afriyie: I shall be charming, and I am sure that the Minister will be charming too. I recognise that he is making some valid points. On the funding of entrance to museums rather than science and discovery centres, if the evidence shows that science and discovery centres provide an overwhelmingly excellent service in getting people into STEM subjects at school and in university, will he consider looking at some of the report's proposals—whether about VAT or other suggestions—to ensure that society and the economy benefit from science and discovery centres? Or is he completely writing that off now and saying that he will not look at them at all, that museum funding and the definitions will remain exactly as they are, and that no other channel of support, funding or encouragement will be available?

Ian Pearson: I am not writing anything off; I am saying that I see no realistic prospect that the DCMS will open up its budget to science centres. On funding and charges, the situation at the moment is that, because of this Labour Government, we have a policy under which a very limited number of museums offer free entry as a result of decisions that we made back in 2001. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fact that overseas visitors can come to our world-class museums for free. I think that that is a good thing. Both UK and tourist visitor numbers have risen dramatically as a result of that policy initiative. If he is suggesting that we should have a tourist tax, that is an interesting new Conservative policy.

As I said, free entry applies to a relatively small number of museums—21, I think—across the country. Many other museums charge, and their charging policies are determined by their governing bodies or local authorities, depending on the arrangements. I think that the hon. Gentleman, like me, is a fan of the National Space Centre at Leicester. He is right that I am instinctively comfortable with the view that science centres have an impact. Exactly how much of an impact and how that compares with science and engineering ambassadors, science and learning centres and the whole range of

other activities going on, such as national science and engineering week and national fairs and competitions, is something that we need to consider carefully as part of a coherent strategy for engaging the public and making them enthusiastic and excited about STEM subjects.

I am hopeful about the work that we are commissioning and the science and society strategy. We want to open up discussions with the wider community, which we have done and continue to do by holding workshops. I hope that we will develop a comprehensive strategy based on firm evidence. The hon. Gentleman spoke about data collection. Obviously, the survey will provide more data, but specifically, Ecsite-uk recognises that there are a lot of differences in how data are collected. I understand that work is ongoing. Our funding has supported the development of an online survey tool, but it is still the beginning of the road for a network. It is not a short-term solution, and more work can be done in that area.

As I said to the Select Committee, as a Minister in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, I am content to take lead responsibility on science centre issues in the Government, but we need to work closely

with the DCSF, particularly on the STEM agenda. We also need to work closely with the DCMS. We have agreed with the Committee's proposals to commission research into the impact of science centres, which we are now in a position to do. All three Departments would agree with the Committee's view that continuing to focus on short-term financial fixes is not the right way forward. We want to encourage all interested parties to contribute to the consultation on our science in society strategy, which will take place very shortly.

I would like to encourage the science centre community to assist in our upcoming work programme; Ecsite-uk to work with the community to continue to develop the work on benchmarking and best practice; and individual organisations—the 2,000 museums and 100 or so science centres in the UK—to consider diverse sources of funding. As a Department for innovation, we want "innovation" to be the watchword of science centres. I know that it can be a struggle trying to find funds from different sources and putting in grant applications, but it is important. As part of our overall strategy, we will certainly consider the wider picture as well and the contribution that science centres make to our agenda.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes to Five o'clock.