SCIENCE AND DISCOVERY CENTRES: THE WAY FORWARD

Briefing document from ECSITE-UK, the Science and Discovery Centre Network
December 2001

The Science and Discovery Centres represent a £500 million capital investment. An additional contribution of £27 million a year – which is less than the current cost of supporting just one National Museum – will secure the entire Science and Discovery Centre Network nationwide, and effectively exploit its cultural and educational potential.

Science and Discovery Centres attract over 11 million visits each year They introduce the non-specialist public to science in engaging, interactive ways. Today there are over 40 science centres in the UK and a similar number of discovery centres in museums, botanic gardens, aquariums and zoos.

Science and discovery centres were introduced to the UK in the early 1980s They built on earlier exhibitions with mechanical models in Europe, and also on the 'hands-on' philosophy developed in North America through the 1960s. Their growth in number and popularity Europe-wide is one of the educational success stories of the last 20 years. In the UK, the science centre sector has expanded on an unprecedented scale through Millennium Commission investment of £250 million, matched by equivalent funding from other public and private sources.

DELIVERING GOVERNMENT OBJECTIVES NATIONALLY

The Science and Discovery Centres (SDCs) are a unique and valuable resource, part of the UK's cultural assets. The SDCs make a national contribution to the fulfilment of the Government's objectives for culture, education and the public engagement with science.

Culture Science is a fundamental part of our culture in the 21st century. The SDCs are:

- Supporting integration of science in cultural policies
- Encouraging innovation, building ICT links, improving technology transfer
- Acting as a showcase for industry
- Developing science as a form of cultural creativity
- Contributing to wealth creation in the cultural industries.

Education The excellence of science education formally in school and informally through SDCs is key to ensuring a flying start for all children. The SDCs are potentially very significant contributors to the future supply of scientists and technologists. SDCs are:

- Reinforcing the curriculum, providing hands-on experience
- Improving science teaching, putting STEM in its social context
- Offering out-of-hours support, and Early Learning
- Increasing motivation, combating school drop-out
- Tackling skills shortages, lifelong learning, careers guidance
- Building industry links, cross-sectoral partnerships.

Engagement As the Jenkin report 'Science and Society' concluded, for people to engage with science & technology and appreciate its relevance for their lives, they need to be better able to understand the implications of new developments and to express their opinions. SDCs are

- Promoting awareness: widening access to science, improving awareness and knowledge
- Establishing dialogue: encouraging public feedback, acting as a venue for debate
- Developing links between the public and the research community.

And more Science and Discovery Centres are also:

- Leading regeneration with developing tourism as a key objective
- Addressing social inclusion objectives through
    - Welcoming environments and targeted programmes for excluded groups
    - Enabling access to new technologies.

A NATIONAL REFERENCE POINT

The national organisation, ECSITE-UK, has been established with funding from both the OST and the Wellcome Trust. ECSITE-UK, the Science and Discovery Centre Network, will ensure that the sector's contribution is a great deal more than the sum of its constituent parts.

OPERATING COSTS AND THE 'FUNDING GAP'

ECSITE-UK is aware of 61 SDCs

Type of **centre** *(excluding national museums, and museums/gardens already in receipt of government funds)*	**number** of centres	annual **visitors** estimate (millions)	annual **expenditure** estimate (£millions)
Millennium Commission funded centres, large	17	5	43
Established centres, medium and small – dating in some cases from the 1980s	20	2	18
Newer centres, medium and small – opened since 1995	24	1	10
	61	8	£71 m

SDCs report that between 25 and 40% of annual operating costs is needed to maintain equilibrium This is the gap between income and operating expenditure, to be bridged each year from non-trading sources, ie the support required from public funds. A realistic planning figure for the total annual expenditure of the SDC sector (to fulfil operational requirements, including a minimum of refreshment activity) is of the order of £75 million. Anticipated expansion of the sector is likely to raise this to £100m.

The 'funding gap' of approx 35% is £27 million With anticipated expansion of the SDC sector, this will rise to £35 million within two years.

CLOSING THE FUNDING GAP

It will clearly be unworkable for government to establish individual funding lines for every individual SDC. It would however be feasible to establish an intermediate body to take responsibility for distribution of funds against pre-agreed eligibility and quality criteria, or in conjunction with a service delivery agreement, and/or by competitive tender. Two models already exist in the UK: the two different funding mechanisms which permit Copus and Science Year to act as distributors of public funds.

The Science and Discovery Centres represent a £500 million capital investment in the nation's future. For an additional contribution which is less than the current cost of supporting just one National Museum, central Government could secure the entire SDC network, enabling it to achieve its cultural and educational potential in a financially sustainable way.

An intermediate body could be established to take responsibility for distributing funds against pre-agreed criteria.

For further information, contact:

Dr Melanie Quin
Executive Director, ECSITE-UK
the BA, 23 Savile Row, London W1S 2EZ

T 020 7973 3179
E melanie.quin@the-ba.net

Colin H Johnson
Chairman, ECSITE-UK, Director/CEO, Techniquest
Stuart Street, Cardiff CF10 5BW

T 029 20 475 461
E colin@techniquest.org