**Impact of Covid-19 on the UK’s Charitable Science and Discovery Centres**

**STEM Learning for 13 million people at risk**

April 16 2020

Submission by Dr Penny Fidler, CEO.

Association for Science and Discovery Centres

**Executive Summary**

* Across the UK, in our regional cities and towns, the nation’s STEM-focussed charitable Science Centres have had to close their public venues due to Covid-19.
* This has entirely cut off their income and threatens their long-term survival.
* As charities, they earn their own income, with little or no public funding. Together they attract 13 million children and adults to participate in STEM learning each year, who pay to take part.
* The 40 UK Self-sustaining Science Centres have a turnover around £200 million per year and employ 5000 staff, 75% of whom are now furloughed.
* However, they need to retain and pay some staff such as site safety staff, security, payroll, HR, staff to negotiate and reduce liabilities to current capital build and other contracts, and some leadership staff.
* Redundancies are now being planned for future months, as event bookings and school bookings have plummeted for the whole year, and visitor ticket sales are unlikely to bounce back to full strength when the Science Centres are allowed to open. This is compounded by it being the busiest time of year for income, and having lost income over Easter holidays, May half-term and likely the May-June summer trips for school children.
* Following research by the national STEM education charity, The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres, an Emergency Resilience Fund of £8.3 million per month is proposed (during furlough) that would secure the Nation’s Science Centres into the future.
* Science has driven so much of the UK’s COVID-19 response. This is not the time to lose our world-leading Science Centres. We are needed now more than ever to help people make sense of what has happened and to inspire future generations of scientists and engineers, from epidemiologists and vaccine researchers to climate scientists and behavioural modelers.

# **Overview and the critical issues**

1. The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres (ASDC) is the national STEM educational charity that brings together the UK’s major Science and Discovery Centres, including Science Centres, environmental and natural history centres and other national and local STEM organisations focussed on engaging the public with science.
2. These charitable Science Centres are cultural resources in the hearts of our nation’s regional cities and towns. Together they engage 13 million children and adults each year with all areas of science, from health and the environment to physics and technology.
3. They collectively employ over 5000 skilled science educators and support staff and have a turnover of over £200 million.
4. They engage over 7 million girls and women with STEM each year and are the main vital STEM engagement and learning hubs outside London. They also engage over 7 million school children with STEM each year and are vital STEM expertise creating a wider STEM ecosystem across the communities and cities where they exist.
5. These major science and cultural resources, often with their iconic infrastructure, are embedded in communities across the UK from Eden Project in Cornwall to Aberdeen Science Centre in Scotland, and from W5 in Belfast, to the National Space Centre in Leicester, Thinktank in Birmingham, Life in Newcastle and Techniquest in Cardiff.
6. They support teachers and schools, families and communities and bring inspirational science to some of the most disadvantaged children in our nation. Around them they have created a wider STEM learning ecosystem, including youth programmes and STEM programmes for families in some of our nation’s most disadvantaged communities.
7. Due to Covid-19, across the UK, in cities and towns, the nation’s Science Centres have closed their public venues. They are all successful education charities, and they earn their income by delivering inspirational school science workshops, lively STEM activities for communities, supporting local teachers, and providing participatory STEM days out for families. They work closely with those in their cities least likely to engage with science in communities high on the indices of multiple deprivation.
8. These robust and entrepreneurial STEM education charities in cities and regions across the UK had their **entire incomes cut off overnight**, from all revenue streams including family ticket sales, event bookings, conferencing, school bookings, car parks, cafes and shops.
9. It is important to note, in this submission we focus only on the UK-wide national STEM engagement infrastructure of our Science Centres in regions across the UK. However, our membership includes the Science Museum and Natural History Museum and other national museums largely in London funded by DCMS (which reach a further 7 million people each year). These centres are undertaking their own discussions with DCMS and so not included here in this submission.

**The additional impact of Timing**

1. Science Centres would right now be embarking on their huge Easter holiday programmes, one of their busiest revenue-generating periods of the year, with families paying to bring their children across the UK to learn about science, technology, engineering and maths.
2. They will also be closed through the busiest school visit period in May and June, when teachers around the UK take their primary classes out on summer visits for special science curriculum-linked workshops, as well as May half-term. The revenue from this is vital to Science Centres survival.
3. If this continues for longer, and without the summer holiday revenue, most science centres would not survive the year without Government Support. Alongside this all their STEM community engagement programmes nationally working with some of the most disadvantaged children have had to stop.

**Data and financial losses**

1. The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres has collected data from across the UK Science Centres in two phases to gain a robust picture of the financial risk level and what is needed. The first phase was before furloughing was announced, the second after.
2. We asked all UK Science Centres about staff numbers, numbers of jobs at risk (FTE and individuals), monthly wage bills before and after furloughing, fixed costs to maintain facilities, insurances and the like, and how many staff would need to be retained and not furloughed as part of a resilience team. These teams include, for example minimum numbers from HR, payroll, facility safety, leadership teams and skeleton digital.
3. From this evidence, to secure their future whilst their income has been cut off, the sector would need a **National Emergency Resilience Fund for UK Science Centres of £8.3 million per month** (£25 million across 3 months) to support the UK Science Centres. This would be needed for as long as Science Centres have to remain closed and the furlough arrangements are in place.
4. With this Emergency Fund, the UK Science Centres would be in a resilient position for the next 3 months to survive this forced shut down with no income, so they can keep their science centre sites secure, their payroll and HR operating for furloughed staff, deliver any charitable obligations, renegotiate existing contracts and ensure their relationships with schools and communities continue and thrive so they are ready to re-open when the time comes.

**Furloughing**

1. The generous furloughing scheme and claiming 80% of salaries has been a lifeline for all these science education charities. Each of these STEM charities took immediate action following the announcement, with over 70% of staff being furloughed immediately to protect the longer-term future of each Science Centre. This reduced their wage bills considerably, and a number of senior staff also took wage cuts to protect the charities through this difficult time.
2. However, Science Centres cannot furlough all their staff. They require payroll, HR, facilities, Site Health and Safety, digital, and staff dealing with and renegotiating current contracts and cancelling events, conference bookings at their centres and school bookings. In addition, there are fixed costs such as rents, utilities and insurances that must be paid each month.
3. The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres has been running weekly zoom meetings with all the CEOs and senior staff across the sector to share approaches, processes and knowledge at this difficult time, in addition to specialist meetings on the impacts of coronavirus on capital build projects, contracts and other matters.
4. Another factor of considerable assistance – and no cost – would be if the furlough rules were relaxed for charities. It would be hugely helpful if staff were able to volunteer a proportion of their time back to their charity.

**Other Generous Government Support**

1. The generous £160 million offered by Arts Council England is a huge benefit to all the UK Arts organization however, Science Centres are not eligible for this funding. Nor are they able to apply for DCMS funds like our National Museums will be eligible for.
2. Charities are also not able to take advantage of the generous terms of the business loans, as the rules for charities differ in terms of taking on substantial debt in a climate such as this, as they need to pass the going concern test. Likewise, the Business Rates relief is of limited value as charities already pay only a very small proportion of this. The only UK central funding that has come to Science Centres in a decade, was secured by ASDC 4 years ago for capital programmes from BEIS, who share so many of our STEM ambitions.
3. The £750 million for charities announced last week is also wonderful and much needed for the hospices and those protecting vulnerable adults, however, Science Centres could not apply for this.

**Summary**

1. The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres propose that the UK Government take measures to protect this vital STEM and cultural sector at the heart of communities across the UK that has taken decades to grow, with investment from all sectors, and is considered to be world-leading in innovation and approach. Once lost they cannot be easily replaced.
2. An investment now, for £8.3 million per month, would save the sector and the 5000 skilled jobs currently at risk. There has never been a more vital time to protect a sector which brings brilliant science, technology, engineering, and maths, to schools, families and communities across the UK.
3. Science has driven so much of the UK’s COVID-19 response. This is not the time to lose our world-leading Science Centres with staff and expertise in these areas. We are needed now more than ever to help people make sense of what is happening and to inspire future generations of scientists, technology experts, mathematicians and engineers, from epidemiologists and vaccine researchers to climate scientists and modelers.
4. Dr Penny Fidler, CEO of The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres would be happy to give evidence on behalf of the sector at any stage during this inquiry, or provide further information as needed.