Budget Representation
from the Association for Science and Discovery Centres:

Science Centres for our Future

For more information visit: https://future.sciencecentres.org.uk/

14 October 2025

1. About science and discovery centres

The UK network of **Science and Discovery Centres (SDCs)** has a core purpose to make science **open, accessible and aspirational for everyone**. They **ignite curiosity** and **nurture a long-lasting interest and identity** in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).

We are driven by the principle that **access to science is a fundamental right**, and that broadening participation from **diverse regions and backgrounds** is good for individuals, for UK society, and for science itself.

Today there **are 28 SDCs around the UK.** Many were established 25 years ago with funding from the Millennium Commission and National Lottery, supporting urban regeneration by creating new facilities in areas previously not associated with tourism. Last year, SDCs engaged and involved over **5.2 million** school children, families and communities with science and technology. **55%** of all our visitors identify as women and girls. Many centres provide visits complete **free of charge**, enabling **more than 450,000 people**, from communities traditionally underrepresented in STEM, to participate in science research and innovation each year.[i]

2. Science centres' contribution to local communities and national priorities

SDCs are present in towns and cities in all four nations of the UK, such as Glasgow, Cardiff, Bristol, Belfast, Newcastle, Leicester, Wrexham, St. Austell, Aberdeen, Halifax and Hull. Today, young people have lower access to STEM enrichment and practical science in school,[ii] and are less likely to feel science and research benefits them or creates jobs in their local area.[iii] SDCs help overcome these challenges through their role as **trusted anchor institutions and hubs of local expertise in their communities**, and strong civic ties with local schools and teachers, industry, business and research partners.

SDCs are an embedded part of the educational ecosystem. Over the last two years, these organisations worked with **more than 37% of all UK schools**, supporting curriculum science concepts, practical science, science inquiry and STEM skills, for pupils and teachers in **96%** (624 out of 650) **of all Parliamentary constituencies** across the UK.[iv]

SDCs' interactive exhibits and programming cover a wide range of science, technology, health and sustainability topics. These directly link to the schools curriculum, and create opportunities to develop STEM skills and career choices needed to deliver the UK's Industrial Strategy ambitions among people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and abilities. Examples of national STEM programmes delivered by SDCs are listed at the end of this briefing.

Since 2000, SDCs have collectively inspired and engaged over **110 million young people and adults** from every corner of the UK. For more than 25 years, SDCs have played a strategic role in the nation's engagement with science, **breaking down barriers to STEM participation, and opening pathways to opportunity.** They are not only assets of cultural value; they are engines of engagement, equity and innovation. With support they will help **shape the society and economy of the future.**

3. Ageing infrastructure is putting Science and Discovery Centres at imminent risk

Most SDCs were built 25 or more years ago, housed in buildings designed with a 25–30-year lifespan. As a result, their buildings and facilities are nearing the end of their design life and need urgent repairs. Essential infrastructure such as roofs, heating and cooling systems, and glazing are starting to fail. Increased sustainability and health and safety requirements are making these upgrades significantly more expensive.[v]

A survey carried out in April and May 2025 by the Association for Science and Discovery Centres, the independent national charity supporting SDCs, identified total infrastructure needs within the sector of up to £160 million over the next five years, made up as follows:

Element	Timing	Value
Essential capital works to keep SDCs operational in the next 12 months	FY25-26	£39m
Essential capital works to keep SDCs operational over the next 3 years	FY26-27 - FY27-28	£68m
Other capital upgrades and renewal to support cutting-edge UK STEM engagement and education	FY29-30	£53m
	Total	**Up to £160m**

4. Science centres have limited revenue sources and are excluded from funds that support other institutions

SDCs are structured as **self-sustaining enterprises.** They demonstrate their resilience and viability, generating revenue from entry fees, corporate sponsorships and many other innovative initiatives.

They have a proven track record attracting visitors to facilities over the past 25+ years. There is a strong demand for the education and learning opportunities they provide.

Like other publicly accessible cultural spaces, SDCs' costs have risen significantly in recent years, including increases in the National Living Wage (up 69.58% in the past decade), inflation, and energy prices.

Unfortunately, **centres' ability to grow revenues from their core audiences to offset these increased costs is limited**. They need to keep entry prices low, and indeed offer subsidised or free access, to deliver their charitable mission and maintain access for underserved groups and communities, because:

- All visitors are facing increased cost-of-living pressures
- They may choose to go to museums offering free entry subsidised by DCMS, and
- Schools' budgets are under increasing strain.

In addition, corporate sponsorships are generally aligned to centre's programming, meaning these revenues cannot be used to help maintain buildings and infrastructure.

Centres' reserves were depleted by the COVID pandemic, and while other museums, arts and cultural and heritage organisations can apply for infrastructure funds, including the Museums Estate and Development Fund, the Creative Foundations and Museum Renewal Funds,[vi] and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, SDCs are largely excluded from these schemes.

As a result, SDCs do not have a dedicated source of funding for their ongoing building maintenance needs, something which was identified as an issue when the 14 centres opened at the turn of the Millennium with National Lottery support.[vii]

This leaves SDCs with three unenviable choices, all of which undermine their core mission, charitable objects and strategic value: to open up access to STEM opportunities and pathways for everyone. Either i) further

deplete their already strained reserves ii) significantly scale back operations including community outreach and subsidised access, or iii) divert resource to operate more commercially.

5. SDCs' asks to government

To address this shortfall and ensure that SDCs can continue inspiring, engaging and involving the next generation and diverse communities in UK science and technology for the next 25+ years, science centres call on government to:

1. Recognise SDCs as part of the UK's scientific and cultural infrastructure, and provide funding for the sector's infrastructure needs, similar to that provided for comparable organisations including museums, libraries, arts and heritage. To do this, the Government should either expand its definition of organisations eligible for existing infrastructure funds to encompass SDCs, or create a new classification of organisation that recognises SDCs' role and contribution towards engagement, education and diversity in STEM (DSIT and DCMS)
2. Provide a one-off capital injection into the sector of £19.5 million in the current financial year, to be match-funded by SDCs on a 50:50 public : private basis from existing philanthropic and business partners, to help fund SDCs' highest priority and urgent building maintenance needs. (DSIT, Devolved Governments, and Mayoral Combined Authorities, with funding either distributed by DSIT, or administered by an independent body.[viii])
3. Create a Capital Renewal Fund worth £12 million per year over the next 5 years, enabling SDCs to compete for funding to renew their aging buildings, infrastructure and exhibitions for the next 25 years. Any funding provided would be matched by SDCs on a 50:50 public : private basis from existing philanthropic and business partners. (DSIT, Devolved Governments, and Mayoral Combined Authorities)

About ASDC

The Association for Science and Discovery Centres (ASDC) is the national charity that strategically and practically supports over 60 major science engagement organisations across the UK. This national infrastructure provides the space where business, industry, research and enterprise converge and coheres with a diverse public. Within this sector resides exceptional inclusive ambition and huge potential for skills, life-long learning, cultural significance of science, and the ability to bring plural perspectives into the sphere of science. Through the ASDC network we promote belonging, agency and identity with STEM that can empower, inform and inspire the citizens for the future.[ix] Every year our members engage with over 25 million people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and abilities. Together, our vision is of a society where science is accessible, inclusive and valued by all as a fundamental part of everyday life.

https://future.sciencecentres.org.uk/

https://www.sciencecentres.org.uk/

https://www.sciencecentres.org.uk/openletter2025/

Annex: National STEM programmes delivered by SDCs

- **Our World from Space**, supported by the UK Space Agency, engaged over 263,000 participants across 25 locations across the UK between summer 2023 and December 2024. The programme shared the relevance of space science to climate, biodiversity, oceans and clean air. Over 95% of participants surveyed saw a connection between UK space science and their own lives and now understand the relevance of space science for the future sustainability of our planet.[x] Events and activities highlighted the broad range of space careers available, addressing misconceptions about who can have a career in space.
- **Explore Your Universe: Valuing Inclusion** has reached over 400,000 young people and their families over the past decade and is currently a driving force for equity in science and technology engagement. Supported by the Science Technology and Facilities Council (part of UKRI), SDCs and their youth and community partners reach diverse communities traditionally underrepresented in STEM careers, developing young people's confidence, STEM skills and broadening horizons in science and technology.[xi]
- **Learning Lab** has engaged over 4000 teachers and 100,000 pupils throughout Scotland and has now expanded to Northern England. Designed by Glasgow Science Centre and delivered through a network of SDCs, the programme provides targeted curriculum resources from early years to secondary school, bringing practical science and opportunities to engage with real scientists that enhance STEM education and provide equitable science learning opportunities. The programme provides training for teachers and offers up to 20 hours of learning per pupil.[xii]
- **Thinking Doing Talking Science (TDTS)** is a national primary science teacher CPD approach. Developed through a SDC / University partnership, it made a significant positive impact on children's attitude to science. An efficacy trail supported by the Education Endowment Foundation showed children taught by this approach made **three additional months' progress in science attainment**, while girls and children with low prior attainment, and children eligible for free school meals made **four-to-five months' progress**.[xiii]

Science centres are making a positive contribution to the UK, by engaging people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and abilities about the value of science to society. They nurture critical thinking and problem-solving skills, encouraging people to make healthier, more sustainable and informed choices, and inspiring future generations into the STEM careers needed for economic growth.

Endnotes

[i] Data taken from ASDC sector survey reports (collected Spring 2024 and Spring 2025).
[ii] Science Education Tracker, The Royal Society, Engineering UK, 2023 https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/science-education-tracker/
[iii] Public Opinion Trends Report, The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) 2023 https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/02/CaSE-Public-Opinion-February-2023-Trends-report.pdf
[iv] A heatmap showing the numbers of school visits to SDCs from each Parliamentary constituency in 2023 and 2024 can be found here https://postcodeheatmap.com/published/523dd84d-857e-4296-8dad-1cf0411bdac0
[v] E.g., The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025, also known as Martyn's Law, requires premises to be better protected in the event of a terrorist attack.
[vi] Major investment to boost growth and cement Britain's place as cultural powerhouse, GOV.UK, 20 Feb 2025 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-investment-to-boost-growth-and-cement-britains-place-as-cultural-powerhouse
[vii] Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, POSTnote PN 143, July 2000, https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-143/
[viii] E.g., the Royal Society, or the Association for Science and Discovery Centres

[ix] Science & Discovery Centre Futures: Missions and Opportunities, external research (The Liminal Space, 2021), https://scienceanddiscoverycentrefutures.the-liminal-space.com/

[x] Further details including case studies from all 25 SDCs participating in Our World From Space can be found here https://heyzine.com/flip-book/6733e9af26.html#page/1

[xi] DeWitt, J. and Leverment, S. (2024). Prioritising community over content: value shifts in science centres. JCOM 23(03), N02. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.23030802

[xii] Supported by local industry and business, Further details about Learning Lab can be found here: Glasgow Science Centre, Learning Lab

[xiii] Hanley, P, Wilson, H, Holligan, B. and Elliott, L. (2020) Thinking, doing, talking science: the effect on attainment and attitudes of a professional development programme to provide cognitively challenging primary science lessons https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09500693.2020.1821931?forwardService=showFullText&tokenAccess=B69XJU2PPE5XH8XIGIUW&tokenDomain=eprints&doi=10.1080%252F09500693.2020.1821931&doi=10.1080%252F09500693.2020.1821931&doi=10.1080%252F09500693.2020.1