**Budget Representation**
**from the Association for Science and Discovery Centres:**

**Science Centres for our Future**

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

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## 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. Since 2000, this network has engaged **over 110 million young people and adults**. **55%** of all our visitors identify as women and girls. Many centres provide visits completely **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. They play a key role in supporting public trust, participation, and engagement with science for public benefit, breaking down barriers to opportunity and driving social benefit. As the Sutton Trust has pointed out, opportunity is not evenly spread across the UK, yet it plays a critical role in an individual's chances of success in education and work.[ii] Today, young people have lower access to STEM enrichment and practical science in school,[iii] are more ambivalent about the role of science in society and are more negative about their experience of science at school. The public feels a disconnect from R&D and are uncertain whether the impacts of science are relevant to them or bring personal benefit to their lives and their local areas.[iv], [v] 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.[vi]

SDCs' interactive exhibits and programming cover a wide range of science, technology, health and sustainability topics. These directly address government priorities like AI adoption and link to the curriculum, creating 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.

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. They 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.[vii]

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

**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 c.70% 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
- 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 provided by Government and the National Lottery, 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 by the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology when the 14 centres opened at the turn of the Millennium with National Lottery support.**[viii]

**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.

The Royal Society's Science and Society report, published in April 2026, recognises STEM engagement as a fundamental part of the UK's social and cultural infrastructure and the risks of the UK taking a backward step. The report includes a key recommendation that the Government and HM Treasury works with ASDC to ensure informal science activities can benefit from the same financial incentives as the cultural sector.[ix]

## 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 properly take ownership of our sector. The abolition of DSIT and allocation of its responsibilities to other Departments presents an opportunity to do this. We are agnostic whether the new Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade should become the lead Department responsible for science centres (because of our focus on STEM engagement and skills), working closely with DCMS (given our focus on youth, inclusion and involvement in the visitor economy) - or whether a joint BIST-DCMS team should be established.
2. Provide a one-off capital injection into the sector of £20 million in the current financial year to fund SDCs' highest priority and most urgent building maintenance needs.
3. Expanding the remit of the National Lottery Good Causes funding to include science and discovery centres, to provide a mechanism enabling SDCs to competitively bid for infrastructure funding, in the same way that museums, galleries, arts and other cultural organisations can.

## 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, relevance, agency and identity with STEM that can empower, inform and inspire the citizens for the future.[x] 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.

### Science Centres for our Future: Key campaign milestones

Over the past 12 months, the Science Centres for Our Future campaign has built significant cross-party support from MPs, Peers and Regional Mayors, and generating national media coverage, and securing commitments from DSIT Ministers to work with DCMS to find a solution for supporting SDCs. Key milestones include:

- September 2025: Westminster roundtable attended by 50+ Parliamentarians and stakeholders
- October 2025: Parliamentary Written Answers confirming i) DSIT Ministerial commitment to working with "DCMS on a coordinated approach around recognition of science centres as an important part of the UK's cultural and science engagement ecosystem" and that ii) "Minister Vallance has written to DCMS to explore a coordinated approach".
- November 2025: Open letter to Ministers signed by over 3,100 leading scientists and stakeholders

- January 2026: Westminster Hall debate attended by 14 MPs
- March 2026: Private meetings with DSIT Ministers. Parliamentary Answer re-confirming that "DSIT is engaging with DCMS to consider how best to support science and discovery centres."
- 2 August 2026: The Sunday Express: Plea to Andy Burnham to save science centres facing £180m funding black hole
- 13 August 2026, The Times: Are we really going to abandon Jodrell Bank and the Eden Project?

## Annex: National STEM campaigns delivered by SDCs

- **Demystifying AI: from algorithms to everyday life,** funded by UKRI worked with 15 SDCs across the UK in January – April 2026. Exceeding targets by 40%, Demystifying AI reached 70,000 participants through 1,094 different events within four months. Negative perceptions of AI dropped from 32% to 10%. 75% of participants improved their understanding of AI capabilities and limitations, 64% reported greater confidence about when to trust AI. Understanding of how AI could benefit their family and their community increased from 54% to 73%[xi].
- **Our World from Space**, supported by the UK Space Agency, engaged over 275,000 participants across 26 locations across the UK between summer 2023 and December 2025. The programme celebrated a theme of "from global to local" and the relevance of UK space science for daily life and for the future health and sustainability of planet Earth. 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.[xii] 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.[xiii]
- **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.[xiv]
- **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**.[xv]

**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] The Opportunity Index, The Sutton Trust, 2025 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/The-Opportunity-Index.pdf
[iii] Science Education Tracker, The Royal Society, Engineering UK, 2023 https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/science-education-tracker/
[iv] Public Attitudes to Science Survey 2025, UKRI, Ipsos, British Science Association https://pas.ipsos.com/
[v] Public Attitudes to R&D 2025, The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) 2025 https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/what-we-do/public-opinion/research/case-public-attitudes-to-rd-2025/
[vi] A heatmap showing the numbers of school visits to SDCs from each Parliamentary constituency 2023-2024 can be found here https://postcodeheatmap.com/published/523dd84d-857e-4296-8dad-1cf0411bdac0
[vii] 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.
[viii] Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, POSTnote PN 143, July 2000, https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-143/
[ix] Science for Society: how society and science shape each other, The Royal Society, April 2026 https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/science-for-society/science-for-society-report.pdf
[x] Science & Discovery Centre Futures: Missions and Opportunities, external research (The Liminal Space, 2021), https://scienceanddiscoverycentrefutures.the-liminal-space.com/
[xi] Independent evaluation report of Demystifying AI, E. Cunningham, June 2026 https://www.sciencecentres.org.uk/documents/843/Demystifying_AI_Evaluation_Report_June_2026.pdf
[xii] Case studies and findings from independent evaluation reports of Our World From Space https://www.sciencecentres.org.uk/projects/our-world-from-space/case-studies-report/
[xiii] 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
[xiv] Supported by local industry and business, further details about Learning Lab can be found here: Glasgow Science Centre, Learning Lab
[xv] 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