

The Government Response to the Report on The Funding of Science Centres

Ecsite-uk's Response
Jan 18th 2008
Dr Penny Fidler

On Jan 16th 2008 the Innovation Universities and Skills Select Committee published the Government's response to the Science & Technology's Committee's Report on the Funding of Science and Discovery Centres. The Government response was jointly prepared by DIUS, DCSF and DCMS and aims to answer the recommendations made by the Select Committee.

Their five page report can be viewed via our website at www.ecsite-uk.net/select-committee

Ecsite-uk are pleased that the Government acknowledges that "science and discovery centres provide a forum for communicating and presenting scientific knowledge and debate on issues to children, families and the wider communities, often in an interactive, fun and informal environment which can enhance the individual's formal learning experiences and capture young people's imaginations."

We would like to note here that the science centres across England are largely run as independent educational charities supported only by funding from corporate partners and other funding bodies, ticket sales, shop and café revenue, income from hosting events and in some cases by revenue from subsidiary (unrelated) businesses.

Ecsite-uk welcomes the DIUS commitment to commission research in early 2008, in consultation with the DCSF and DCMS, to establish how effective the science centres would be compared to other delivery agents in helping the Government to meet both its STEM and public engagement goals. Ecsite-uk will of course offer our full assistance to this project. We are confident in the work we do as a sector and that we offer excellent value for money as places where our nation's children, students, teachers, families and others can be truly inspired by science, spending time together with professionals engaging in science in its widest context.

We would of course have liked to have seen some financial commitment to our sector for the future. However, we recognize the Governments need for an assessment to prove independently that we deliver exceptional quality and offer excellent value for money.

We would be happy to work with the DIUS and other STEM providers in the creation of joint criteria against which we would measure the effectiveness of all STEM provision, including science centres. We would welcome a commitment from Government that if through this research our centres demonstrate excellent value for money along with science engagement in a more lasting way as compared with other providers, that there would be a high probability of being considered for sizeable future funding.

We would have preferred more robust Government support of the Select Committee recommendation to guide Local Authorities to offer 100% business rates relief to science centres and will aim to review an approach for this as a sector.

We would also have liked to have seen a recommendation for a fuller independent study of the overall impact of science centres as recommended in the Select Committee Report, namely assessing their role in encouraging young people to pursue STEM careers and how effectively science centres influence public discussion and perception of science issues. However, we recognize the finite public resource available and are encouraged by the opportunity to prove, through the DIUS and other research, the excellent quality of engagement and informal learning that science centres provide.

The report refers to the £750 000 awarded to UK science centres. This has funded 14 science centres (approx £50 000 each) to take part in 5 collaborative pilot projects engaging adults and children with the wonders of science right across England and Wales

It has been a huge success and the projects have worked with many thousands of students and their teachers from all over England and Wales including those in the most remote school in England through to those in our inner cities. The projects have created new mechanisms for captivating students and teachers for the future, including mini-science exhibits to invigorate experimental science teaching in schools as well as inflatable domes where whole classes of students can be immersed in a fully interactive journey through the galaxies (stopping where they choose). Within these domes they can also choose to explore the wonders inside our cells, or be captivated by the beautiful and amazing world of light. In all cases the projects built new partnerships and engaged new audiences, and will have effects that extend long beyond this funding provision.

Looking to the future

We are currently in dialogue with the members of the DIUS and DCSF to apply their funding in ways that maximize potential through sharing experience and knowledge within our sector. This will include amongst other things bringing target groups of people within the sector together to share best practice, and working towards improving financial sustainability wherever possible.

The research suggested by the Government in this report will be an important next step to prove the successful ways we engage people with science and the enormous added value science centres provide to science learning and science literacy in the UK.

Both the science centres and the Government share a common vision - that of inspiring and engaging people of all ages and backgrounds with science.

We believe the UK's science centres and museums represent an extraordinary resource for the future of science in this country. As a network with a physical infrastructure and 17 million visitors a year, we are uniquely positioned to foster scientific entrepreneurship and a genuine and long-lasting sense of excitement and adventure in science with people of all ages in all parts of the UK.

We look forward to continuing these discussions with the Science and Innovation Minister Ian Pearson on February 12th 2008 and exploring ways the

UK science centres can use their expertise and proven appeal to audiences to partner with the Government to achieve this shared vision.

Dr Penny Fidler
Director of Ecsite-uk