From Andrew Miller MP, Chair

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Minister for Cities, Universities and Science
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

11 March 2015

I wrote to you on 25 February and Gareth Davies, commendably, responded promptly on your behalf on 6 March.

I have, subsequently spoken to the Association of Science Discovery Centres who do not agree that the situation is as settled as Mr Davies outlined in that letter. I think this may be a matter of talking across each other and so I am making an effort to highlight where the problems lie and where an opportunity is in danger of being missed.

Everyone would appear to support the intent of the Inspiring Science Capital Fund as outlined in the Government's consultation:

Funding could be used to support capital investment for inspirational and involving hands-on science exhibitions and programmes across the UK. This would be open to, amongst others, Science and Discovery Centres, and other organisations that cannot access capital investment from other public sources.

The problems that the proposed delivery mechanism raises can be summarised in three points:

1. Science discovery centres will not be able to apply for these funds, they would need a lead university partner.
2. The need for a university partner would mean that the funding would be heavily if not entirely focussed on exhibitions rather than on the core infrastructure to build capacity across the UK for the practical delivery of hands-on experiences such as classrooms, laboratories, live science areas, eating spaces and areas to
increase ongoing sustainability (such as hireable corporate spaces).

3. Using the Arts and Humanities Research Council as the partner organisation, while attractive in terms of its previous work with delivery of public engagement through museums, ignores the strong existing partnership between the science discovery centres and the Science and Technology Facilities Council (and their involvement in enabling the nation's largest study of informal science learning).

From what you have said in your appearances before my Committee I am sure that you share both my and David Willetts' ambitions for as many children as possible to be encouraged to follow an interest, and hopefully a career, within STEM.

I understand the desire to ensure that there is engagement of the centres with universities and current research science, I do not understand why all capital investment in science centre infrastructure needs not only a university partner but to be led by that university partner.

I hope that you will be able to give this some personal attention and, if necessary, be able to talk to Penny Fiddler, the CEO of the Association of Science Discovery Centres to appraise yourself of the real concerns these organisations have about what should be a good news story for public engagement with science.

Andrew Miller
Chair
Dear Andrew

INSPIRING SCIENCE CAPITAL FUND

Thank you for your letter to the Minister of 25 February concerning the Inspiring Science Capital Fund. On his behalf I am pleased to clarify current thinking on this funding commitment, announced as part of the Science & Innovation Strategy. I can reassure you that the capital funding will support exhibitions at science and discovery centres, supporting our world class research base.

You will recall that in April 2014 the Government published Creating the Future: a 2020 Vision for Science & Research in which we launched a consultation on capital spend until 2020-2021. We summarised early thinking on a number of indicative major projects for consideration, which included an Inspiring Science Capital Investment Fund. Without confirming the delivery partner or estimated operational costs we stated:

“Funding could be used to support capital investment for inspirational and involving hands-on science exhibitions and programmes across the UK. This would be open to, amongst others, Science and Discovery Centres, and other organisations that cannot access capital investment from other public sources.”

I am pleased to confirm that this is the basis for the on-going development of this funding stream, informed by feedback from the consultation from a number of stakeholders. You will see from the attached email sent by my officials to the chief executive of the UK Association of Science and Discovery Centres that the capital funding will support science and discovery centres in delivering new/revised exhibitions underpinned by research excellence; support a renewed sense of collaboration between the Research Councils, the research they have funded and the science and discovery centres; and support the broader STEM careers agenda through inspiring would-be scientists and engineers.

The delivery partner is to be the Arts and Humanities Research Council, working with the other research councils, because of their expertise in supporting research-led public engagement with the museum and gallery sector.

You may be aware that many science and discovery centres have never been eligible for public funding from the science budget in their own right. By partnering with a university or eligible “independent research organisation” (eg a national museum such as the Natural History Museum), previously ineligible science and discovery centres will be able to apply for Inspiring Science capital once the scheme is launched. Such partnerships will ensure that the science exhibitions funded will build on our world class UK research system, leading to enhanced public engagement. The scheme, the first of its kind as far as I am aware, will have excellence and impact at its heart.
I trust that this provides answers to the points raised. You will note that AHRC is keen to engage with the science and discovery centre community in shaping this opportunity to inspire a new generation.

Yours sincerely

GARETH DAVIES

Director General, Knowledge & Innovation
Extract from email to Penny Fidler, chief executive of the ASDC, from Research Councils Unit 18 February 2015

"...I thought it would be helpful to summarise our current thinking about the capital funding relevant to Science & Discovery Centres.

As you will know the science budget is delivered through BiS partner organisations, mainly the Research Councils. We have commissioned a lead research council to coordinate work on the Inspiring Science funding outlined in the capital consultation on behalf of all the research councils. It will be the AHRC because of its expertise in supporting research-led engagements with the public, communities and the museums and galleries sector that showcase research excellence.

Science and Discovery centres are not in eligible for direct receipt of research council funding, although some of your members already hold independent research organisation status. As such the funding can only be awarded to Science and Discovery Centres in collaboration with a lead partner which must be a university or an eligible IRO. The AHRC has extensive experience in funding calls that support partnerships led by universities and IROs that require the involvement of non-university organisations and provide funding to those organisations via the grant.

In the case of this funding stream, awards would be made via a grant call. The objectives of the funding would be: to support Science and Discovery Centres in delivering new/revised exhibitions underpinned by research excellence; support a renewed sense of collaboration between the Research Councils, the research they have funded and the Science and Discovery Centres; and support the broader STEM careers agenda through inspiring would-be scientists and engineers. The call will be advertised in due course with the expectation that funding is available within the next couple of financial years.

We have been discussing the implementation of this funding allocation with the AHRC who are very keen to work with your community, including brokering and facilitating collaborations, holding town hall and other events from an early stage in the process to ensure strong and sustainable partnerships can be delivered through this programme. These will be held in good time to allow your community to form effective collaborations with universities and IROs ready for the call."
The Rt Hon Greg Clark
Minister of State, (Universities, Science & Cities)
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

25th February 2015

Dear Greg,

The attached is sent to me as chair of the Science and Technology Select Committee on behalf of the science learning centres. Clearly what is happening is not what was intended, unless there has been a policy change. I assume this is a communication problem rather than the latter.

I would therefore ask that you personally intervene and get the matter back on the right track. As you appreciate there are only a few meetings of my committee left during this Parliament, so I would be grateful for some clarity on the points made in the email, in time for our meeting next week. I realise that is asking a lot as we are all under pressure at this stage of the cycle, but I would want to be able to report to my committee that there is nothing to worry about and that the concerns raised with us are unwarranted.

Kind regards,

Andrew

Chair Commons Science & Technology Select Committee