

Centres point to the future

Science centres provide a new focus for public attention. And there will be life after the lottery.

Michael Kenward

From reports in the media you would have thought that the British public had stayed at home throughout millennium year. Okay, one well known attraction was effectively a queue-free zone, but the picture was very different elsewhere. For example, turnstiles at many millennium attractions with a science dimension have been working overtime.

Even before it opened in March, the Eden Project in Cornwall attracted 70% more people than forecast to witness its construction. Dynamic Earth, the geological science centre in Edinburgh, opened its doors in July 1999 and had clocked up getting on for 700 000 visitors by the end of last year. That was around 32% above forecasts.

The Big Idea, another Scottish venture, at Irvine, exceeded its targets by 17%. In the south-west, @Bristol was 11% up on the forecasts. The half-term holidays in February saw the number of visitors to @Bristol top the half a million mark.

Most science centres have beaten their predictions for the number of people that would come through their doors. Some forecasts suggest that getting on for 11 million people will visit science and discovery centres during 2001.

The pioneers who set out to create these attractions had very little to go on when they set out to forecast, perhaps a better word would be guess, how many visitors they would lure in through their doors. After all, with the exception of a few visionaries, science centres were few and far between in the UK before Lottery money started to flow into the sector through the Millennium Commission.

By the end of this year, when nearly all of the new wave of science centres are open for business, most of the country will be within easy reach of at least one centre. As Mike O'Connor, Director of the Millennium Commission, points out, most people will soon live less than one hour's drive from a centre.

Lottery money has, then, created a new phenomenon. As O'Connor puts it: "While we have had science centres, the Commission has really transformed the sector and introduced a whole



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@ a glance...

■ Many new science centres have had many more visitors than they expected - around 11 million people will visit a science or discover centre in 2001.

■ Science centres may struggle to fund new attractions so the Millennium Commission has set up a £25 million renewal fund, which the Wellcome Trust may contribute to and manage.

■ A UK chapter of Ecsite - a pan-European association of science centres - has been formed. The network will provide a unified front to negotiate with government and a focus for discussions with research councils, industry, educational bodies.

■ Ecsite-UK has attracted twice the expected number of member organisations.

■ Ecsite will campaign for funding equality with museums and galleries.

What is ECSITE?

ECSITE is a non-profit organisation that fosters collaboration between science and technology centres, museums and related institutions throughout Europe. It acts as a contact point for institutions that want to build on multinational networks.

The organisation runs a web site and newsletter, holds meetings and facilitates staff exchanges. It keeps a database of experts and has raised money for such projects as 'Chemistry for Life', a travelling exhibition funded by the chemicals industry.

ECSITE, formed in 1989, has 270 members. They come from 50 countries and include 100 institutions in the EU with a total of 30 million visits a year.

www.ecsite.net

new generation of projects." In all, the Commission estimates that it has invested about £250 million in science centres. This represents 20% of its major capital awards.

Science and discovery centres are such a new idea that the whole sector faces unique challenges. "When the Commission looked at the portfolio of projects that it had supported across the country, nearly 200 capital projects, the science centres stood out," explains O'Connor. Science centres are additions to the cultural landscape.

"If you take the stadiums and art galleries that we have supported, they are an enhancement of facilities that already existed. We have always had stadiums, and we have always had art galleries. Galleries and

stadiums have their traditional ways of raising money. Even if the Millennium Commission had never happened, they would still be here, albeit perhaps not as many or as well appointed. You cannot say this for science centres.

"These projects don't have traditional public support in terms of taxation and grants from the government," says O'Connor.

Science centres differ from traditional attractions in other ways. Science and technology move on rapidly. Science centres have to respond to this pace by creating new attractions to reflect recent progress. As O'Connor puts it: "Of all the projects we have supported, the science centres are going to be the most dependent on having up-to-date kit and new attractions."

The unique position of the science centres prompted the Commission to look for ways to support them into the future. "We thought that the science centres would face particular needs over the coming years," says O'Connor. "So we decided to set up a fund that would be available in three to five years time to bring new exhibits in."

The renewal fund certainly appeals to the science centres. Professor John Durant, Director of @Bristol, naturally considers it "a good idea". Durant anticipates that in a few years time science centres will face the need to put together new exhibitions and "having a fund that we can apply to is really helpful".

The Commission has allocated £25 million for the renewal fund. In line with the Commission's requirement for partnership funding, O'Connor hopes that other organisations will also chip in with an equal amount. The Wellcome Trust has already signed up to the new fund.

The Wellcome Trust is the

single largest supporter of science centres after the Millennium Commission. In all it has already committed up to £50 million to eight centres.

It was a meeting organised by the Wellcome Trust last November that helped to convince the Millennium Commission to go ahead with the new fund. The Commission and the Trust are now discussing how the fund will work. They hope to be able to reveal the full details later this year.

The Millennium Commission has a limited life, so the Wellcome Trust will probably administer the scheme. Exactly when the fund invites bids, and who is likely to be eligible, are just some of the questions that they hope to pin down over the next few months.

The meeting in November also fired the starting gun for another new initiative for science centres. A new network of science centres will operate under the auspices of ECSITE, the European Collaborative for Science, Industry and Technology Exhibitions. At its meeting in March, ECSITE approved the formation of a UK 'chapter'.

The official launch of ECSITE-UK happened in April, with another meeting of the science centres and other interested parties. The Wellcome Trust has agreed to provide running costs so that the BA can manage the network. The trust will also provide a home until when the Science Museum has completed its Queen's Gate development and the BA moves in.

The Trust had already brought together the eight science centres that it supports through the Network of Wellcome Trust Funded Science Centres. The network, which includes the Science Museum, where the trust contributed nearly £18 million towards the cost of the Wellcome Wing, had started to discuss such ideas as touring shows and saving money by working together at events, for example. Then there is the obvious advantage of clubbing together in purchasing and marketing.

One outcome of the Wellcome network was a partnership with the charity that runs Science Line. This then bid for funding to the New Opportunities Fund to develop a web-based version of Science Line. Such activities allow science centres, with their regional focus, to come together to create a national impact.

With so many new science

Mike O'Connor, Director of the Millennium Commission.



centres coming along, a natural next step was to bring them all together. Once again the Wellcome Trust stepped in "to help them to get together with a unified front," says Laurence Smaje, who is overseeing the trust's activities related to science centres.

When the idea came up for the national network, the Wellcome Trust was lucky in being able to sign up Gillian Thomas and Melanie Quinn to work on the idea and get the ball rolling. Thomas saw @Bristol through its formation as the centre's first chief executive. Quinn is the Science Communication Director of Techniquest in Cardiff where she also runs the centre's MSc course in communicating science.

One of Thomas's first moves at the Wellcome Trust was to organise a one-day meeting in November. This brought together people from the science centres, the Millennium Commission and three government departments.

Alan Howarth, Minister for the Arts, kicked off the November event by pointing to the contribution that science centres can make to the government's social inclusion agenda and to formal education. In particular, Howarth cited the Science Year, which begins in September, as an example of the contribution that science centres can make to education.

Many centres are gearing up for this year-long extravaganza, which will have a strong emphasis on the teenage audience. There are plans afoot for centres to act as the focus for science clubs and to develop electronic support groups and internet links.

The November meeting naturally also provided a chance for people to talk about a perennial topic – income. Organisations and sponsors are reluctant to contribute to running costs. However, as O'Connor points out, by providing money for science centres to renew exhibits, the new fund relieves some of the pressure. Science centres don't have to worry so much about salting away money to develop new exhibits a few years from now.

The group creating ECSITE-UK had "a real surprise", as Thomas puts it, when it set out to see how many people might join. Twice as many organisations than expected said "Yes Please".

Thomas sees many roles for ECSITE-UK. As well as talking to government on behalf of the



Glasgow Science Centre, which opens this summer, is a striking addition to the city's skyline.

sector, the network can also act as a focus for discussions with research councils, industry, educational bodies and, says Thomas, "anybody else" who will listen.

Durant is also excited about the creation of the new network. "I can't wait for it to happen," he says. "I detect a real groundswell of enthusiasm across the community of science and discovery centres."

The idea of ECSITE-UK has already been a catalyst for the centres to talk to one another, says Durant, who also happens to be the current chairman of ECSITE. People are already talking about joint activities and ways of sharing ideas and costs. For example, a number of centres are already working on proposals for joint projects for Science Year. Together, explains Durant, the centres can do more than is possible alone.

Much as the science centres welcome the renewal fund, few expect this to solve their financial needs. As Durant says, there has been "an enormous but essentially unplanned growth in the science centres". There has not, though, been enough thinking about how to make the sector sustainable. "All of these places are going to raise a lot of commercial income," he adds, "but all of us are going to need to apply for funds in the public sector in one way or another."

Thomas believes that the network will help science centres to campaign for "equality of treatment with other parts of the cultural sector". After all, she adds, the centres have already delivered a lot in the way of education and providing access for people. Many are, she adds, more visitor friendly than the average art gallery.

The need to tackle this issue was actually on the agenda from the beginning of ECSITE-UK. One objective of setting up the network, says Laurence Smaje, was to get the centres "to speak with one voice and to try to get a seat at government tables". Together the science centres could then try to persuade the government to change its line on funding. Unlike museums, Smaje points out, science centres are not eligible for government funding. Durant makes a similar point. He insists that science and discovery centres do not want any special favours, just a level playing field.

Science and discovery centres are an important way of connecting science to the public. The Millennium Commission has done its bit for the new sector. ECSITE-UK will clearly press for support to continue where the Commission left off.

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