

Life Science Centre - inclusion and accessibility work. Information for ASDC

August 2025

Background

Life Science Centre serves the North East of England, a region which has some of the worst areas of deprivation in the UK.

In the 'State of the Region' survey (2024), North East schools identified rising levels of SEND as one of their top concerns. 96% of schools reported an increase in students with SEND, particularly in diagnoses of autism, social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) issues, and speech and language difficulties. 84% of schools indicated they lacked the capacity and resources to support these students adequately. This challenge is even more acute in the North East, where SEND rates stand at 14.6%, significantly higher than the national average of 13.6%, and the region has one of the highest rates of education, health, and care plans (EHCPs).

Life attracts families and schools from the Borders, North Yorkshire and Cumbria, working with urban and rural schools and underserved communities, reaching many young people who never would have considered a job in STEM as 'for them', and igniting the vital spark that raises aspirations and ambitions and showcases the breadth of jobs available.

As well as welcoming thousands of families every year, the science centre's school programme offers exciting, relevant and interactive STEM experiences that cannot easily be replicated in the classroom. Life's outreach programme has helped thousands of school children in deprived or geographically remote locations.

Some examples of Life impact are listed below:

1. Autistic and neurodiverse audiences

More than 15% of people in the UK) are neurodivergent, and Life's audience reflects this. Life is regarded as an industry leader in its work with neurodivergent communities, and particularly those with autism.

Life started working with the North East Autism Society (NEAS) in 2018. The pioneering partnership has led to physical changes and adaptations of the centre as well as additional programming such as [Relaxed Sunday Sessions - Centre For Life](#) which offer dedicated quiet time for anyone to access and enjoy the science centre. The model has been adapted for other programming including relaxed ice-skating sessions and the Santa Experience <https://www.life.org.uk/whats-on/event/the-santa-experience-relaxed-sessions/>

In 2024, Life became the first (and so far, only) visitor attraction to receive a 'Gold Plus Standard' Autism Acceptance Award from NEAS <https://www.life.org.uk/who-we-are/latest-news-and-blogs/life-celebrates-start-of-autism-acceptance-week-with-gold-plus-award/>

Life's awards can be found here <https://www.life.org.uk/who-we-are/awards-wins/>

"Relaxed Sunday gave us a chance to take our son where he would feel comfortable and free to be himself. Very inclusive and accessible, especially the changing facilities. We were super impressed!"

David Jones, Life's Community Liaison Manager is in demand internationally for his advice and expertise in this area and sits on several advisory boards.

Abstract from summative independent evaluation on Life's work- Alice Fenyo, 2021

<https://www.curiouser.me.uk/> :

"For autistic young people and their parents, the experience could be described as life-changing. The value is threefold:

- A sense of connection & identity rarely experienced in any other context beyond their own families
- A sense of self-worth and self-esteem derived from delivering expert advice and guidance to Life on the development of its exhibits
- Independence and confidence by setting up and running their own network on Facebook named Covid-Safe Centre for Life

"People at school were not so nice. Here, I met more people like me. And they didn't take the heck over. They didn't drain my battery so much" Child in E=mc2 (NEAS/Life group)

Impact wasn't just restricted to the children. "Parents of autistic children also rarely get the opportunity to meet each other in a relaxed environment"

"We have got more out of this group than I could have ever hoped for – confidence, friendship and support" Parent of child in E=mc2

"It came at a really hard time for us. It's the first time we've linked with other families in the same situation, who 'get us'" Parent of child in E=mc2

"Your vision has not only helped the Centre for Life, its staff and the general public gain a better understanding of what our children go through on daily. You have taught me more and more about my son. He has rarely stuck with anything but with this he has! He has truly adored every moment" Thank you card from parent of a child in E=mc2"

2. Accessible pricing

Life works with local authorities and community groups to facilitate free or heavily discounted visits for those who can't afford to come and offers regular discounts throughout the year.

- **Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme** is a government-funded initiative in England designed to provide school-aged children who are eligible for free school meals with access to free healthy meals and engaging activities during school holidays. Life has been involved since the original North East HAF pilot in summer 2019 and to date, nearly 10,000 people have benefited from the scheme at Life.

- **Universal credit scheme** was introduced on 21 July 2025 as a summer trial (£3.00 per ticket with each recipient of UC being able to bring up to 5 people with them). Life is the only family attraction in the region to offer this. <https://www.life.org.uk/who-we-are/latest-news-and-blogs/3-summer-tickets-for-universal-credit-visitors-at-life-science-centre/> To date, approximately 40% of visitors each day are using the Universal Credit ticket offer. **83% of visitors taking up the offer are first-time visitors to Life, indicating that this offer has widened participation to a new audience.**

"Being a single parent who is lucky enough to get all the holidays off from work, I struggle to entertain the children everyday. Knowing we could attend on a much cheaper rate (universal credit) made it so much better as I struggle to afford to pay regular prices for myself and 2 children. This is a fantastic offer which helps parents like myself give our children a great experience and day out here."

"Everything was fantastic, the children had so much fun, everything seemed to be set up to spark their imagination and teach them so many cool things! The science show was especially amazing! The lad who did it was engaging, fun and the kids loved voting on the experiments and getting involved they were amazed by the bubble that goes on fire and the spinning sparkler. I'd bring them every week if i could. Its a wonderful facility and im thankful i was able to take my children there. Thank you" (UC discount visitor)

3. WEST Science Club

WEST is comprised of 9 primary schools located in the west end of Newcastle. 8 out of 9 WEST schools are in the most deprived areas nationally.

WEST School (LSOA)	IMD 2019	
	Rating out of 32,844 with 1 being the most deprived	As a %
St Paul's (024E)	208	0.63%
Hawthorn (024E)	208	0.63%
Moorside (024D)	1314	4.00%
Wingrove (022G)	9,467	28.82%
Canning Street (029B)	553	1.68%
St John's (027D)	137	0.33%
Bridgewater (025E)	649	1.98%
Broadwood (025G)	1,602	4.88%
Lemington Riverside (021E)	3138	9.55%
Average		5.83%

Since November 2014, Life has hosted a weekly science club that meet's WEST's aims of enhancing opportunities for children by collaborating with partners.

In 2022 the science club programme was updated to reflect broader aims around STEM skills, communication skills, building confidence and resilience. Sessions cover a range of themes, involve practical experiments not possible in school and highlight STEM role models.

Approximately 50-60 children attend each week with opportunities for years 1-6 across the year. 3330 children have benefitted in the past 10 years.

Evaluation shows the updated model is meeting all outcomes with particularly high impacts on increasing children's STEM skills, STEM awareness and communication skills.

99% of WEST staff agreed that science club increased their pupil's confidence in STEM skills.

98% of WEST staff agreed that science club allowed their pupils to use authentic STEM equipment they wouldn't normally use.

"They get so much out of attending the life centre such a valuable resource." – WEST staff

97% of WEST staff agreed that science club gave their pupils a broader understanding of STEM skills and careers.

"For myself who has attended every session since it started, these new topics have been very welcome. The children have enjoyed the projects as they have been current and prominent in society today." – WEST staff

94% of WEST staff agreed that science club allowed their pupils to explore interests that are important to them. WEST staff were also positive about the improvements related to children's communication in and out of WEST science club.

"A teacher commented one of their children is extremely quiet in school but very confident and talkative at science club. I've often chosen them to answer questions, without knowing, and they said this is something that the child would never do." – Life staff

As well as the positive impacts on the young people, staff from WEST highlighted the enriching continuing professional development (CPD) opportunity for themselves. 88% of WEST staff agreed that science club increased their own confidence in delivering STEM activities.

During a focus group of WEST staff in 2024 many noted the challenges schools are facing, including time, money, and resources. They noted that the number of SEN children in school is increasing but there aren't enough provisions to support this. Their partnership with Life ensures that pupils still have access to high quality and life enhancing opportunities.

4. Sensory Science Clubs

Through a Community Foundation grant three science clubs were delivered during 24/25:

- The Autism club, in partnership with North East Autism Society
- The Deaf Science Club, in partnership with Newcastle Council Hearing Impaired Additionally Resourced Provision (HIARP)
- The Visually Impaired Club, in partnership with Newcastle Council Visual Impairment Additionally Resourced Provision (VIARP)

Impact was evaluated through surveys completed before and after the programme. The strongest positive change was in the "pride in myself" statements implying growth in science capital and confidence.

The NEAS science club is the longest standing sensory club. Impact continues beyond the club: one of the original participants joined the latest iteration as a volunteer mentor; young people who struggle with social interaction have developed friendships and self confidence that continue outside the club. In addition, parents who may have felt isolated meet up with peers to share experiences and insights.

5. Space Explorers Programme

The Space Explorers project is a multi-touch programme targeting schools in the North East of England that are either rurally isolated or have many low-income families.

The projects aimed to:

- Provide enjoyable and unique experiences for school students while engaging with STEM through visits to the science centre and outreach workshops
- Increase young people's motivation and self-confidence in engaging with science, technology, engineering and maths
- Illustrate the relevance of science and technology to their lives and interests
- Reinforce and develop young people's knowledge and theory of STEM, by putting STEM skills into practise
- Raise awareness of the broad range of STEM opportunities in the North East, and demonstrate the relevance and transferability of STEM to a vast range of careers.

In 24/25 61 schools participated in the programme (30 through Edina funding, 31 through UK Space Agency funding).

86% of teachers strongly agreed that their students had been able to use STEM equipment that they wouldn't normally have access to.

97% strongly agreed or agreed that the programme gave their students a broader understanding of STEM skills and careers.

6. Spotlight Days

Life runs regular Spotlight Days which focus on pertinent STEM topics like space, and AI. Community groups are invited free of charge and make up around 30% of the audience on the day. As well as providing an accessible and family friendly introduction to relevant science, they give families a chance to meet real life role models working in these important areas.