

# A Slice of Life

2023 - 2024

Life<sup>™</sup>  
SCIENCE FOR ALL



# Our purpose...

is to inspire everyone to explore and enjoy science, and to provide a world-class science hub where life-enhancing engagement, research and patient treatment can thrive.



Life is a great part of the city's culture; it offers an access point to science for families and young people who don't have knowledge of the opportunities that are available."

Chi Onwurah, Shadow Minister for Science, Research and Innovation

# A word from the Chair and Chief Executive

It has been a busy and productive year. The science centre has delivered a programme of astonishing breadth to its audiences, has continued to make improvements to enhance the overall visitor experience and has developed further its innovative work with audiences that have sensory and other needs. In tandem with this, Life's commercial team has worked hard to maximise income from a range of diverse activities, ensuring that the centre remains financially buoyant. We do hope that you enjoy reading more about all of this in our annual review.

It's always difficult to pick out favourite moments, but some deserve a special mention. Our adult Speakeasy series goes from strength to strength, focusing on difficult and often controversial subjects, but the standout event for us was **Fitting into Our Genes**, a discussion about genetic heritage and the impact of changes in the law to remove the right to anonymity for sperm, egg and embryo donors. It was particularly powerful to hear the lived experience of a donor-conceived adult who had herself used donor sperm for her own children.

We are so proud of our in-house team who created a truly wonderful Planetarium show linked to the festive season for young audiences. The quality is stunning and the production received superb feedback from families. And we are equally proud of continuing efforts to engage people with sensory needs, including autism and sight and hearing impairments.

In addition, thousands of families and schoolchildren enjoyed interactive, hands-on science experiences, designed to spark imagination, enhance their knowledge of science and technology and, for some, set them on the path to a career in STEM. It is wonderful to see young people celebrating science with such enthusiasm!

Our visitor improvement plan continued with major changes to the ever-popular Play Zone for our youngest visitors; preparatory work for exciting exhibits that will be launched next year; a new science hub showcasing how regional experts take inspiration from nature to tackle global challenges in a sustainable way; and a new and larger café bar for visitors to enjoy.

It is always encouraging when others tell us that we are doing a good job. The whole organisation was elated to learn that Life had received the highest mark of any visitor attraction in England (95.7%) as part of an independent survey, backed by the Association of Large Visitor Attractions. An Autism

Acceptance Gold Standard Plus award for 'taking autism acceptance to the next level' and the Gold Better Health at Work Award in recognition of our efforts to promote healthy lifestyles in the workplace were the icing on the cake.

It is extraordinary that the gap between the first and second industrial revolutions was 80 years and now change is happening so quickly that looking ahead by even 12 months seems too long a horizon. Such rapid change brings with it both challenges and opportunities. Artificial Intelligence, for example, is no longer the domain of science fiction fans. It's affecting education and healthcare increasingly, which lies at the heart of what we do at Life. What does this mean for our audiences and for young people? Those same young people grow increasingly concerned about what is happening to the planet. As the region's only contemporary science centre, it is critical that we encourage them to express their feelings and views and think about the positive actions they might take at a local level. These issues occupy us now, and will continue to do so, in the months and years ahead.

We remain acutely aware that Life Science Centre is part of something very special. The clinicians, researchers, educationalists and entrepreneurs who work on site are all united in a quest to help people live better and healthier lives. Find out more about the cutting-edge work undertaken by our long-term partners, Newcastle University and the NHS in this review and on our website.

Finally, huge thanks to the Life board of trustees, to the subsidiary commercial company that raises money for our work, to the Life team and to all our partners, regionally, nationally and internationally. It is a tremendous collective effort!



**Fiona Cruickshank**  
Chair



**Linda Conlon**  
Chief Executive



# A year in numbers

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40k

school pupils interacted with Life.



30k

family and friends took to the ice on our outdoor rink over the festive season.



6k

people visited the centre when the UK Space Agency's 72ft rocket docked in Times Square in August.



2k

adults enjoyed the new *Dark Side of the Moon* Planetarium show.



25k

visitors became scientists in the Experiment Zone.



2k

young people benefitted from Holiday Activity Fund and Life partnership.

# Families

**We celebrate science every day, highlighting its relevance to our lives.**

Over the past year, Life has been providing visitors of all ages with more opportunities to discover amazing things about science and the world they live in... and have lots of fun doing it.



## Summer '23.

**Gross and Glorious Me** focused on human biology and the wonders of the human body. The Science Theatre became a human fortress fighting off viruses and bacteria, and real forensic techniques were used to investigate fingerprints.



## FAMILY-FRIENDLY PROGRAMMES

### Spring '23.

**The Sea and Me** covered areas of climate science and sustainability with a new show in the Science Theatre, ocean acidification in Experiment Zone and mechanical wave machines in the Making Studios.

### Winter '23/24.

**Fire vs Ice** explored how you can trick your eyes, your brain and your sense of touch using extremes of temperatures.

## YOUNGER VISITORS

### Pre-School Days

Pre-School Days have been developed with very young children's physical, cognitive and social skills in mind.

A combination of external guest facilitators, such as ZooLab, Fun Little Foodies and Piccolo Music alongside in-house activities remains a mix that very young people and their carers appreciate, with nearly 4,000 youngsters and carers taking part throughout the year.

### Play Zone

The Play Zone, for under 7s, was revamped and opened in time for February half-term.

New additions include a coastal area, complete with a lighthouse, a boat to explore and a River Tyne mural running throughout, with bridges to walk across.







A new festive Planetarium show, ***What Santa Sees*** (above), was written and produced by the Life team, combining festive magic with the wonders of space and the universe, receiving rave reviews.

This formed part of a wider ***Santa Experience***, which was an instant sell-out success, and included an opportunity to see Santa and his elf deliver science demos such as smoke rings and sprout cannons.



**Absolutely great show, both the kids and I got goosebumps. It was magical."**

Amy, visitor

#### Spring '24.

***True Colours*** included a colour-inspired trail, a new live show, pop-up demonstrations and the popular colour catcher making activity.

During busy holiday periods, additional shows were added to the in-house programme. For February half-term, ***Wonderstruck*** performed their popular ***Rocket show***, seen at national and international science festivals. This show included fireballs, a rocket car and exploding stunt-teddies.

## BRITISH SCIENCE WEEK

**A 10-day celebration of science for all ages was launched in March to mark the start of British Science Week.**

Families, adults and schools took part in live shows, panel discussions and interactive workshops to explore science in an immersive way and foster a deeper understanding of the world around us.

Over the week, 2000 schoolchildren visited the centre for curriculum-linked workshops and centre visits.



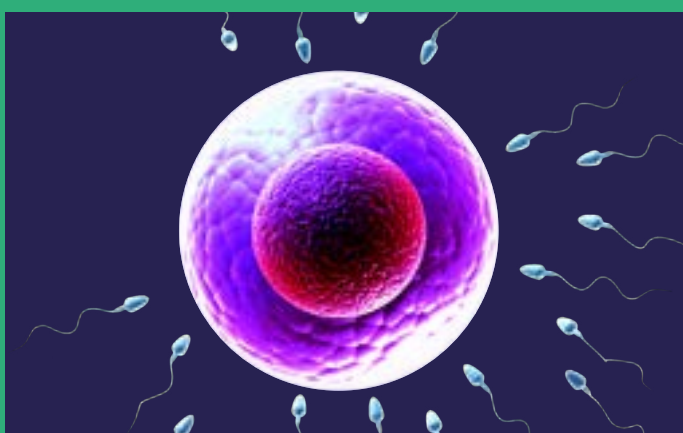
# Schools

**For nearly 25 years, Life has supported teachers by delivering activities that enhance and enrich the STEM curriculum, providing experiences that are not usually possible to deliver in a classroom.**

The core programme continues to focus on 18 curriculum-linked workshops, catering for pupils aged 4 to 18+, which take place in fully equipped real labs and the Making Studios.

Workshops cover a wide range of topics, from investigating outbreaks of bacterial disease, discovering the workings of the digestive system and scientific solutions to the climate crisis, to life on board the International Space Station and exploring Earth and the solar system.

Over the year, there were over 40,000 interactions with schools and the centre welcomed pupils from across the North East as well as the Netherlands, London, Scotland and Ireland.



## PUTTING FERTILITY UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

**In October, sixth-form students from 12 regional schools and colleges took part in a fertility themed event, *Matters of Conception*, which was linked to the Science Speakeasy about genetic heritage. The event was in partnership with the NHS Fertility Clinic based at Life.**

Students participated in a series of workshops with activities including a VR tour through the reproductive system, interpreting medical imaging and looking at tools used in embryology.



**Fantastic! The children have thoroughly enjoyed themselves and have learned a lot. We would love to come back!"**

Lumley Junior School



**The children loved their visit, especially being in the lab. The Chemistry workshop covered a huge amount of practical work which was excellent for the children. Thank you – so much of the KS2 syllabus content covered. Perfect."**

Cundall Manor School



## AFTER SCHOOL SCIENCE CLUB

**Over the year, children from nine schools in areas with many low-income families, took part in this weekly club, covering a wide range of curriculum-linked topics.**

Activities included launching rockets using a chemical reaction, navigating using magnetic fields and creating an efficient moon space lander.





The team's engagement with children was brilliant. Our children had an excellent day and I feel we have developed their science capital."

Cambois Primary School

## EDINA TRUST

The Edina Trust-funded *Space Explorers* continues to target schools in rural or urban deprived areas across the North East.

So far, 26 schools have received an Astromaths show in the mobile Planetarium (pictured above) while 30 schools have visited Life and taken part in live online chats with scientists.



## HOME EDUCATION DAYS

Reflecting the changing educational landscape and in response to the growing number of requests from home educators, Life held its first Home Education Days in September, for youngsters who do not attend school.

Aimed at young learners aged 4 to 16, the events provide home educated children with an opportunity to enjoy a day of curriculum-linked learning activities, shows and workshops.

## OUR PLACE IN SPACE

In February, a new curriculum-linked Planetarium workshop for 7-11 year-olds, *Our Place in Space*, was launched.

This provides a tour of the solar system and reveals how the James Webb Space Telescope is helping to make new discoveries about the universe.



## POST-16 WORKSHOPS

For older students, the PCR workshop where students use their own DNA to discover and compare a bitter taste receptor gene, continues to be the most popular.

Life is one of a few centres in the UK to have the specialist lab equipment for this workshop.



This is an excellent course and by far the best way of delivering this part of the specification."

Teacher visiting for the PCR workshop

## MATHSPLOSION

Working in partnership with AMSP (Advanced Maths Support Programme) two maths-themed days for Year 10 students were held in July and November.

# Exploring space

**The North East is a leading player in the expanding space sector and Life plays an important role in helping people understand the breadth of career opportunities in today's space industry.**

From a dedicated Space Zone that includes a detailed replica of the International Space Station and a NASA Mission Control area, to school workshops and adult events, we believe nowhere else in the region offers such a comprehensive space engagement programme.

## ROCKET IN TIMES SQUARE

**In August, the UK Space Agency's 72ft replica of Launcher 1 docked in Times Square for five days, as part of its national *Space for Everyone* tour.**

Families also visited the science centre to enjoy Space Zone and space-related activities, which led to a 200% rise in visitors compared to the previous year.



**In March, international scientists, funded by the UK Space Agency, met for a three-day workshop at Life Science Centre.**

**The group, from as far afield as America, Belgium, France, Spain and Japan, are examining if life has ever existed on Mars.**



**Life is playing a key role in promoting the importance and relevance of the space sector and inspiring young people to consider one of the many diverse roles within the space industry as a career."**

Professor Manish Patel, ExoMars mission scientist

## PROTECTING OUR PLANET

**In July, Life joined forces with 21 UK science centres and museums for a two-year national STEM programme, *Our World from Space*, which explores the relevance of space science for the future health and sustainability of the planet.**

Schoolchildren, families and community groups will benefit from workshops, planetarium shows, 'meet the scientist' events and pop-up science shows.



**Through our commitment to using resources and facilities responsibly and our efforts to encourage and educate staff about sustainability, we strive to operate in ways that minimise negative effects on the environment.**

Over the past year, we have reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by almost 10%, adopted energy-efficient lighting, expanded our recycling programmes and ensured that waste is managed responsibly and efficiently.





## PLANETARIUM

Life is home to the biggest planetarium in the North.

New for this year was an animated show for under 7s, *What Santa Sees*, which received rave reviews.

Written and produced by Life's creative in-house team, the show provides a magical Christmas experience with science at its heart – introducing youngsters to the wonders of space and the universe through stars in the night sky.

Bringing the wonders of space and the universe to a new audience, Life's *Dark Side of the Moon* planetarium show provides 360-degree breathtaking high-resolution visuals of the solar system and beyond set to tracks from the iconic Pink Floyd's album.



I felt completely immersed in the show at Life and the sound quality of the production was fantastic – it was a very special and unique experience."

Peter Smith, Pink Floyd fan

The immersive show for adults has been an outstanding sell-out success, and prompted many nostalgic memories from visitors, including Peter Smith (*pictured*) who was one of the first music fans to see the tracks performed live in 1972.

*Live Skies* is a series of presenter-led evening shows for adults, introduced in April. The first shows have all sold out.



## SPHERE

The Sphere is a large-scale spherical projection screen, ideal for presenting planetary and lunar scale shows.

ITV weatherman Ross Hutchinson worked with the team to create an engaging new show for the Sphere.

Launching in February, *Cloudy with a Chance of Diamonds* gives an amusing and insightful guide to the universe, covering such facts as the 2,000km winds on Neptune and how it rains diamonds on Saturn!



# Adults

Life continued to expand its popular series of after-hours adult events.



**The no-holds-barred, topical Science Speakeasy events remain popular, with a mix of local and national/international experts taking part in the debates and inviting audience participation.**

The carefully-curated panels are balanced to showcase diverse voices, including those from academia, public sector, the commercial world and those with lived experience like Hayley King, a donor-conceived adult who herself used donor sperm for the birth of her children.

Contemporary topics debated include microdosing, the rise of toxic influencers and the importance of genetic heritage in a modern family.

The Planetarium proved to be popular with adults. The largest in the north, it uses the most advanced technology available for ultra-rich, high-resolution visuals and superb sound quality. See page 11 for more information.



**It was my first #speakeasy event and I found it thoroughly enjoyable and informative - great speakers. Looking forward to the next one."**

Louise, LinkedIn comment



**I absolutely loved it. The open discussion about such an interesting topic was fantastic!"**

Comment on post-show survey





# Power of partnerships

Forging and maintaining meaningful partnerships is a cornerstone of the Life approach. Over the past year, Life has continued to build and grow relationships, leading to exciting new collaborations.



## 'SPOTLIGHT ON' DAYS

To highlight regional and contemporary science for a family audience, Life welcomes local STEM professionals to engage with visitors.

'Spotlight On' days focus on a specific topic and explore it in detail, with the support of subject experts from academia, business and the voluntary sector.

Through the year we have been supported by 144 expert contributors, including 32 from Newcastle University, 35 from Northumbria, 32 from Durham, 3 from Sunderland and 2 from Teesside, as well as a further 40 from other academic and business organisations.

In addition to paying visitors, 450 people from 12 community groups took up the offer of a free "VIP visit."

In July's **Marvellous Molecules and Medicine** day, scientists from Newcastle and Durham Universities shared the process of developing medicines, from identifying a problem to devising a solution.

In October, marking World Space Week, the **Spotlight on Satellites** day lifted the lid on how North East scientists and engineers are building and engineering satellites to monitor Earth.

To celebrate British Science Week in March, 17 partners from Newcastle and Durham Universities helped visitors explore how colour affects different parts of our lives, including nutrition, astronomy, childhood language development and perception.



## SCIENCE NOW! HUB

The Science Now! Hub at Life showcases the cutting-edge research taking place in the region to tackle contemporary issues.

In February, **Growing our Future** opened, highlighting how regional scientists and researchers are taking inspiration from nature to tackle global challenges in a sustainable way. Topics include breathable walls that open and close like pinecones, as well as buildings made from fungi that could one day replace concrete.

## INFORMING RESEARCH

In May '23, researchers from Durham University carried out a study on Life's young visitors by inviting children to hand-feed meerkats and red pandas in Virtual Reality.

# Engaging with communities

**Life remains committed to making the centre an inclusive and welcoming place for all.**

Over the last year, Life has continued to build and nurture relationships with a range of people and partners to bring about meaningful change.



## SUPPORTING FAMILIES

**Life's partnership with regional councils has continued, with visits funded through six local authorities, enabling young people and families to spend a day at Life and receive a nutritious meal.**

Working closely with StreetGames and the Council's SEND Team, over 200 people with special educational needs and disabilities have been supported as part of the programme.

In addition, external funding provided more than 400 "community passes" to facilitate free visits for groups including Children North East and families from deaf and sight loss communities.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FORUM

**Representatives from local authorities, universities and community groups across the region came together at Life in October, for the second annual Community Engagement Forum.**

The session was a great opportunity to engage with a wide range of community stakeholders, seek opinions and get feedback to help shape Life's future community work and further develop new partnerships.

## CONNECT

**This family engagement project, funded by the North of the Tyne Combined Authority, is delivered in partnership with NUSTEM at Northumbria University and Life.**

Through hands-on workshops, families from low-income areas and children with sensory challenges worked together to increase their understanding of the digital world by creating remotely operated puppets. 348 people participated.



**Thank you for giving the children the opportunity to take part in such a valuable activity which developed their skills."**

Susan Bennison, Year 4 teacher, Farne Primary School

## INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE WEEK

**In July, Life joined forces with local theatre company Curious Monkey, to welcome refugees living in Newcastle to the science centre.**

The group, based in Newcastle's West End, enjoyed live shows, time in the Planetarium and other hands-on activities.





## VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN

A group of Newcastle school children visited as part of Newcastle Council's Visual Impairment Additionally Resourced Provision (VIARP), which supports the inclusion of visually impaired children in mainstream education.

## SENSORY BOXES

**Building on the success of sensory bags, which are available for visitors to the centre, sensory boxes, complete with a range of fidget objects, are available in all our labs to support children.**

Life has continued to receive global inquiries about developing sensory tools from France, Italy, Brazil and Japan.



## DEAF SCIENCE CLUB

**Through a partnership with South of Tyne and Wearside Deaf Children's Society, Life has just launched a new science club for deaf children.**

The North East Autism Society Science Club has also continued into its 4th year.



**My daughter has gained so much from being around children similar to herself. The staff at both NEAS and Life were beyond fantastic. She has learnt to be 'more her' and drop her mask and I truly believe that has come from being part of your group."**

Parent of NEAS Science Club member



## DIVERSITY PANEL

**In March, Life hosted a panel discussion on diversity and inclusion in the life sciences, with delegates from across the country attending.**

The British Science Association event was opened by Chi Onwurah, Shadow Minister for Science, Research and Innovation. Life Chief Executive Linda Conlon chaired the panel and led the discussion on the importance of attracting and supporting diverse talent in STEM.



## RELAXED SUNDAY SESSIONS

**Relaxed Sunday Sessions are designed for people with autism and other sensory needs.**

Participants can explore the science centre with fewer visitors, watch relaxed performances and experience a quieter environment, with more than 1,600 people enjoying these sessions last year.

# Power of people

Life's commitment to being an excellent visitor attraction for all has been rewarded with accolades and awards.

## NUMBER 1 VISITOR ATTRACTION IN ENGLAND FOR VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The science centre was independently rated best in England for visitor experience by global benchmarking company BVA.

They score visitor attractions during mystery visits on a range of categories, from memorable moments and friendly staff to best welcome and facilities.

Life scored 100% in many areas and received an overall score of 95.7%, ranking the centre highest overall for participating attractions in England, ahead of the National Portrait Gallery and Bletchley Park.

## BEST COLLABORATION INAUGURAL AWARD

Newcastle City Council's award recognises the partnerships Life has forged across Newcastle and support for the city council's Holiday Activity Fund, providing free healthy food and enriching activities throughout the summer.



## AUTISM ACCEPTANCE GOLD STANDARD PLUS

As part of Autism Acceptance Week 2024, Life became the first organisation to receive this award for taking "autism acceptance to the next level."

## DEAF-FRIENDLY BRONZE ACCREDITATION

This award recognises Life's ongoing commitment to being deaf-friendly and accessible. As well as adjustments in the science centre, Life also runs science clubs exclusively for deaf children.

## 100 GREAT NORTH EAST WOMEN LIST

Life Chief Executive Linda Conlon was included in the list by the Chronicle newspaper on International Women's Day.



## GOLD BETTER HEALTH AT WORK AWARD

The Gold Better Health at Work Award recognises Life's ongoing work to promote healthy lifestyles in the workplace.

Life's wellbeing strategy was developed following staff consultation and focuses on physical, mental, financial and social wellbeing, to improve morale, lower levels of absenteeism and increase productivity.

Life is also signed up to the NHS Charter for Employers Positive about Mental Health, highlighting that mental health issues can be discussed comfortably and openly.



# Times Square

A vibrant programme of public events is held through the year in this flexible, enclosed square at the heart of the science village.



## OUTDOOR ICE RINK

**Life's outdoor ice rink, an established part of the Christmas calendar, returned to Times Square in November.**

More than 30,000 skaters young and old took to the rink between November and January.



**Times Square provides a vital revenue stream through external rentals.**

Events that have taken place over the past year include a live screening of the King's Coronation Ceremony in May as well as a broadcast of the Windsor Castle Coronation Concert the following day.

Later that month, around 1,700 people celebrated the Eurovision Song Contest with live music, DJs and a big screen broadcast of the final. Members of the Ukrainian community in Newcastle received free tickets to the event.

Other events included Oktoberfest, cabaret show Lady Boys of Bangkok and Paddy Fest.

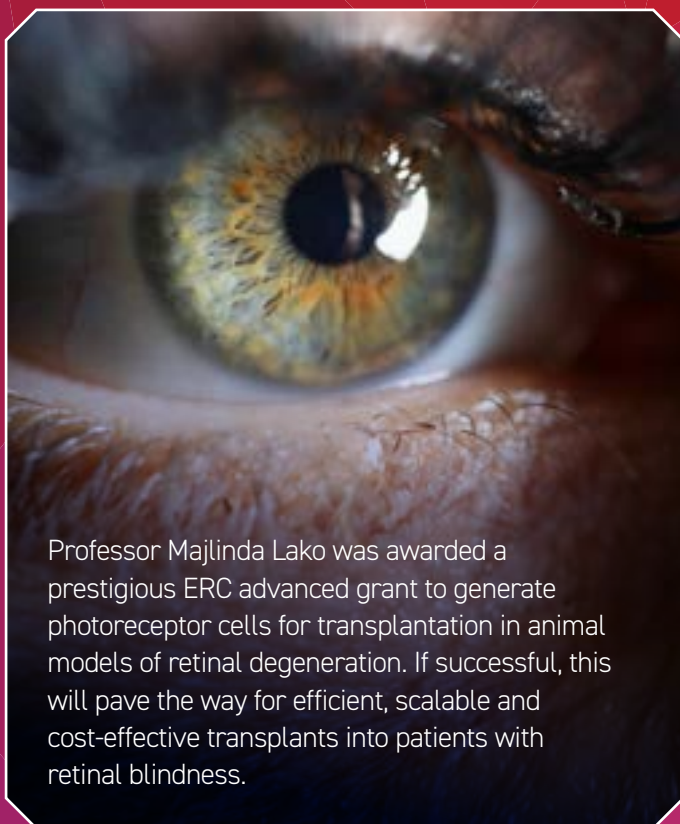


# Groundbreaking research and patient care

Life's on-site partners continue to do life-enhancing work, both in research and clinical care.

Life's site is home to 30 research groups and more than 200 research, diagnostic laboratory and clinical staff, working for organisations such as Newcastle University, the NHS Northern Genetics Service, and the NHS Newcastle Fertility Centre.

Here are just a few site highlights from the past year. For more, [read our blog](#)



Professor Majlinda Lako was awarded a prestigious ERC advanced grant to generate photoreceptor cells for transplantation in animal models of retinal degeneration. If successful, this will pave the way for efficient, scalable and cost-effective transplants into patients with retinal blindness.



Newcastle Fertility Centre has been part of the Life story since 1998 - two years before the site was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 2000. We're now regarded as a world-leading fertility clinic, dedicated to research, innovation and supporting our patients, and we're proud to be part of the ongoing Life story.

We help thousands of people every year, as part of their fertility journey. Fertility treatment often takes place in out-of-the-way places so being part of this vibrant community, in the heart of the city, is a hugely positive thing for our patients and our team. It's a daily reminder of the wonders of science and the power of partnerships."



Dr Matthew Prior,  
Consultant Gynaecologist  
in Reproductive Medicine,  
Newcastle Fertility Centre



The team at the John Walton Muscular Dystrophy Centre obtained funding to continue its pioneering rare disease studies, collaborating with partners across the world. This will allow them to accelerate the development of effective treatments and to establish best practice and care for neuromuscular patients worldwide.







When Life opened, many people were nervous about genetics research and the concept of IVF babies. Life is proud to have been a pioneer in both fields. Partnership is key to the work we do. For example, male infertility genetics, my specialism, has involved working with fertility experts from Newcastle University and international collaborators but also closer to home, with the NHS Fertility Clinic on site.

It's inspiring and rewarding to be part of a unique circle of science in a place where researchers, clinicians, science communicators and educators work side by side, sharing expertise and ideas. We are all driven by a common goal to enrich lives through science - and to make it accessible and relevant to everyone."



Professor Joris Veltman,  
Dean of Biosciences  
Institute, Newcastle  
University



The NHS Fertility Centre at Life, in a collaboration with Prof Anil Namdeo from Northumbria University, is working on assessing the influence of air pollution on IVF success rates. This study, named AIRPORT is funded by a BIRTH grant from Theramax.



The Northern Genetics Service, part of Newcastle Hospitals, is a great example of the outstanding role that Life plays in hosting both research and healthcare. We have the satisfaction of discovering exciting new ways to understand and treat genetic conditions - and seeing the real difference we make to patients.

Working as part of the North East and Yorkshire Genomic Medicine Service, we make sure the latest developments in genomics benefit people across our regions. Clinicians, laboratory staff, researchers and our patients are working together to investigate improvements in how we diagnose many conditions including bowel cancer, harnessing RNA sequencing to help diagnose diseases when existing lab tests do not give us an explanation and exploring how to detect and treat cancers at an earlier stage.

Genomics offers an opportunity to find out so much more about how to care for our bodies - and provides much optimism for better treatments and outcomes for our patients in the future."



Dr. Michael Wright, Consultant  
Clinical Geneticist at Life, Joint  
Medical Director of Newcastle  
Hospitals and Medical Director  
of the North East and Yorkshire  
Genomic Medicine Service



# Trustees

A big thank you to our Board of Trustees, who give their time and expertise to help Life achieve its mission.

For information on Life's Non-Executive Directors, [visit our website](#).



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## FOND FAREWELL

**Frank Nicholson (left) and Andy James** stepped down from Life's commercial company in August after many years of outstanding dedication and commitment.





Keep up to date with everything happening at Life  
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International Centre for Life, Times Square, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 4EP  
**Telephone: 0191 243 8210 Email: [info@life.org.uk](mailto:info@life.org.uk) Website: [life.org.uk](http://life.org.uk)**