

'E=mc² Online' – Responsible and Responsive Award 2022 Winner

We caught up with David Jones, Community Liaison Manager at the International Centre for Life in Newcastle which won the Responsible and Responsive Award in 2022 for its project, 'E=mc² Online'.

The International Centre for Life (Life) is a thriving science hub in the heart of Newcastle upon Tyne. The National Health Service and Newcastle University are key partners onsite and the ground-breaking research and patient treatment that take place here have led to international recognition. It's a place where researchers, clinicians, science communicators and educators work side-by-side on one site, sharing expertise and ideas and creating a unique circle of science.

Life Science Centre is at the heart of this circle and David and his colleagues made a series of homemade videos of experiments that could be replicated by young autistic people in their homes during the first Covid-19 lockdown – he told us about what winning the award has meant for him and his institution, more about this innovative project and about how the International Centre for Life continues to strive to be as accessible as possible.

You can nominate or apply for the Responsible and Responsive Award 2023 [here](#), or if you'd like to nominate an individual for a lifetime achievement award in science engagement, you can nominate them for the Beacon of the Year Award 2023 [here](#).



David Jones and members of the community at Life in Newcastle

The International Centre for Life was awarded the Responsible and Responsive Award in 2022 because of the way that 'E=mc² Online' responded in a creative and inspiring way to the challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic – can you tell us about what winning the award has meant for you and the International Centre for Life?

For me, one of the biggest impacts of winning the award is that it's opened the door to a bigger conversation with other people and organisations. Through raising awareness of our story,

hopefully we can help effect change as well as continuing to learn. Like the project itself, it's an ongoing journey rooted in partnership.

The award has led to a lot of media interest, locally and nationally and internationally. Each time the story appears, it has a ripple effect. For example, the BBC, sparked by news of the award, visited Life soon after the conference. They interviewed me, our chief executive Linda Conlon and Kerrie Highcock and Zoe from the North East Autism Society. What started as a short segment for local television, was then shared nationally and eventually globally on BBC News 24. As well as being great exposure for Life and a boost for the team, it provided a brilliant platform for the young people to talk about their experience and the impact of the project on them, in their own words.

Can you tell us about the project that won the Responsible and Responsive Award 2022 for the International Centre for Life, 'E=mc² Online'? How did it start and how did it evolve?

Long before the pandemic, we'd been working with young autistic people and their families as part of our wider community engagement programme. The group came up with the name - it was inspired by the concept of 'equality matters and we care.' The sessions were very much about instilling confidence in the young people and encouraging them to share their experiences in a safe and supportive space. Right from the start we made it clear that we didn't have all the answers. This was about learning and making changes together.

The start of the Covid pandemic was particularly hard for autistic people because they lost the structure and regularity which is so important for them. After talking to Kerrie from the North East Autism Society, we decided to start an online Friday catch-up with the group so they could see their friends on a regular basis. The group quickly became comfortable with these sessions and soon after, one of the parents set up a Facebook group and invited me and Kerrie to be part of it. We were both really touched and as a 'thank you', I made a short video with a science fact to share with the group. Their response was so enthusiastic that we just kept going and we started to produce more and more science-based videos. We focused on things that the young people could try themselves at home, for instance, creating and floating a boat made from tinfoil and seeing how many coins it could take before it sank.

Kerrie then started to share the videos on North East Autism's closed family network with over 2000 people and the momentum continue to grow. At this point we started to involve the wider Life team, particularly our science explainers. The videos were so popular that North East



Making a catapult at home: Top Left: Danny Stones. Top Right: David Jones. Bottom: Kerrie Highcock

Autism Society decided to share them with a Facebook group that had over 12,000 followers. Gradually a low-budget project became this thing that was having a huge reach. We covered a

huge range of topics. At one point, I even got out my bagpipes to share the science of sound and to encourage the group to make their own instruments with straws.

Accessibility – especially for young autistic people– is clearly very important at the International Centre for Life. Could you tell us a bit more about how that impacts your way of working and what you’ve learned about making your science centre more accessible during your time there?

Making Life more accessible has been a long journey and one that’s still ongoing. We’ve made it our goal to work with the community to improve our space and to let them influence our understanding about the way we operate.

The young people we work with have helped us to create a range of materials including a [‘visual story’](#) – a downloadable photographic explanation of the centre which can prepare them for their visit. Removing uncertainty in everyday situations can make the visit less stressful and therefore more enjoyable. We’ve made some physical changes to the building too. For example, we changed the finishes on the floors in parts of the building. This was as a direct response to feedback from our autistic visitors, who pointed out that the noise of chairs and tables being



moved across the old surfaces was incredibly jarring. A relatively simple adjustment has had a really positive impact on not just autistic visitors, but all visitors.

Another new initiative that’s been warmly received by the neurodiverse community is our Relaxed Sunday Sessions. These regular events provide dedicated quiet time for anyone to access and enjoy the science centre, including autistic people and those with other sensory needs. Lighting and sound levels are altered and we provide sensory bags which include things like fidget toys to help make autistic people feel more at ease.

After one session, Joella (a member of the original group who visited Life pre-Covid) suggested that we

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make a change to the sensory bag, including adding images of the contents to the information sheet that accompanies the bag. We took on board her comments and she was delighted to see the change - and was very vocal about it. This was a girl who literally would not speak when she first visited us. It’s been amazing to be part of a journey which has, in the truest sense, given her a voice.

Is there anything you’d like to share about what’s currently happening at the International Centre for Life?

We’re currently making exciting changes to the centre and bringing in new exhibitions. It’s brilliant to see the team putting into practice everything that they’ve learned during training and through their ongoing experience.

I’m really proud that the people who work here have the confidence to make changes in response to the people who visit. This open-minded approach builds confidence in the team and also underlines to our audience that we are committed to change; which in turn builds trust and



encourages them to share their views. They know we will listen. We have come a long way in the past five years and I am excited and proud to be part of this ongoing journey.

It's great to see that you're taking part in a preconference session and two conference sessions at the Ecsite Conference 2023 in Malta – could you tell us a bit about that?

I'm really looking forward to the conference because last year was superb. I learned loads – every session I went to was insightful and inspiring. I'm part of the DiverSci Group so I'm collaborating with colleagues from across Europe on a regular basis to help push forward the equality and diversity agenda across the sector.

This year I'm involved in the preconference session which will provide lots of tools on how to improve accessibility for everyone. In addition, I'm facilitating two neurodiverse sessions. It's fantastic to have the chance to work with colleagues from all around the world and to come together and collaborate internationally on issues that I'm so passionate about.

Thanks again for speaking to us today David – congratulations again to you and everyone at the Centre for Life! We look forward to seeing you in Malta in June!

You can learn more about the DiverSci group on [their website](#), access tools and resources they've created and find out about their upcoming events.



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