

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT SELECT COMMITTEE



MARKING THE MILLENNIUM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Government Response
to the Eighth Report from the
Culture, Media and Sport Committee
Session 1999–2000

*Presented to Parliament by the
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
by Command of Her Majesty
October 2000*

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MARKING THE MILLENNIUM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE EIGHTH REPORT FROM THE CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE, SESSION 1999-2000

1. The Government welcomes the Committee's report and its continued support for the Millennium Experience at Greenwich. The Government has given careful consideration to the report's conclusions and recommendations. Where the Committee has made specific recommendations, the Government's response is outlined below. The response has been prepared by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) but includes contributions, as appropriate, from the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), the Millennium Commission and the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).

Whilst the Government recognises that the Committee has not had opportunity to investigate or comment upon the events over the summer we have endeavoured, where possible, to reflect these issues in our response.

- (ii) We consider the sharing of best practice to have been beneficial both to the capital projects and to the Millennium Commission. We recommend that the Government consider ways to ensure that the increased expertise in project management that has resulted is not dissipated when the Millennium Commission concludes its work (paragraph 18).**

The National Lottery distribution bodies meet regularly through a number of fora to exchange information on their experiences. There is also a more informal exchange of ideas and views on best practice on a day-to-day basis between their staff.

In addition, each of the distributors undertakes work which is of benefit to the others. The Millennium Commission, for example, is undertaking an Economic Impact Assessment to examine the economic effects which its grants have had around the United Kingdom. The other distributors will be able to learn from the results of this and it will also inform any similar research which they themselves might undertake. The Millennium Commission is also producing a report on the issues surrounding the operational viability of projects which will be circulated to other distributors.

- (iii) There was clearly a demand for regeneration in many of the areas of the country that received funding for a major project and there have been regeneration benefits in the case of some projects. However, it is too early to tell whether all the major projects will prove to be as effective as hoped in both meeting local need and in serving as effective catalysts for regeneration. We welcome the Millennium Commission's decision to commission a study into the economic impact of its major capital projects. We recommend that in due course that examination should be expanded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to consider the wider need for and regenerative and employment impact of cultural and sporting capital projects (paragraph 21).**

DCMS has been developing with Lottery distributors a programme to add to the evaluative work which distributors are already carrying out. The DCMS evaluation involves putting into place a mechanism to track the long-term impact of the Lottery. Common quantitative indicators have been agreed by distributors to measure economic impact. DCMS will also commission a study to identify the most effective methodology for measuring social impact and as part of this will consider the Social Impact Study which the Millennium Commission has produced in relation to its Awards Scheme.

The Millennium Commission's own Economic Impact Assessment, covering its capital projects, Millennium Awards and Festivals, and linking with similar work being undertaken on the Millennium Experience, is now under way and the final report is due early next year. It will produce a robust and high-quality examination of the economic impact of the Commission's grant programmes across the UK. This will not be an evaluation of grant programmes, but rather a wider ranging survey of what the Commission's expenditure has done to the UK economy at local, regional, and national level. There is already some evidence that Commission's projects are having regenerative effects and the EIA will allow the Commission to evaluate these more accurately.

- (iv) The Secretary of State may be right in expecting demand for visitor attractions to increase in future, but the supply of visitor attractions is increasing more rapidly. This is having and will have consequences for existing visitor attractions that have not benefited from Lottery support; those consequences do not appear to have been systematically considered by the Millennium Commission or government, past or present. It will also have consequences for the long-term future of the projects themselves (paragraph 28).**

The Millennium Commission has supported projects which aim to boost overall tourism and the economy. It concentrated on new kinds of projects, such as science centres, which often did not previously exist. It has also funded attractions away from the usual tourist honeypots and therefore many of its projects are not competing directly with other established attractions. Only about 25% of the Millennium Commission's capital projects include charging attractions.

Millennium projects have extended cultural provision in the UK and provided increased choice for the public. Healthy competition benefits consumers and ensures that the quality of the attractions market will continue to improve. The Commission examined applicants' business cases, including their projections for likely visitor numbers, before awarding grants. It has also introduced a programme of Business Operational Reviews to take place during construction and business plans are, therefore, now reviewed three times before projects open.

The strategic plans which the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport now requires distributors to draw up help ensure that Lottery funding is properly targeted and that projects complement existing attractions rather than compete with them. Competing attractions are taken into account by distributors when assessing bids.

Potential applicants have to demonstrate that they have a viable business plan and that they can manage commercially. Distributors have rigorous procedures for assessing and monitoring projects, and continue to improve the ways in which they evaluate and ensure the long-term viability of Lottery projects.

DCMS recently considered the impact of new Lottery-funded attractions at a National Forum of its NDPBs. It was agreed that there was a need for better coordination of the work of public bodies who invest in the attractions sector; for greater expertise and better advice to help inform investment decisions; and for better information on the state of the attractions sector. DCMS will set up a standing forum to discuss regularly issues of common concern and share best practice.

DCMS will also explore the feasibility of building a reliable and comprehensive database of arts, sport and cultural and leisure facilities, including Lottery funded attractions under development, and of developing methodologies for analysing visitor attractions data to meet policy and operational needs.

- (v) We received suggestions that the Commission's life might be extended or a successor body put in place to provide continuing support for capital projects or to fund comparable projects such as science centres, which might not be funded by other Lottery distributing bodies. We do not consider that to be an appropriate course of action. However, we recommend that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport set out in its response to this Report its strategy for responding to demands for additional funding by the Millennium Commission's capital projects after the Commission's resources from the National Lottery have been spent and the Commission has been wound up (paragraph 30).**

The Millennium Commission currently considers any application for additional funding from one of its projects against a number of agreed criteria and with consideration of the total funding available to it. In the case of its capital projects, the Commission's grants are to provide for the creation of assets, not their revenue costs, although it does carry out a number of reviews at different stages in projects' development and construction to ensure that they will have sufficient income to operate viably. The Commission expects all of its capital projects to be completed before it is wound up. However, both the Government and the Millennium Commission recognise that the capital projects represent a very significant investment; that some may need additional capital funding to secure their future; and that an appropriate mechanism may be required for providing that funding.

- (vi) **The Company's unusual hybrid structure led to the absence of a clear line of responsibility for overseeing the project (paragraph 39).**
- (vii) **From the start, in 1996 the separation between politicians and what became NMEC was never clearly established by either Government, which affected perceptions of the Millennium Dome as a visitor attraction. It has also meant that we have found it exceptionally difficult to disentangle the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the Millennium Experience. This may perhaps have been one of the intentions of those involved, but it must also be acknowledged that political involvement was integral to the project from its very inception (paragraph 43).**

The Millennium Experience was a unique project. Under the previous administration, private sector options for a Millennium Exhibition were tested to destruction. A decision was therefore made to take the project within the public sector, but with the flexibility of a Private Sector company to organise and run the attraction, A structure was developed which consisted of a private sector company, bound by company law, which could recruit the right people with the vision and expertise of operating a large scale visitor attraction, with a Minister of the Crown holding the share in order to provide parliamentary accountability.

The Government does however recognise that the political issues surrounding the project has hampered its progress, and had an alternative structure to deliver an Exhibition been possible at the outset, there may have been a different outcome. The Government admits that it does not have the necessary expertise to run large scale visitor attractions.

- (viii) **With the benefit of hindsight it is evident to some of those involved and to this Committee that the project lacked enough involvement by those with sufficient experience of commercial visitor attractions. The evidence that we received in November 1997 from Mr Keith Bales was far-sighted and demonstrated that the weakness was foreseen and therefore foreseeable. In spite of constant reassurances both from Ministers and the Board themselves that they were safely in control of the project and suitably qualified to run the project successfully, the Board of NMEC failed to recognise that different skills were required for the construction and operational phases of the project and to plan ahead to ensure a smooth transition between these phases. For too long, the Dome was perceived as a public monument more than a visitor attraction, but it was the latter element that would ultimately determine its success or failure (paragraph 51).**

As the Committee recognises, there are a number of issues on the Dome project that with the benefit of hindsight, might have been handled differently. In terms of experience of commercial visitor attractions, the Board recognised the need for specific experience and expertise at the very beginning of the year. The board appointed M. P-Y Gerbeau – who had excellent experience, gained during his ten years at Disneyland Paris – as Chief Executive in February 2000. M. Gerbeau made changes to and strengthened the operational team after his arrival. In terms of the Dome as a visitor attraction product, during the content development phases the Company involved a number of eminent and qualified individuals, with experience in the visitor attraction industry, the media, design and specific subject areas being addressed in the exhibits, to advise and assist the process. These individuals contributed both as members of the Strategic Creative Review Group set up in December 1997 and as “Godparents” to individual exhibits. In approaching the development of the Dome’s content in this way it needs to be borne in mind that the Company was not seeking to replicate a theme park; or an expo; or a trade exhibition; it was seeking to be innovative and creative.

- (ix) **The Millennium Dome was from its inception a high-risk project. However, it is now apparent that the urgency of ensuring the completion of the building of the Dome on time led to an as yet unquantifiable overspend and subsequent severe financial problems (paragraph 54).**

The Government and the Millennium Commission have always recognised that the Millennium Dome was a unique and high risk project and were aware of the potential difficulties which that implied. When financial overspends were identified earlier this year, the Millennium Commission insisted on compensating cost savings being found. The National Audit Office report on the funding of the Dome which is due to be published in early November will address the background to the Dome’s financial problems in detail.

- (xi) The fact that the Jubilee Line Extension opened only just in time is a demonstration of the validity of our concerns about transport. Furthermore, the obduracy of London Transport until very late in the day in rejecting our proposals for a scheduled bus route was unjustified. We are concerned that even now visitor numbers may be affected adversely by London Transport's failure to direct visitors adequately to the Dome from its stations (paragraph 59).**

The delays to the opening of the Jubilee Line Extension (JLE) were of concern to all parties involved in the Dome and its vital transport infrastructure. The JLE reliability record has improved considerably over the course of the year with statistics indicating that the JLE remains the preferred final mode of transport for the majority of Dome visitors. Buses serving the area surrounding the North Greenwich Interchange, including the Millennium transit M1 and M2 routes serving Charlton and Woolwich, are also well used by both visitors and local residents.

NMEC is very satisfied with the support given by London Transport staff at all levels since the opening of the Dome. Operational staff at North Greenwich, in particular, continue to work closely with NMEC admission line staff to meet visitor needs. London Transport has worked hard to ensure that its staff are briefed to deal with Dome-related questions from members of the public, producing its own guide to staff detailing procedures in the event of disruption to the JLE service. The LT leaflet "How to get to the Dome by public transport" is available from most underground stations and the Dome "wayfinder" sign, installed at key stations, gives further directional advice for visitors.

- (xii) During all of our previous inquiries on the subject, NMEC repeated the mantra that the project was "on time and on budget". The first part of that claim has proved justified; the second is more open to question (paragraph 60).**

The definitive final cost of the project awaits completion of the final accounts and of the necessary processes to achieve solvent liquidation of the Company. At this stage, in terms of the overall project life-time budget it is likely that the original cash limit of £758 million will be exceeded by approximately 5%. This is being addressed in the National Audit Office Report, which will be published in early November. At the time of the earlier enquiries, the Dome had not been open to the public and full and final accounts for some of the major construction and fit out contracts were undergoing the normal process of resolution. Nevertheless, the judgement of the Company – prior to January 2000 was that the project at that stage was on time and on budget.

- (xiii) The Comptroller and Auditor General has already agreed that the National Audit Office will undertake a full audit of the circumstances surrounding the most recent grant made to NMEC. We recommend that he should broaden that enquiry to look at the Dome's accounts to date, in their entirety, in preparation for a full examination of those accounts by the Committee of Public Accounts (paragraph 66).**

The National Audit Office report on the additional grant to the New Millennium Experience Company is due to be published in early November. The accounting officers of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the New Millennium Experience Company, and the Millennium Commission are due to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts in November. The subject and timing of any further inquiry into the Millennium Dome is a matter for the NAO.

- (xiv) A balanced assessment of the Dome as a public project should give due weight to the growing signs of its success as a regeneration project, particularly as that regeneration potential of the project was from the outset of crucial importance in the selection of the site and organisation of the project (paragraph 71).**

The Government and the Millennium Commission are grateful for the Committee's recognition of the success of the Dome in regenerating the Greenwich Peninsula. This was the primary reason for the selection of Greenwich as the site for the Millennium Experience. Indeed, the then Secretary of State for National Heritage and Chairman of the Commission, the Rt. Hon. Virginia Bottomley JP MP, said at the time that "the decontamination and regeneration of the 300 acre Greenwich Peninsula – the largest single derelict site in Southern England, just six miles from Westminster – will be one of the great legacies of the event". There is strong evidence that were it not for the Dome, the pace of development in the recent and forthcoming few years would not have been approached and that the high quality of sustainable development now being achieved on the wider peninsula would not have been realised.

Two sources of independently-produced research evidence; the DETR-commissioned “Greenwich Peninsula Developments; Baseline and Interim Evaluation” (published February 2000) and the NMEC/LB Greenwich/English Partnerships commissioned “Employment Benefits of Greenwich Peninsula Developments” (forthcoming) already indicate that the Dome is a vital contributor to the development of the Greenwich Peninsula and has led to considerable regeneration benefits in Greenwich and the wider Thames Gateway. The Dome and other Peninsula developments have acted as a catalyst for comprehensive regeneration; providing a far greater focus and pace for development of the area. The galvanising effect of the decision to locate the Millennium Experience on the Peninsula in 1996 prompted much of the regeneration activity that swiftly followed. The “Year 2000” deadline instilled a focus and timescale which drove activities in North Greenwich forward on a wider scale than just the Peninsula itself.

Surveys from the DETR research show that Greenwich residents and businesses are positive about the improved public profile given to the area by Peninsula developments and their potential employment effects over the longer term. Between 1999-2010, the NMEC/LB Greenwich/ English Partnerships research estimated that over 19,000 construction and operational jobs will be created on the Peninsula and that significant percentages of these will be taken up by Greenwich and other Thames Gateway residents (9% of construction jobs estimated to go to Greenwich residents, with a further 21% to other Thames Gateway residents. 40% of operational jobs are estimated to go to Greenwich residents and a further 16% to Thames Gateway).

The DETR plans to commission follow-on work from the Baseline and Interim Evaluation to monitor the regeneration effects of the Greenwich Peninsula developments. The results of this exercise are expected to be available late 2001.

- (xv) We have observed the pleasure that the Dome’s contents give children. However, it must be recognised that some of the original ambitions for the Dome’s contents have not been realised. Taken as a whole, the Dome’s content is interesting and rewarding, but rarely inspiring. The content lacks a sense of cohesion; it is more of a patchwork. There is no single element to make the visitor gasp in astonishment – to provide the “wow” factor that was originally sought (paragraph 82).**

The Millennium Dome remains the most popular pay-to-visit attraction in the UK. By the end of September 4.7 million people (in total) had visited the Dome. The results of the latest MORI survey (undertaken between 17 August and 20 September, involving over 1,000 face to face interviews with visitors to the Dome) are especially encouraging. These satisfaction ratings are among the industry’s highest.

- 88% of visitors satisfied with their day at the Dome;
- 79% would recommend a day at the Dome;
- 73% thought it good value for money;
- 68% thought it something Britain should be proud of; and
- 94% enjoyed the Millennium show.

The incredibly positive and enthusiastic reception among audiences of the Millennium Show would suggest that the Dome does indeed have a “wow” factor.

- (xvi) We were impressed by the performance of Paisley’s Our Town Story and the energy and enthusiasm that the Our Town Story had fired in all those involved. This Committee continues that support for the Our Town Story initiative first stated in *Not Only the Dome* and has been impressed by the number of children who have had the opportunity to perform in the Dome (paragraph 84).**

The Millennium Commission's grant for the Millennium Experience specified that there should be a national exhibition and an associated nation-wide programme of events and activities. The Government joins the Committee in agreeing that Our Town Story is a strong element of the national programme which has involved many thousands of children from all over the UK.

The Our Town Story initiative, which is part of the McDonald's sponsorship arrangement, is one of the 12 national programmes developed and implemented by NMEC and the Dome's sponsors. Taken together the Programme is probably one of the largest country-wide programmes ever mounted involving direct participation of thousands of children and members of their communities. The 11 other initiatives are Children's Promise (Marks & Spencer) through which over £19 million has been raised for children's charities; Voices of Promise (Marks & Spencer); Citizens Connection (Camelot); Tesco Schoolnet2000; Reach for the Sky (BskyB); Engineering our Future (BAE SYSTEMS); Millennium Youth Games (BAA); Millennium Skills Festival (Manpower); Future Talk (BT); the Millennium Festival in partnership with the Lottery distributors; and We're in Business (City of London).

In particular every local education authority and library board in the UK has participated in Our Town Story. In addition there have been several "national" Our Town Story days including Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and Jersey. In total, up to 4 October, there had been 153 performances on the Our Town Stage in the Dome involving 16,500 participants of which 15,300 were performers. There are 67 further performances booked to the end of the year and these will involve a further 6-7,000 participants.

- (xvii) We still do not know who decided the various visitor forecast figures, who changed them or why. However, ultimate responsibility must lie with the Board of NMEC and successive shareholders. The fluctuations in the visitor forecasts from more than 15 million to 10 million, up to 12 million and back down to 10 and finally 6 million seems to have been made without proper regard to the immense financial implications those changes entailed. It appears that NMEC, the Millennium Commission and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport accepted the over-optimistic opinion polls without considering the underlying assumptions or exploring a new methodology on which to base those crucial figures (paragraph 95).**

The Millennium Commission received advice from specialist consultants on visitor attractions in June 1997. Deloitte Consulting advised that the target of 12m visitors set out in the New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) Business Plan was achievable. They said that 8m was a worst case scenario. Estimates from a number of other sources suggested that 12 million visitors was achievable. The Commission therefore decided to support NMEC's Business Plan in June 1997 although it recognised that there were risks associated with going forward with this unique project. Subsequent reductions in forecast visitor numbers reflected the reality of visitor numbers.

- (xviii) NMEC is confident that it will not have to return to the Millennium Commission for more funds. However, there are no guarantees, and therefore if the current business plan does not balance and insolvency becomes a prospect then the taxpayer may face a bill larger than the cost of the Millennium Commission making further grants from the National Lottery (paragraph 101).**
- (xix) There is still a lack of clarity as to how much of the Lottery money so far received by NMEC is a loan and how much grant. Originally the total sum was to be £538 million but that has been revised to £525 million. Just how much will be repaid? (paragraph 102).**

As the Committee will know, further grants have been made to the Dome since the publication of their report. However, the position now, as then, is that all funds awarded to the Dome are grants. The Commission cannot make loans as it has no statutory powers to do so. Any grant made to NMEC will be repayable from any operational surplus or asset disposal achieved after the organisation has met its other contractual liabilities. However, this does not constitute a loan as there is no guarantee of

repayment or certainty of the amount which might be repaid to the Commission. The figures given to the Select Committee have been overtaken by the subsequent events.

As a consequence of the Company's application for an additional £53m grant in August (the then expected allocation to NMEC of the sale of the Dome to Dome Europe), and the Commission's subsequent decision to provide £43 million, the Board of NMEC initiated further actions which included the commissioning of an investigative report by PricewaterhouseCoopers. The PWC report has been made available to the NAO and was placed in the Libraries of the House on 2 October. The report estimated that on top of the £43 million, further funding would be required in order that the Millennium Experience project could run to the end of the year and to ensure an orderly wind-down of the Company. The Millennium Commission therefore agreed in early September to provide a further £47 million grant. However, the NMEC Board considered that this would be enough for a solvent solution. The review also estimated that to close in advance of 31 December could cost more: a further £30-£65 million. The Government is currently considering the best process and vehicle to deal with any residual and contingent liabilities. This Government and the previous administration gave written guarantees that the funding of the Millennium Experience would not have an adverse impact on the Millennium Commission's programme and that its life would be extended should that be necessary.

(xx) The Company did not place a sufficient emphasis on marketing before the Dome opened and was unduly reliant on free coverage in the press. That approach proved to be disastrous when the press coverage became largely hostile (paragraph 107).

The marketing strategy was underpinned by a number of assumptions including the significance people would attach to the millennium, the amount of free publicity the Dome would receive by virtue of its status as the centrepiece of the UK's millennium celebrations, word of mouth by visitors and the previous experience of other short-life events in terms of uplift in visitor numbers in the final phase. On the basis of these assumptions the strategy front loaded much of the marketing activity and expenditure – for example the high profile campaign in September 1999 to launch the ticket sales to the public ran for 8 weeks and incorporated TV, radio, press and poster activity, and the subsequent TV, radio and press campaign in January 2000.

By that stage the project was subject to an unprecedented level of negative media coverage and NMEC's media buying agency has estimated that for every £1 the Company spent on marketing and advertising in the first quarter, there was hostile editorial equating to three times that amount.

Whilst the Company has accepted the original business plan assumptions were wrong, including those underpinning the marketing strategy, it is difficult to argue that the outcome would have been drastically different even if the assumptions and budget had been different in the light of the ongoing negative media coverage.

Nevertheless, as the results of the latest MORI survey (see xv) demonstrate, the vast majority of the 4.7 million people who have visited the Dome have very positive views their experience.

(xxi) Mr Smith's statement that NMEC's 1999 Annual Report contained a "reasonable stab" at the Company's expected income from the Dome's sale is an unusual way of describing a business plan which has had to be rewritten so many times (paragraph 115).

The Secretary of State's reference to "a reasonable stab" related specifically to the original estimate of the scrap value of the Dome which NMEC made in May 1997, prior to the launch of the Competition to find a sustainable use for the Dome in March 1999. In December 1999 the Company revised its estimate from £15 million to £30 million, taking into account the Government's commitment to find a sustainable long term use for the Dome. A £30 million receipt from the legacy competition was considered reasonable in the light of indicative numbers from bidders at that stage of the Competition.

As is commercially prudent, the NMEC board has kept its business plan under constant review. The Millennium Commission has undertaken an independent analysis of each plan,

(xxii) We regard it as essential that English Partnerships will be beneficiaries of the sale of the Dome to the extent originally envisaged (paragraph 117).

Any decision on the division of proceeds from any future sale of the Dome will be made having regard to the way in which the bid is structured and the land which is required and the need to ensure that the Lottery investment in Greenwich and English Partnership's contribution is recognised.

(xxiii) The Dome's future has been a fundamental issue since our first inquiry. The permanence of that future has been held up as a justification for the entire project. The timing of the announcement of the decision has rendered it impossible for this Committee to give full consideration to the implications of that decision in this Report. We consider it imperative, however, that the following four issues should be clarified:

- **the overall level of the payment by the successful bidder and the timetable for payment.**
- **the division of proceeds from the sale and the rationale for that division.**
- **any circumstances relating to the Government share of ongoing revenue and how such revenue would be determined and who would benefit from it.**
- **any conditions attached to the disposal of the Dome and the related site that will guarantee the preservation of the Dome at Greenwich as an enduring symbol of the United Kingdom at the turn of the Millennium (paragraph 118).**

This recommendation has been overtaken by the withdrawal of Nomura from the Competition, but the Government remains committed to ensuring a long term future for the Millennium Dome. The Government has been having discussions with Legacy plc, the remaining bidder from the final shortlist of two, and hopes to be in a position to offer Legacy a period of exclusivity in order to agree terms for exchange of contracts. However, agreement has not yet been secured and the Government has asked English Partnerships to undertake a review of options for the Millennium Experience site.

In view of the current circumstances, particularly the ongoing negotiations with Legacy plc, the Government is not in a position to provide the information requested at the time of going to print. The Government will however, keep the Committee fully informed of developments.

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