

**MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY FIRST MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2024 AT 11.15 AM IN THE PLANETARIUM BOARDROOM**

Present: Mr J Briggs (Chair), Mr G Cox, Professor M Darnley\*, Revd Canon M Hagan, Mr P Kennedy, Professor M Mathioudakis\*, Ms G McVeigh, Mr R O'Hara, Mr E Rooney and Mr R Wilson  
\* via Zoom

In Attendance: Professor M Burton (Director), Mrs C Corvan (Head of Corporate Services), Dr M Sarzi (Head of Research), Mr L Knox (Head of Finance and Income Generation), Mrs S Mackle (Education and Outreach Manager), Mrs M Glass (Operations Manager) and Mrs L Brown (Corporate Manager)

Observers (via Zoom): Ms S Leverment, Chief Executive, Association for Science and Discovery Centres and Professor G Cotter, Department of Physics, University of Oxford

Apologies: Professor C Jackman and Dr K Lemon

The meeting, which had been due to commence at 11.00 am, did not do so until 11.15 am.

**1. APOLOGIES**

- 1.1 Apologies were received as outlined above, noting that Dr Lemon may be able to join during the meeting.

**2. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED**

*AOP Officers and the two Observers joined the meeting at 11.20 am.*

**3. WELCOME**

- 3.1 The Chair welcomed Ms Shaaron Leverment, Chief Executive, Association for Science and Discovery Centres and Professor Garret Cotter, Department of Physics, University of Oxford as Observers to the meeting noting that both would become members of the Management Committee the following day. He thanked them for agreeing to the co-option process and welcomed their experience and knowledge on the AOP Management Committee. He advised that the next formal meeting of the Management Committee was Monday 19 December and he looked forward to their participation in that and perhaps in Committees as AOP entered into a redevelopment phase, a very critical and important time for the Observatory and Planetarium.

**4. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

- 4.1 The Chair reminded members and officers of the need to declare any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest associated with any item on the Agenda, either now or at the relevant point during the meeting.

- 4.2 Ms McVeigh advised that she had been appointed to the Board of the NI Transport Holding Company from 1 October 2024.
- 4.3 Mr Wilson declared interests as Chief Executive of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and a member of the Board of Governors of the Royal School.

## **5. MINUTES OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 24 JUNE 2024**

- 5.1 On the proposal of Mr Kennedy, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the meeting of 24 June 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

## **6. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

- 6.1 There were seven actions arising from previous meetings, five of which it was proposed to close. A number of these would be picked up on later in the meeting.
- 6.2 There were no further matters raised.

## **7. CHAIR'S BUSINESS**

- 7.1 The minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Strategic Oversight Committee (SOC) held on 24 June were noted.
- 7.2 The Chair referred to the revised Committee Structure proposals that had previously been circulated and an email he had issued, emphasising that 'Form Follows Function'. He explained that AOP was at a critical stage in terms of its redevelopment and referred to the funding offer from Heritage Lottery, with decisions on match-funding from DfC and a funding application with PEACEPLUS awaited and the need to create a more agile committee structure and to make better use of the time on the day of Management Committee meetings. Discussions had been ongoing over the summer and at the first SOC meeting it had become clear that there was enthusiasm among members to play an increased role. He had also had further meetings with Eileen Mullan.
- 7.3 The Chair briefly elaborated on the Committee Structure Proposals and the rationale for the changes. He proposed that the SOC, Chaired by Mr O'Hara, comprise the Management Committee and Committee Chairs; Mr Cox representing the Board of Governors; Mr Wilson from the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Professor Burton. The new Head of Strategic Planning, Mrs Corvan would prepare and present reports to the Committee.

*Professor Mathioudakis joined the meeting at 11.29 am.*

- 7.4 Mrs Corvan's report would be presented to the Management Committee at its quarterly meeting ensuring that all Management Committee members were kept fully involved.
- 7.5 To address time constraints it was proposed that ARAC and SPRC meet at least 2 weeks prior to the date of the Management Committee meeting with a written Chair's report being brought to the Management Committee rather than a verbal report. In-person attendance for the Management Committee was encouraged and this would be preceded by a networking session with all staff at 10.00 am. Presentations that normally took place during Management Committee meetings would be made during this session. The Director's report would also be delivered at this time and to everyone within the organisation to address issues where staff might feel overlooked.

- 7.6 The Management Committee formal business would commence at 11.00 am, the first hour dealing with business issues and the second hour for the redevelopment report and strategic matters.
- 7.7 The impact of the changes would require additional commitment from some members; increased engagement between staff and members; and members being involved in increased networking and influencing with external stakeholders within a project plan co-ordinated by Mrs Corvan. The Chair sought feedback from Members.
- 7.8 Mr Kennedy welcomed the proposal of holding ARAC and SPRC on a different day from the Management Committee. Mr Cox sought the views of the Management Team on the approach and each in turn expressed their support for the proposals. In so doing additional comments made were that it may not work and may need to be reviewed; it necessitated some additional resources to assist with the organisation of the proposal and review of the time of year for the 2-day meeting would be welcomed.
- 7.9 The Chair and Officers responded to queries from Members during which it was noted that the SOC minutes would be available to all Management Committee members; any member could attend any meeting as an observer; strong governance was important in ensuring AOP maintained the confidence of the Department; the changes had been designed to recognise the need for agility and the need for a smaller Committee and equally that all Management Committee members wanted to be involved and engaged; the Management Committee would retain its responsibility for strategy and the SOC would bring the strategy through into implementation, project and tasks; the changes would be kept under review and further changes would be made if required; Terms of Reference for the SOC were being developed; reviewing administration arrangements i.e. detail of minutes/report and delegation to Sub-Committees would be considered and that the Director's Report would remain as an agenda item and business issues or questions that would not be appropriate for discussion in the open forum would be addressed then.
- 7.10 Professor Burton pointed out that the Director would be a member of the SOC and would not be reporting to it. The Committee needed to have frank discussions in a way that could not happen at the Management Committee since he was reporting to it.
- 7.11 There being no dissent the new proposals were deemed to be approved for immediate implementation.
- 7.12 The Chair referred to the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 which had recently been published for consultation. Mrs Corvan advised that she had prepared a summary of the areas where she thought AOP would want to respond. Unfortunately it had not been uploaded with the papers, but would be following the meeting, and so she talked members through it highlighting that it was possible to make an individual response as well as responding on behalf of an organisation and encouraging members to do so.
- 7.13 The PfG identified 3 key areas – Doing What Matters Most Today; Building New Foundations; and Shaping a Better Tomorrow and there were also 3 missions of People, Planet and Prosperity underpinned by a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. Mrs Corvan highlighted the key areas relevant to AOP and how it might respond. She proposed preparing a draft response and circulating for comments and encouraged members to make individual responses also.
- 7.14 The Committee was content for Mrs Corvan to prepare a draft response on behalf of AOP for members' consideration prior to the consultation deadline. **Action MC 30/9/24-01 – Draft PfG response to be circulated for consideration and comment.**

- 7.15 The Chair reported that there was no Boardroom Apprentice programme for 2024/25 due to funding constraints and that he and Dr Lemon had taken part in a video interview measuring the impact of the Boardroom Apprentice. The interview had been contained in the digital summary report circulated.
- 7.16 The Committee was content to continue to support the Boardroom Apprentice programme in future years.
- 7.17 With regards to the Collaborative Understanding project, the Chair reported that work had continued over the summer and the Council was proposing to take forward some action in relation to this matter. Mr Wilson confirmed that the Council was happy to host some sort of engagement event or session and would work with the team at AOP in bringing that forward.
- 7.18 The Chair reported that there had been 5 responses to the annual Management Committee effectiveness checklist, the recently appointed members having not been required to complete the questionnaire. He acknowledged that the questionnaire was cumbersome and unsuitable for smaller organisations. As an alternative to this a facilitated session in a previous year had not worked as well as they would have liked either. He considered that work over the summer and the changes to the Committee Structure and staffing structure were all means by which the Management Committee had considered its effectiveness. Comments and/or suggestions on how the Management Committee could improve assessment of its effectiveness moving forward were welcomed.
- 7.19 In response to a query from Mr Rooney, the Chair confirmed that he considered the exercise to be complete, asked that a summary of the responses prepared by officers be circulated and suggested consideration by SPRC. **Action MC 30/9/24-02 – Effectiveness Review Summary Report to be circulated.**
- 7.20 The Chair reported that induction had taken place with the new DfC appointees on Tuesday 10 September. He thanked them for what had been a very enthusiastic session enjoyed by all in attendance.
- 7.21 Induction for the observers to the meeting in progress would be organised in advance of the December meeting.
- 7.22 The Chair advised that the Inaugural Meeting of the AOI Oversight Board had taken place in the Observatory on Monday 9 September. AOP was represented on the Board by both Archbishops. He reported that it had been a very successful meeting and it was clear that each of the members had taken the time to consider how AOI could develop in the future.

## **8. REPORT FROM DIRECTOR**

- 8.1 Professor Burton's report, which had previously been circulated, had been structured into sections in respect of Corporate; Research; Education and Outreach and History and Heritage activities. Professor Burton took members through his report elaborating on various items.
- 8.2 In terms of Corporate Activities the report provided updates in relation to The Astronomical Observatories of Ireland (AOI) Partnership; AOP Redevelopment Project; Capital Projects; Visa Issues and Infinite and Finite. Attention was drawn to:
- the first meeting of the AOI Oversight Board which had taken place on 9 September;
  - appointment of the next Lindsay PhD scholar;
  - the link to the script for David Gavaghan's speech on 24 June 2024.

- 8.3 The Director drew attention to the visa issues which were severely affecting AOP as outlined in his report and sought Management Committee support for an employee loan scheme for visa and NHS costs as a means of alleviating the problem and would require DfC approval.
- 8.4 Professor Darnley advised that he had first-hand experience of this issue before his institution had had a loan scheme in place whereby a post-doc had been unable to accept a position due to affordability. He pointed out that in addition to visa and NHS costs there was a third hidden aspect as the applicant also needed to show a certain level of finance in their bank account for a certain period of time. He briefly outlined the scheme available through his institution.
- 8.5 Professor Mathioudakis advised that Queen's did not operate a loan scheme, though individual academics might try to help with visa costs by way of a small reimbursement when the PDRA arrived, if there was money available. Queen's had experienced issues whereby at the end of a 3-year contract if there was a further 1-year post many people would be reluctant to apply because of the amount of money involved for a 1-year post. He also advised that some 10-15 years previously there had been a special agreement that enabled non-EU Queen's students to travel to the Republic for 1 or 2 days however he was unsure if this was still in place.
- 8.6 The Chair thanked Professors Darnley and Mathioudakis for their contribution. He acknowledged that the Management Committee would not be able to find a solution but that the Director was seeking its support.
- 8.7 Discussion ensued during which Mr Cox made three points – the need to find an imperfect solution in respect of the offer already made, expressing his support for so doing; the need to frame the issues specific to AOP such as the arrangements with Birr and Dunsink and collaboration with other academic institutions.
- 8.8 Mr Wilson advised that similar issues were being experienced by the Ulster Orchestra with musicians travelling internationally. He pointed out that it was a political issue and suggested recording with politicians the significant impact it was having.
- 8.9 Mrs Corvan advised that it could be noted in the draft response to the Programme for Government and earlier in the day ARAC had agreed to add in a section re Brexit which had previously been removed from the Bi-Annual Assurance Statement. She commented that DIAS had engaged at a political level about its proposed visit to AOP and was unable to find a way forward. In terms of the practicalities of a loan, she referred to the document Managing Public Money in Northern Ireland which AOP was required to adhere to. AOP had engaged with DfC who considered it to be 'novel and contentious'. DfC had raised a number of queries which she reported to the Committee. She pointed out that the issue would not be solved before the person's arrival as it would take months, if ever, to have a Business Case approved.
- 8.10 Mr Knox added that a reimbursement solution was taxable income and would be subject to tax and National Insurance deductions, with Employers' National Insurance contributions adding to the cost.
- 8.11 Mr O'Hara considered the matter to be repercussive and suggested that AOP correspond, via Sponsor Branch having the correspondence directed to the Finance Minister as it was a jurisdiction-wide issue.
- 8.12 The Chair thanked members and acknowledged that the way forward was about finding an imperfect solution and looking towards a longer-term policy, with political and financial involvement.
- 8.13 Mrs Corvan pointed out that DfC was not unsympathetic to the issue.

8.14 The Research Activities covered the Conference Season; Election of Three AOP Presidents to IAU Commissions; Research Strategy; Publication in the Journal Astronomy and Astrophysics and Postdoctoral Positions. The Management Committee:

- noted the conferences at which AOP personnel attended and presented;
- offered congratulations on the election of three AOP Astronomers as IAU Presidents of Commissions:
  - Stefano Bagnulo              Commission B6 Astronomical Photometry and Polarimetry
  - Michael Burton              Commission C4 World Heritage and Astronomy
  - Simon Jeffrey              Commission G5 Stellar and Planetary Atmospheres;
- welcomed the waiver of publications charges for Northern Ireland Institutions if they were subscribers to the Journal Astronomy and Astrophysics (A&A).

8.15 In response to a query from Mr Cox, Dr Sarzi advised that the draft Research Strategy would be further considered by REAC in December and thereafter brought back to the Management Committee.

8.16 Education and Outreach Activities included Summer Visitor Statistics; Visit of NASA Astronaut Cady Coleman; Staff Movements; Engagement with the Royal Irish Academy; Digistar Lite and STFC Legacy Award. The Management Committee noted:

- the summer visitor numbers were lower than those of 2023 and the possible reasons;
- notable events;
- funding had been secured to replace the Digistar Lite;
- support provided by AOP to Mayo Dark Skies Park;
- STFC Legacy Award funding.

8.17 In terms of History and Heritage Activities the Committee noted:

- AOP's involvement with the book '100 Years of Planetaria' to mark the global centenary of the modern planetarium;
- RTE Nationwide's coverage on the AOI and World Heritage aspirations for Heritage Week;
- submission of a funding application for the expertise required to improve the research supporting the UNESCO application;
- extension of the NLHF Wisdom Begins with Wonder Project;
- acquisition of the Ellison Telescope displayed in his booklet 'The Amateur's Telescope'.

8.18 In conclusion Professor Burton remarked that AOP was at a cliff-edge in terms of whether it would receive PEACEPLUS funding and whether the OBC was going to be approved by DfC and as a result a match component to the Heritage Lottery funding. He advised that the organisation's future depended on the outcome of both matters in terms of the direction it would take.

8.19 The Chair concurred with Professor Burton's remarks. He pointed out that their ambition would never change and acknowledged that they would have to reconsider everything. He thanked Professor Burton for his report.

*The meeting adjourned for 2 mins at this juncture during which Mrs Martina Glass joined the meeting.*

## **9. PRESENTATION – 'IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO BECOME AN ASTRONAUT'**

9.1 With the aid of PowerPoint and screen share, Mrs Glass gave a very enthusiastic presentation on the recent inspiring visit by NASA Astronaut Dr Cady Coleman on Thursday 19 September. Invitations to the event had been extended to each of the local secondary schools and had been accepted by the

Royal School; Southern Regional College and the City of Armagh High School. AOP's PhD students had also attended.

- 9.2 Mrs Glass advised that as part of the embassy speaker tour Dr Coleman was visiting Dublin and Mayo and wanted to come to the North. The Embassy had contacted AOP and AOP was delighted to seize the opportunity. The visit had taken place during the time the Planetarium was hosting the UK Galactic Star Commission Conference.
- 9.3 During her visit Dr Coleman had had her photo taken with the Grubb telescope; received an overview of the history and the origins of astronomy at AOP; delivered a talk and held a 10-minute Q&A session and she had also dropped into the UK Galactic Star Formation Conference that was running concurrently.
- 9.4 Mrs Glass played a short video of the visit and shared some of the personal conversations she had had with Dr Coleman, one of which had inspired the presentation title. She also retold some of the anecdotes Dr Coleman had shared during the visit.
- 9.5 The Chair thanked Mrs Glass for recognising, taking the opportunity and organising the visit at very short notice.
- 9.6 Mrs Corvan commented on the value and importance of networking activities and attributed the visit to one such recent event which the US Consul General had attended.
- 9.7 Mr Kennedy said the video delivered a very powerful message.
- 9.8 In conclusion, the Chair commented on the value of presentations and the move to create space before the Management Committee meeting to enable presentations.

*Mrs Glass retired from the meeting at this point.*

## **10. UPDATE FROM THE RESEARCH EDUCATION AND OUTREACH COMMITTEE (REAC)**

- 10.1 As Dr Lemon was not present the matter was deferred until the next meeting.
- 10.2 Dr Sarzi referred to the draft Research Strategy, a copy of which had been included with the papers, and encouraged feedback from Members.

## **11. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED**

## **12. UPDATE FROM THE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE (ARAC)**

- 12.1 Mr Kennedy reported that a pre-meeting, without officers, had taken place with the internal and external auditors and DfC prior to the meeting and that no issues had arisen.
- 12.2 ARAC had considered the summary of the annual ARAC Effectiveness Review. There were 6 essential questions to which some room for improvement had been noted.
- 12.3 The Committee had considered the Human Resource Management Internal Audit which provided satisfactory assurance making two Priority 2 and five Priority 3 recommendations.

- 12.4 There were five outstanding Internal Audit recommendations carried forward from prior years. One relating to the retention and disposal schedule had been passed on by PRONI for Ministerial approval before being laid with the Assembly; two were deemed to be complete and two had not yet reached the implementation date.
- 12.5 In relation to ICT matters, ARAC had considered the ICT Risk Register, which identified 16 risks across 5 risk categories. Of the 16 risks, once treated, 5 remained high, 9 moderate and 2 low. ARAC recommended approval to the Management Committee.
- 12.6 ARAC had considered and discussed the ICT Strategy and following lengthy discussion it had been agreed to defer the paper for further consideration and to bring it back to a future meeting.
- 12.7 The Corporate Risk Register identified 9 risks across 5 risk categories. Of the 9 risks once treated, 5 remained extreme, 1 high and 3 moderate. ARAC recommended approval of the Corporate Risk Register.
- 12.8 The ARAC Chair encouraged all Management Committee members to attend the ½ day Risk Management Workshop on Monday 21 October. This would be an opportunity to ‘zero base’ on the risk appetite; to identify risks and look at the process whereby risks were managed. He pointed out that it was an integral and essential part of Corporate Governance.
- 12.9 ARAC had considered a report regarding a desktop exercise carried out on the Business Continuity Plan relating to a Ransomware attack which provided satisfactory assurance.
- 12.10 The Bi-Annual Assurance Statement had been considered by ARAC and was recommended for approval, subject to the addition of a further section in relation to Brexit and the impact the issue of visas was having as a result of it for AOP.
- 12.11 In terms of external audit, ARAC had considered the draft Report To Those Charged With Governance and was advised of an outstanding issue relating to the pension audit. Once that was completed it was hoped to have the Annual Report and Accounts signed off.
- 12.12 ARAC noted that the Finance Report would be tabled at the meeting in progress.
- 12.13 In respect of policies, ARAC was content to recommend approval of the:
- Policy on Acceptance & Provision of Gifts and Hospitality, which had been amended to reinstate the £50 limit; and
  - Financial Policy and Procedures, which had included a number of changes.
- 12.14 The Management Committee accepted the report from ARAC and approved the ICT Risk Register; Corporate Risk Register; Bi-Annual Assurance Statement, subject to the addition outlined; Draft Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24, subject to the ongoing review in relation to the pensions surplus; Policy on Acceptance & Provision of Gifts and Hospitality and Financial Policy and Procedures.

### **13. UPDATE FROM THE STAFFING POLICY AND REMUNERATION COMMITTEE (SPRC)**

- 13.1 Mr Rooney reported that SPRC had considered the outcome of the review of its effectiveness and of its Terms of Reference, as required by its Terms of Reference, and a minute of that meeting recorded the key points from that discussion. No major issues had been identified in terms of changes to the Terms of Reference or improving effectiveness. Discussions earlier regarding structural changes would be relevant to how SPRC could be improved and made more effective.



- 13.2 SPRC had considered the issue of grading and associated remuneration of posts in applications for research grants. A proposed grading for several posts had been included in a recent grant application which had prompted consideration of having a fair approach to grading and remuneration, whilst remaining competitive, for such situations. SPRC had asked for possible options to be identified for a general approach which was appropriate for the organisation.
- 13.3 In terms of Equality, Inclusion and Diversity, SPRC had noted that the Project Juno accreditation had changed, however, there would continue to be a staff team looking at and developing AOP's approach to equality and diversity. Submission of the Diversity Mark annual progress report had been moved to 31 October.
- 13.4 Unconscious Bias training for Management Committee members was being organised and potential dates would be issued in due course.
- 13.5 Having considered the following matters, SPRC was content to recommend them for Management Committee approval:
- Business Case for a new Head of Strategic Planning and associated structural changes, subject to DfC approval and a JEGS evaluation;
  - JEGS evaluation for the Head of Education and Outreach;
  - Initiate a recruitment exercise for an Öpik Fellow;
  - Attendance Management Policy;
  - Performance Appraisal Policy.
- 13.6 The Management Committee accepted the report from SPRC and approved the proposals in respect of the Head of Strategic Planning post; evaluation of the Head of Education and Outreach post; progressing recruitment for the Öpik Fellow; Attendance Management Policy and Performance Appraisal Policy.

#### **14. BUSINESS PLAN 2024-25 AND PROGRESS REPORT TO 31 AUGUST 2024**

- 14.1 The Chair reported that following on from discussions at the June meeting the draft Business Plan had been amended and circulated to Members on 6 July for comment by 31 July. It had been submitted to DfC on 2 August and approved by the Minister on 16 September.
- 14.2 The Management Committee retrospectively approved the Business Plan 2024-25 and approved the Progress Report to 31 August 2024.

#### **15.0 FINANCE REPORT – PERIOD 5 (AUGUST)**

- 15.1 A Finance Report prepared by Mr Knox had previously been circulated.
- 15.2 Mr Knox advised that he had no concerns for the current financial year. However, he had been asked by the Department to provide budgets for the next three financial years and they were showing deficits of £200k in 2025/26 rising to £600k in year 3.
- 15.3 Mrs Corvan added that this had also been mentioned at ARAC earlier in relation to the risk register and that members would have been fully aware that they had made a number of one-off savings in 2024/25 which would impact in 2025/26.
- 15.4 Mr Cox commented that the summary provided in Mr Knox's report had been very helpful.

## **16.0 POLICY**

16.1 There were no policy matters.

## **17.0 AOB**

17.1 The Committee noted the:

- date of the next meeting was Monday 16 December and this would be the first day of initiating the changes discussed earlier;
- availability of training as outlined in the report;
- PR Coverage Reports June/July 2024 and August/September 2024.

17.2 Mrs Corvan drew attention to the Committee dates included within the papers and requested that if anyone had an issue with any of the dates to flag it. It was intended to issue diary invitations for the next year.

The Chair thanked members for their attendance.

The meeting concluded at 1.34 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: