

MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY SECOND MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 16 DECEMBER 2024 AT 11.05 AM IN THE PLANETARIUM BOARDROOM

Present: Mr J Briggs (Chair), Professor G Cotter*, Mr G Cox, Professor M Darnley*, Professor R Hunter, Professor C Jackman*, Dr K Lemon, Ms S Leverment*, Ms G McVeigh, 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 (Head of Education and Outreach) and Mrs L Brown (Corporate Manager)

Apologies: Mr P Kennedy, Professor M Mathioudakis, Mr R O'Hara and Revd Canon A Totten

1. OPENING REMARKS

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular Professor Ruth Hunter who was attending her first meeting of the Management Committee and Ms Shaaron Leverment and Professor Garret Cotter recently appointed Board of Governors co-optees.
- 1.2 In terms of membership changes, the Chair reported that Revd Canon Matthew Hagan had been replaced as a Board of Governors nominee to the Management Committee by Revd Canon Andrew Totten.

2. APOLOGIES

- 2.1 Apologies were received as outlined above.

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 Mr Wilson referred to his usual interests, as declared on previous occasions.
- 3.3 Ms McVeigh advised that in addition to her usual interests, as had previously been declared, was her recent appointment to the Governing Body of SERC.

4. MINUTES OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2024

- 4.1 On the proposal of Mr Cox, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the meeting of 30 September 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- 5.1 There were four actions arising from previous meetings, two of which it was proposed to close.
- 5.2 There were no further matters raised.

6. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

- 6.1 The Chair advised that the PEACEPLUS funding application had been unsuccessful and a copy of the associated Press Release had previously been circulated for information. This matter would be addressed later in the meeting.
- 6.2 The Strategic Oversight Committee (SOC) had been established and Terms of Reference and proposed delegations would come back to the Management Committee in due course.
- 6.3 The Chair referred to a vacancy on ARAC and reported that Professor Matt Darnley had indicated his willingness to join the Committee. The Management Committee duly approved the appointment of Professor Matt Darnley to ARAC. **Action MC 16/12/24-01 – Appointment of Professor Matt Darnley to ARAC.**
- 6.4 Confidential item removed.
- 6.5 The Chair advised that in relation to the Collaborative Understanding project, he and Ms Caitriona Mullan had been relating to the Council in relation to UNESCO and a seminar/conference was planned. He further advised that Council officials had attended a 2-day workshop held recently in Dublin.
- 6.6 The Chair reported that he and Professor Burton had recently had engagement sessions with Department officials and the matters discussed would be addressed during the Strategy part of the meeting.
- 6.7 For the benefit of those who were joining the meeting via Zoom, the Chair advised that the first staff engagement session had taken place prior to the meeting. There had been two very inspiring presentations, one delivered by Professor Jorick Vink entitled 'The Quest for First Stars in the Universe' demonstrating the astronomical research being undertaken at AOP and another by Dr Kerem Osman Çubuk entitled 'Unlocking New Opportunities for Visibility and Growth' outlining AOP's potential in relation to its redevelopment project. Professor Burton had also delivered a comprehensive overview of AOP activities.
- 6.8 Acknowledging that it was the first time of engaging in this format, the Chair sought reflections from members and the following comments were made:
 - no time for engagement following the updates - need to make sure this was factored in in the future;
 - reflections from staff should also be sought;
 - balance in terms of what could be communicated without causing concern;
 - Professor Burton's overview had clearly articulated the various elements of the projects and interdependences;
 - how did they emphasise the ambition as well as the challenges likely to be faced?
- 6.9 The Chair welcomed the comments, noting that it was the first time and pointing out that should the redevelopment project move ahead lots more communication would be needed. He asked that

feedback on the engagement session be sought from attendees. **Action MC 16/12/24-03 – Feedback on engagement session to be sought from attendees.**

7. REPORT FROM DIRECTOR

7.1 Professor Burton explained that his report had been delivered during the engagement session to Management Committee and staff. For the benefit of those attending the meeting via Zoom he provided a brief overview of the matters that would be relevant to later agenda items:

- in terms of UNESCO, the interview for evaluation and inclusion on the tentative list for Ireland was 23 January 2025;
- the organisation was in a holding pattern for the next 6 months while awaiting a decision from the Department whether or not to approve the OBC;
- the PEACEPLUS application had been unsuccessful;
- the Heritage Lottery grant offer could not be accepted as it required a match element. An extension to 30 June 2025 had been sought from Heritage Lottery;
- AOP had been asked to re-submit its OBC, following some changes, which should include:
 - phasing of the project as different blocks;
 - more information about the wider Armagh context;
 - more information in relation to the possibility of libraries being accommodated on the site;
- the OBC to be resubmitted early 2025 to provide time for it to be assessed;
- some short-term resource was required from the Department to support organisational needs.

7.2 The Chair pointed out that matters relating to the redevelopment and UNESCO would be considered in the second half of the meeting. A query raised by Ms McVeigh regarding the re-work required to the OBC was deferred until later in the meeting.

7.3 Mr Wilson referred to the presentation of the Director's report during the engagement session rather than to the Management Committee and there being no written document. He suggested that the topics should be tracked and logged for the Management Committee. It was agreed that the key points be documented for the purposes of the Minutes.

7.4 The Director's Report which had been delivered during the engagement session with staff, had included updates on activities; new grants/awards; staff news; Projects and Partnerships; Redevelopment Project; Interim Management Structure and the immediate future.

7.5 In terms of activities Professor Burton had reported:

- that the Archbishops' Christmas Message had been filmed by RTE from AOP;
- on a visit by Ireland's famous poet Paul Muldoon;
- Mission Santa was under way;
- on new commercial bookings – Mesmerica and Sound Journey Under the Stars;
- visitor statistics had been included with the agenda;
- on Digistar and exhibition area projector faults.

7.6 In relation to new grants and awards Professor Burton reported:

- that AOP had been awarded a contract to be the hub for promoting STEM in NI through STEM Ambassador programme;
- there had been an STFC Legacy Award to fund school trips to the Planetarium;
- funding for an ESA PhD Scholarship had been secured;
- on a Northern Bridge funded PhD with QUB.

- 7.7 There had been updates on a number of staff related matters including resignations, recruitment and a graduation.
- 7.8 Updates in relation to Projects and Partnerships included that:
- AOP was the last remaining UK member of the SALT consortium (South African Large Telescope);
 - an Expression of Interest, with DIAS, had been made to the Shared Island Higher Education Authority Research Programme;
 - a new Memorandum of Agreement with QUB was being progressed.
- 7.9 AOP was at a fork in the road in terms of whether there was a redevelopment project or not and an interim management structure that was being implemented had been reported on.
- 7.10 Looking forward and in the immediate future Professor Burton had reported that AOP would work to facilitate the Department to make a favourable decision by mid-2025 on AOP's future direction and seek the support needed to run the organisation until that point. Research, Education and Outreach would continue their contribution to AOP activities and engagement events would continue to lobby for support needed with an AOI event planned for 30 January 2025.

8. UPDATE FROM THE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE (ARAC)

- 8.1 The Agenda and Papers for the ARAC Meeting on 11 November 2024 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Acting Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 8.2 Mr Rooney, who had Chaired the meeting on behalf of Mr Kennedy, took members through the Report elaborating briefly on the areas considered during the meeting. In conclusion, he reported that ARAC recommended approval of the ICT Risk Register, Corporate Risk Register and revisions to the Risk Management Policy.
- 8.3 The Chair thanked Mr Rooney and the Management Committee approved the recommendations from ARAC.

9. UPDATE FROM THE STAFFING POLICY AND REMUNERATION COMMITTEE (SPRC)

- 9.1 The Agenda and Papers for the SPRC Meeting on 11 November 2024 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 9.2 Mr Rooney took members through his Report elaborating briefly on the areas considered during the meeting; issues escalated to the Management Committee and the actions required of the Management Committee. In conclusion, he:
- reported that SPRC recommended approval of the revisions to the Recruitment and Selection Policy and Performance Appraisal Policy;
 - reported that it had not been possible to identify a date for on-line Unconscious Bias training that would suit most Management Committee members and further possible dates would be circulated;
 - asked the Management Committee to note that AOP's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy would be brought to a future meeting for approval.

- 9.3 In response to a query from Mr Cox as to whether the Museum Collections Officer's role had been resolved it was confirmed that financial provision had been made until the end of the financial year and it had been included and reflected on in the paper associated with the 2025/26 financial year funding pressures which would be considered later in the meeting.
- 9.4 With regards to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, Mrs Corvan advised that it had been anticipated that this would be approved by the Management Committee at the meeting in progress. Mr Cox suggested approving it electronically and discussion ensued during which Mr Rooney explained that SPRC had been advised at its meeting the previous month that there was to be further consultation with staff and senior management and he was not aware of this having happened. He added that there was a commitment to develop a Strategy for Diversity Mark and queried if the draft Strategy would work for Professor Vink's purposes.
- 9.5 It was noted that the SPRC would want to be content with the Strategy prior to Management Committee approval. Further discussion ensued during which Dr Sarzi suggest enhancing the information contained on AOP's website and responded to a query regarding any time pressures involved. Noting that SPRC next met in February 2025, the Chair suggested that the Strategy be brought to that meeting and if greater urgency developed in the meantime then the matter be brought to the Chair of SPRC to best deal with as appropriate. **Action MC 16/12/24-04 – If there became urgency before the next SPRC/MC meetings, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to be brought to Chair of SPRC.**
- 9.6 The Chair thanked Mr Rooney and the Management Committee approved the recommendations from SPRC.

10. UPDATE FROM THE RESEARCH EDUCATION AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE (REAC)

- 10.1 The Agenda and Papers for the REAC Meeting on 3 December 2024 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 10.2 Dr Lemon took members through her Report, which also included the areas considered by the Committee on 25 June 2024, elaborating briefly on the areas considered during the meetings. The Committee noted that the timeline for completion of the Education Programme Strategy was during the first half of 2025 and that the Research Strategy was nearing completion and would be brought to the next REAC meeting prior to final approval at the next Management Committee meeting.
- 10.3 Dr Sarzi reported briefly on a recent REF event he had attended advising that the Northern Ireland HEA partners seemed interested in tapping into the Planetarium and Education and Outreach product to help their impact cases. In relation to the REF exercise itself, he explained that previously AOP had had a mock exercise because the full REF required two impact cases, which was very challenging for a small organisation like AOP. The REF had taken this into consideration and should AOP wish in 2028 it could progress the official REF assessment requiring only one impact case.
- 10.4 Dr Sarzi responded to queries from Ms McVeigh regarding AOP's REF assessment and the potential for collaboration with other HEA's in relation to their impact cases and reported that AOP also had the opportunity to sit on REF panels.
- 10.5 The Chair thanked Dr Lemon and the Management Committee accepted her report.

11. BUSINESS PLANNING

- 11.1 A Progress Summary on 2024-25 Business Plan Objectives and KPIs for the period to 30 November 2024 and a Business Planning and Financial Pressures for 2025-26 Issues Paper had previously been circulated. In terms of the objectives in the 2024-25 Business Plan Mrs Corvan advised that the year to date progress would be picked up when discussing the objectives for 2025-26. She reported that in terms of the KPIs there were a number of areas where it was anticipated that targets would not be achieved, elaborating on these.
- 11.2 Mrs Corvan guided members through and elaborated on the issues outlined in her report regarding Business Planning for 2025-26 and setting a budget, pointing out that the draft budget for 2025/26, which included a deficit of £413k based on resource grant as per the 2024-25 allocation, included high and essential priority spend and against which they were likely to be required to make savings.
- 11.3 The draft 2024/25 Business Plan Objectives and Priorities had been set out around four overarching themes – Maintain Organisational Performance; Maximising Efficiencies and Self-Generated Income; Progress the Redevelopment Project and Participate in the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland (AOI) Partnership. Mrs Corvan elaborated on the challenges, budget pressure assumptions and risks.
- 11.4 In response to a query from Mr Wilson, Mrs Corvan confirmed that DfC was aware that the Observatory could become a Building at Risk if urgent remedial works to safeguard it were not addressed. The Conservation Management Plan was currently being updated and would be provided to DfC at the earliest opportunity.
- 11.5 In terms of maximising efficiencies and self-generated income the drop in visitor numbers and the benefit of TNI marketing grants in previous years were noted. Discussion ensued regarding the current approach to marketing and whether there was an appetite to identify a marketing budget to enable Mrs Mackle to target marketing across the year to drive footfall, noting that there was no dedicated marketing officer.

Mr Wilson retired from the meeting at 12:06 pm.

- 11.6 The Management Committee was supportive of the allocation of a £20k budget for marketing and the need for a strategy, focus and resource in the longer term. Mrs Corvan pointed out that the document under consideration was about starting to think about key priorities for 2025; where budget should be allocated; essential pressures and where savings could be made, before writing a business plan. She added that Planetarium business-as-usual and maintaining income was important regardless of what happened in June.
- 11.7 The Chair reflected on the new meeting format and the difficulty separating business from strategy matters.
- 11.8 In terms of next steps, Mrs Corvan sought Management Committee feedback on the four themes outlined; the structure; were there any omissions; which cost pressures were essential and what could be earmarked for savings and what were the key priorities for 2025-26. She sought comments from Management Committee members.
- 11.9 The Chair thanked Mrs Corvan for her comprehensive and credible report.

12.0 FINANCE REPORT – PERIOD 6 (SEPTEMBER)

- 12.1 A Finance Report prepared by Mr Knox had previously been circulated.

- 12.2 In terms of the current financial year Mr Knox highlighted the reduction in Planetarium trading income and research income and savings being made. Whilst he was still aiming for break-even, the financial position was under stress.
- 12.3 It was pointed out that costs associated with a Review had not been factored into the assessment and DfC support was still unclear.

13.0 POLICY

- 13.1 There were no policy matters.

14.0 AOB

- 14.1 The Committee noted the:

- meeting schedule Jan-March 2025;
- availability of training as outlined in the report;
- Minutes of AOI Oversight Board held 9 September 2024 (draft);
- Minutes of ARAC held 11 November 2024 (draft);
- Minutes of SPRC held 11 November 2024 (draft);
- PR Coverage Reports October-November 2024.

15. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED

The Chair thanked members for their attendance and wished them a Happy Christmas and New Year.

The meeting concluded at 12.55 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: