

**MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY THIRD MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 31 MARCH 2025 AT 11.00 AM IN THE PLANETARIUM BOARDROOM**

Present: Mr J Briggs (Chair), Professor G Cotter\*, Mr G Cox, Professor M Darnley\*, Dr K Lemon,  
\* via Zoom Ms G McVeigh, Mr R O’Hara, Mr E Rooney and Revd Canon A Totten OBE

In Attendance: Professor M Burton (Director), Professor 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: Professor R Hunter, Mr P Kennedy, Ms S Leverment, Professor M Mathioudakis and Mr R Wilson OBE

Mrs C Corvan (Head of Corporate Services)

**1. APOLOGIES**

1.1 Apologies were received as outlined above.

**2. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

2.1 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.

2.2 There were no conflicts declared at this point.

**3. MINUTES OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 16 DECEMBER 2024**

3.1 On the proposal of Dr Lemon, seconded by Mr Rooney, the minutes of the meeting of 16 December 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

**4. MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 3 MARCH 2025**

4.1 On the proposal of Mr Rooney, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the special meeting of 3 March 2025 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 ten actions arising from previous meetings, eight of which it was proposed to close.

5.2 Professor Burton commented on the proposal to close the matter relating to the inclusion of the Observatory in Armagh Conservation Area and explained that this had been superseded by discussions with ABC Council about the wider planning issue for Armagh.

*The Head of Education and Outreach joined the meeting at 11.30 am.*

## 6. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

- 6.1 At the outset, the Chair reported that a number of matters of Chair's Business would be retained for discussion in the Strategy part of the meeting.
- 6.2 The Chair referred to the Chair of ARAC's current personal circumstances and sought a temporary Chair for the Committee in the event that he was unavailable. Ms McVeigh indicated she would be willing to do so, however, due to a prior engagement was unavailable for the next meeting on 19 May. The Committee approved the appointment of Ms McVeigh as temporary Chair of ARAC when required. **Action MC 31/3/25-01 – Ms McVeigh appointed temporary Chair of ARAC.**
- 6.3 Discussion ensued during which Mr Rooney referred to the period of time between ARAC and SPRC meetings and the Management Committee meeting to which ARAC and SPRC report and suggested rescheduling the meetings. Mr Cox offered his support if the date of 19<sup>th</sup> May could not be rearranged. The Committee agreed in principle to re-scheduling of the ARAC committee, with further discussions to take place offline. **Action MC 31/3/25-02 – Possible rescheduling of ARAC to be explored.**
- 6.4 The Chair sought Management Committee approval to increase the membership of REAC and the appointment of Professor Garret Cotter and Ms Shaaron Leverment to the Committee. Dr Lemon, Chair of REAC, referred to the need for the review of the Committee's Terms of Reference, which was being held in abeyance, and sought Management Committee approval to proceed with this piece of work. The Management Committee duly approved an amendment to the REAC Terms of Reference to increase its membership; the appointment of Professor Cotter and Ms Leverment to the Committee and that the REAC progress the review of its Terms of Reference. **Action MC 31/3/25-03 – Membership outlined in REAC Terms of Reference to be increased; appointment of Professor Cotter and Ms Leverment to REAC and review of REAC Terms of Reference to be progressed.**
- 6.5 The Chair reported that a light touch review of the Partnership Agreement between AOP, represented by Mrs Brown, and DfC was ongoing and the Department would be taking forward some material matters in relation to an externally facilitated Review of the Management Committee and Sub-Committee Effectiveness (every 3 years) and external Quality Assessment of Internal Audit (every 5 years).
- 6.6 The Chair reported briefly on and responded to queries from Members regarding a recent meeting that had taken place with Minister Gordon Lyons. It was hoped that an announcement would be made before the end of June deadline, that AOP would receive early notification of that and that there would be an opportunity for PR. He intended following up with DfC officials later in the day.

## 7. REPORT FROM DIRECTOR

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 In terms of Corporate Activities the report provided updates in relation to the Birr Prints Exhibition; AOP Redevelopment Project; SIB Review; National Lottery Heritage Fund grant acceptance; Archbishops' Christmas Message on RTE; Remembering Pat Corvan; Staff Movements and Appointments; Capital Projects and Meteorological Events – Storms Darragh and Éowyn. The Committee noted:
- the recently submitted OBC1 outlined that the project was imperative to future-proof AOP's role in the next generation and the basis for which the case for change was predicated;
  - the offer of appointment in relation to the Öpik Fellowship had been accepted;

- the STEM Ambassador programme Project Manager was due to commence on 14 April;
  - recruitment of a STEM Ambassador Admin Officer remained ongoing;
  - the recent upgrade of the Observatory Fire Alarm had significantly improved weekly disruption when testing;
  - wind speeds recorded during storm Éowyn and the absence of sunshine over an 11 day period in February.
- 7.3 The Research Activities included the Research Strategy; STFC and EU Horizon Proposals; PhD Students and HEA North South Research Programme. The Management Committee noted that:
- if successful, Prof Vink’s funding application would support a research team;
  - two of the 3 PhD Student offers had been accepted, one to work with Prof Vink and the other with Dr Bagnulo;
  - a Northern Bridge funded PhD Student was due to commence in October;
  - the Northern Bridge Consortium, from which AOP had benefitted in recent years, had finished.
- 7.4 In response to a query from Mr Rooney regarding Prof Vink’s funding application and an associated allowance, it was noted that a Business Case was still to be developed.
- 7.5 With regards to strengthening AOP’s relationship with Queen’s, Professor Burton advised that he had been tasked with writing a Discussion Paper on expanding this, with four areas for growth of Astrophysics; Data Visualisation, Education and Heritage.
- 7.6 The Education and Outreach Activities included the Winter Visitor Statistics; STEM Ambassadors; Events of Note; STFC Legacy Award and Projector Repairs. The Management Committee:
- noted the visitor numbers for February were the highest ever recorded for that month;
  - received a brief summary of the activities and opportunities related to the STEM Ambassador programme from the Head of Education and Outreach;
  - noted that KPIs for the STEM Ambassador programme would be reported through the meeting each quarter;
  - noted the STFC Legacy Award project objectives.
- 7.7 The History and Heritage Activities included updates on the UNESCO Application Status; Alliance of Historic Observatories; 100 Years of Planetaria and NLHF Wisdom Begins with Wonder Project. The Committee noted:
- it was likely to be mid-April before the outcome of the interview with the Expert Advisory Group would be known;
  - Armagh Observatory had been admitted to membership of the Alliance of Historic Observatories;
  - AOP Collections Officer and PhD student Matthew McMahon’s editing the International Planetarium Society’s book ‘100 Years of Planetaria’ celebrating the centenary of the modern planetarium;
  - the conclusion of the NLHF Wisdom Begins with Wonder Project. A copy of the Project Evaluation Report having been provided with the meeting Papers.
- 7.8 Mr Cox referred to the imminent departure of Mr Knox and Mrs Corvan and on behalf of the Management Committee formally extended thanks to both officers for their contribution to AOP, asking that this be communicated in a suitable manner. The Chair concurred with Mr Cox, acknowledging that their departure would be a major loss for AOP and commenting that the Management Committee respected and recognised the reasons behind these decisions. He conveyed thanks directly to Mr Knox.

- 7.9 The Chair referred to his earlier comments at the Staff Briefing about the period of time it had taken AOP to gain the confidence of the Department and that this had been due to both Mr Knox and Mrs Corvan and to whom they were indebted. He said it was imperative to find a way to express their thanks and to wish them all the best in their retirement. **Action MC 31/3/25-04 – Thanks to be conveyed to Mrs Corvan as appropriate.**
- 7.10 The Chair briefly reported on his visit to Brisbane Planetarium, opened in 1978 and located beside Botanical Gardens, which was also making plans to renew its planetarium.
- 7.11 The Chair thanked Professor Burton for his report.
- 7.12 In response to a query from Ms McVeigh, Professor Burton provided a brief update on ongoing recruitment to replace the Head of Corporate Services and Head of Finance and Income Generation.

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

- 8.1 The Agenda and Papers for the ARAC Meeting on 17 February 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 8.2 The following additional papers had been included with the agenda:
- a Report on the Annual Audit Plan 2025/26;
  - updated Bi-Annual Assurance Statement (October 24-March 25);
  - DAO DoF 02-25 Corporate governance in central government departments – Code of good practice NI 2024.
- 8.3 In the absence of the ARAC Chair, Mr Rooney briefly elaborated on the areas reserved by the Management Committee. ARAC recommended approval of the ICT Risk Register; ICT Strategy; Corporate Risk Register; Bi-Annual Assurance Statement; Annual Board Assurance Statement; Reserves Policy and Physical Access Control Policy.
- 8.4 Discussion ensued regarding the Report on the Annual Audit Plan 2025/26 during which Ms McVeigh briefly elaborated on the two possible options; Mr Rooney noted that Risk Management had not been subject to an internal audit for 10 years and felt that the organisation would benefit greater from a review of this area of activity rather than any potential savings from delaying a third audit until next financial year and Mr Cox referred to the SIB report and whether there might be any recommendations arising from that warranting input from Internal Audit.
- 8.5 It was agreed that should the SIB Report identify something requiring Internal Audit review then that should be the third audit for 2025/26, if not, then it should be Risk Management. **Action MC 31/3/25-05 – Final Internal Audit for 2025-26 to be Risk Management unless something requiring Internal Audit review was identified in the SIB Report.**
- 8.6 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 24 February 2025 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 some of the areas considered; issues reserved by the Management Committee; issues escalated to the Management Committee and the actions required of the Management Committee. In particular, he reported that:
- changes to the Special Bonus Scheme had been approved by the Special Management Committee on 3 March;
  - SPRC recommended approval of the Hybrid Working Policy, which had been updated to remove reference to Covid-19;
  - SPRC recommended approval of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.
- 9.3 The Chair thanked Mr Rooney for the update and the Management Committee approved the recommendations from SPRC.
- 9.4 Mr Rooney drew attention to a Doodle Poll issued by Ms O'Neill on 19 March 2025 regarding online Unconscious Bias training for Management Committee members and encouraged those who had not already indicated their availability to do so.

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

- 10.1 The Agenda and Papers for the REAC Meeting on 19 March 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 10.2 Dr Lemon briefly elaborated on the areas considered and the issues reserved by the Management Committee. In particular she reported that REAC was recommending:
- approval of the AOP Research Strategy; and
  - retrospective approval to sign the QUB/AOP Memorandum of Agreement (Research Students).
- 10.3 By way of context Dr Lemon elaborated on the reasons behind the Research Strategy, which included updating a previous version held online, which was difficult to find; to provide external stakeholders information on what the Researchers did at AOP and the direction of travel; and to complement the Strategic Plan. It was never intended to be a stand-alone document and would be an outward facing document, with broad direction of travel.
- 10.4 Discussion ensued regarding the Management Committee's expectations of what a Strategy should contain versus the high level document provided during which the difficulties in producing a comprehensive research strategy were noted and the Management Committee sought another layer of granularity outlining where they were, where they wanted to get to and how they were going to get there. During the discussion, it was pointed out that AOP's research was determined by the appointments made in the past and could not change until making appointments in the future; an easily accessible and easily understood document was needed for stakeholders; each of the academics had a page on the website about their research and that it had been a strategic choice that AOP's research needed to be broad, covering solar systems, stars and galaxies, because of the Planetarium and to be able to respond across all of astrophysics.
- 10.5 Ms Lemon explained that there was a real need to have the document signed off. Taking on board the Committee's comments she suggested developing an underpinning action plan and to address the Committee's points for the next iteration of the Strategy.
- 10.6 In conclusion, acknowledging the differing interpretation of language and expectation between academia and non-academia, the Management Committee approved the document as the Research Vision and Priorities, noting that further discussion would be needed by REAC to bring it to the next level.

10.7 The Management Committee approved the retrospective signing of the Memorandum of Agreement between Queen's University Belfast and Armagh Observatory and Planetarium in relation to Supervision of PhD Students.

10.8 The Chair thanked Dr Lemon and REAC and the Management Committee accepted her report.

## **11. PERFORMANCE AGAINST BUSINESS PLAN 2024/25**

11.1 A Progress Report on 2024-25 Business Plan Objectives estimated at 31 March 2025, KPIs for the year to 30 November 2024 and a Finance Report (Period 11) had previously been circulated.

11.2 Mr Cox noted that objectives 5 and 10 were linked to the SIB Review/funding decision and that many of the others were on target. Professor Burton noted that admissions income and numbers were below target. This stemmed from the Summer, however the Winter had been better than anticipated.

11.3 Ms McVeigh noted that the visitor numbers presented were as at 30 November 2024 and acknowledging that 31 March 2025 figures were not available she queried what the anticipated shortfall might be. In response Mrs Mackle advised that on-site visitor numbers were estimated to be approx. 64,000. To put it in context she reported on the targets for the previous few years, explaining that they had exceeded the 52,000 visitor numbers achieved in 2019/20, which had been the Planetarium's best year, adding that they had set ambitious targets.

11.4 In response to a query from Mr O'Hara regarding the off-site engagement numbers, Mrs Mackle explained that this was as a result of the SFI / UKSA funded programmes delivered primarily by Dr R Nežic. It was noted that the outreach activity had been fully funded and had not affected onsite school visits. This figure would reduce in future years as they tried to make it sustainable. It was also noted that school visits to the Planetarium were at capacity.

11.5 Mr Knox reported that he was fairly confident of achieving break-even at year end and expressed concern about the 2025-26 budget. In response to a query from Mr Cox regarding the income target versus actual income, Mr Knox confirmed that this had a direct correlation to visitor numbers.

11.6 The Chair welcomed the anticipated break-even position, something not expected earlier in the year.

11.7 Mr Knox referred to the NICS pay award with a 3% increase from August 2024 to March 2025, which had been budgeted for, however from August 2025 to March 2026 it was a 6% increase with only 3% included in the budget.

11.8 The Chair thanked Mr Knox for his report and for all his work.

## **12. DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2025-26**

12.1 A draft Business Plan 2025-26, which had been led by Mrs Corvan with input from Senior Management Team, had previously been circulated.

12.2 Professor Burton explained that the document provided was unusual as due to the current uncertainties it was not possible to prepare a normal business plan. The document referred to the fork in the road and the two different directions, with the associated pressures. He pointed out that it was for internal discussion only.

12.3 Noting the paper, the Chair acknowledged that the document pointed to the present uncertainties, which were linked to the SIB report; future structure needs; annual budget allocation; capital and match-funding budgets and anticipated that a Special Management Committee meeting would be required in the coming weeks.

### **13.0 POLICY**

13.1 Updated Financial Policies and Procedures has previously been circulated. Mr Knox drew attention to the increased procurement control limits. He explained that this was a significant change as previously two quotations were required for expenditure up to £5k and for expenditure between £5k and £30k, if the goods or services were not already provided on an existing framework or contract a tender exercise was required. The £5k threshold had been uplifted to £10k with two quotes. For expenditure between £10k and £50k 3 written quotations were required and expenditure in excess of £50k required a tender exercise where the goods or services were not already provided for on an existing framework agreement or contract. He welcomed the change, having recently been involved in a lengthy tender exercise.

13.2 In response to a query from Ms McVeigh as to whether it was receipt of 3 written quotes or evidence that 3 written quotes had been requested, Mr Knox advised that there had to be a very good reason if it was not possible to provide 3 written quotes. It was noted that implementation of the changes would be a matter for the Interim Head of Corporate Services/Finance and Income Generation to take forward.

13.3 Mr O'Hara stressed the importance of the governance and administration arrangements relating to the new limit being strengthened, with the retention of the supporting documentation and asked that the Management Committee be provided with comfort in due course that the necessary administrative processes were in place.

13.4 In terms of other amendments to the Policy, Mr Knox advised that a table showing Credit Card limits had been added. The roles of Head of Corporate Services and Head of Finance had been highlighted throughout the document.

13.5 An updated CCTV Policy and a Paper on Temporary Amendments to Policies had previously been circulated.

13.6 The Committee approved the:

- updated Financial Policies and Procedures;
- updated CCTV Policy; and
- paper on Temporary Amendments to AOP Policies, giving the Director authority to reallocate responsibilities assigned within policies to the Head of Corporate Services and Head of Finance and Income Generation to an appropriate AOP Officer during the transition period.

### **14.0 AOB**

14.1 The Committee noted the:

- meeting schedule April-June 2025;
- availability of training as outlined in the report;
- Minutes of ARAC held 17 February 2025 (draft);
- Minutes of SPRC held 24 February 2025 (draft);

- Minutes of REAC held 19 March 2025 (draft);
- PR Coverage Report December 2024-January 2025;
- PR Coverage Report February 2025.

**15. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED**

**16.0 CREDIT CARD FOR ACCOUNTANT**

16.1 Professor Burton referred to earlier discussion on the Financial Policies and Procedures and formally sought the Management Committee’s approval to obtain a credit card for the Accountant. This was necessary due to the imminent departure of the Head of Corporate Services and the Head of Finance and Income Generation.

16.2 The Committee agreed that a credit card be obtained for the Accountant . **Action MC 31/3/25-08 – Accountant to be provided with AOP credit card.**

16.3 In response to a query from Dr Lemon regarding the freeze on Government Procurement Cards Mr Knox advised that AOP’s credit card was not provided through this framework.

**17.0 THANKS**

17.1 Mr Cox extended thanks to Mrs Brown for the additional work she had undertaken in recent times and the Chair concurred.

The Chair thanked members for their attendance.

The meeting concluded at 13.10 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: