

**MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY FOURTH MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 30 JUNE 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\*, Ms S Leverment\*, Ms G McVeigh, Mr R O'Hara, Revd Canon A Totten OBE and Mr R Wilson OBE  
\* via Zoom

In Attendance: Professor M Burton (Director), Professor M Sarzi (Head of Research), Mr M Blaauw (Interim Head of Corporate Services and Finance), Mrs S Mackle (Head of Education and Outreach) and Mrs L Brown (Corporate Manager)

Apologies: Professor R Hunter, Mr P Kennedy, Professor M Mathioudakis and Mr E Rooney

**1. APOLOGIES AND OPENING REMARKS**

1.1 Apologies were received as outlined above.

1.2 The Chair welcomed Mr Mike Blaauw, Interim Head of Corporate Services and Finance, to his first Management Committee meeting.

**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 31 MARCH 2025**

3.1 On the proposal of Mr Cox, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the meeting of 31 March 2025 were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

**4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

4.1 There were ten actions arising from previous meetings, four of which it was proposed to close. The Committee was content to close these actions.

4.2 There were no matters raised.

*Ms Leverment joined the meeting at 11.02 am.*

## 5. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

- 5.1 The Chair reported on his recent trip to Prague for the opening of its LED Dome, the first in Europe. Referring to the impressive technology and immersive experience, he explained that the dome was totally multi-use and the show had been created to demonstrate its functionality. He referred to the investment opportunity such a facility presented and could present for AOP.
- 5.2 Ms Leverment commented that an LED dome provided 100 times the light output of conventional systems and although they required an £8m investment, their lifespan was up to 4 times that of a conventional system. She pointed out that the performance in Prague had been due to a combination of the technology and of a creative Director with theatrical interaction between the Dome and the presenters. Increasingly audiences sought not just visual but mind and body immersive experiences. Whilst other organisations were considering LED domes, she suspected that Armagh's would be the first in the UK, with the uniqueness of having Research Astronomy on site.
- 5.3 Acknowledging the importance of longevity of the technology, the Chair suggested that further study trips for both technical staff and decision-makers would be beneficial.
- 5.4 The Chair advised that it was the time of year when they normally considered the Management Committee's annual Effectiveness Review. Given the extra work over the past couple of weeks this would be deferred until September. **Action MC 30/6/26-01 - Management Committee annual Effectiveness Review to be included as September Agenda Item.**
- 5.5 A successful Annual Visitation of the Board of Governors had taken place on 13 May 2025 and the Board had been content with the work that had been undertaken. The Chair reported that the Archbishop was content that AOP accept Heritage Lottery funding.
- 5.6 The Chair reported on a forthcoming visit by Steve Harper, the new CEO of SIB, on Thursday 3 July 2025 and thanked Ms McVeigh for agreeing to facilitate same in his absence. He extended an invitation to any member of the Management Committee who was able to attend.
- 5.7 The Chair noted receipt of the SIB Report, which would be discussed during the second part of the meeting.
- 5.8 Appraisals of public appointees were now due to take place and would be arranged over the next few weeks. **Action MC 30/6/26-02 - Appraisals to be arranged.**
- 5.9 The Chair referred to the intention of having an in-person meeting at least annually with a two-day meeting having taken place in June over the past few years. He sought views on the possibility of holding an in-person meeting on Monday 15 December 2025 with members travelling from other geographical areas to Armagh for an informal engagement event on the evening of Sunday 14 December 2025. Activities on the Monday would conclude at lunch-time. Members were asked to indicate to Mrs Brown if this option could work. **Action MC 30/6/26-03 – Members' availability for two-day December meeting to be provided.**

## 6. REPORT FROM DIRECTOR

- 6.1 Professor Burton's report, which had previously been circulated, had been structured into sections in respect of 2024-25 Research, Education and Outreach Activities; Corporate; Research; Education and Outreach and History and Heritage activities. Professor Burton took members through his report elaborating on various items.

- 6.2 In terms of the statistical summary of the 2024-25 financial year it was noted that AOP had produced approximately 80 refereed scientific publications; delivered approximately 100 talks or presentations of a scientific nature; received 64,000 visitors on site and interacted with 24,000 off-site.
- 6.3 In terms of Corporate Activities the report provided updates in relation to the SIB Review; OBC1; National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant; Ministerial and DfC Meetings; Staff Movements and Appointments and Capital Projects. In particular the Committee noted:
- the SIB Review had been completed with three documents having been produced;
  - a decision in respect of OBC1 was expected imminently;
  - Mike Blaauw had commenced as Interim Head of Corporate Services and Finance on 10 April 2025;
  - appointments of Dr Ryan Begley, Öpik Fellow; Emma-Jayne Malcolmson, Education Assistant and Hanagh Winter, STEM Ambassadors Project Manager.
- 6.4 Research Activities included the STFC and EU Horizon Proposals; PhD Students; HEA North South Research Programme; Postdoctoral Fellows; QUB engagement; INSAP Conference (INSpiration in Astronomical Phenomena) and AOP-DIAS Research Awayday. The Management Committee noted:
- Professor Vink's funding application was on a reserve list. This was a significant outcome for which Professor Vink was commended as just over 10% of applications had been successful;
  - the top 3 PhD Student offers had been accepted for the second year running;
  - a decision on the application with DIAS to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in RoI for North South Research Programme entitled 'Strengthening North-South Training And Research in Astrophysics and Space Science' (STARS) was awaited;
  - there had been 25 applications to the Öpik Fellow;
  - a discussion paper on QUB-AOP collaborative activities had been produced and a follow-up meeting held;
  - AOP had co-hosted the 13<sup>th</sup> INSAP conference with QUB and had hosted a reception to inform of the UNESCO journey as part of the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland;
  - the award of Companion of Honour to Dame Jocelyn Bell-Burnell in the King's Birthday Honours List. She had been the keynote speaker at the INSAP meeting in Armagh the day before the announcement.
- 6.5 The Education and Outreach Activities included the Spring Visitor Statistics; STEM Ambassadors; STFC Spark Award; Projector Repairs; Opening of Europe's first LED Planetarium in Prague. The Management Committee noted:
- the UKSA funded outreach project had concluded in March 2025;
  - the Planetarium had recorded the highest ever visitor numbers for May;
  - events of note held during March, April and May 2025 and the activities included in the summer programme, which centred around the Stellar Science Lab exhibition;
  - AOP had commenced the contract to deliver the STEM Ambassador programme;
  - an STFC Spark Award application completed by the Head of Education and Outreach had been successful;
  - the faulty dome and exhibition area projectors had been repaired;
  - Europe's first LED planetarium dome had opened in Prague on 8 June 2025, AOP represented at this event by the Chair of the Management Committee.
- 6.6 The History and Heritage Activities included updates on UNESCO World Heritage and 100 Years of Planetaria. The Committee noted:
- that Birr and Dunsink observatories had been added to the World Heritage Tentative List for Ireland as part of the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland;

- the centenary of the invention of an opto-mechanical planetarium projector had occurred on 7 May 1925. AOP participated in the global celebration of this event organised by the International Planetarium Society;

6.7 During Professor Burton’s presentation there was discussion about the UNESCO aspirations during which it was noted:

- discussions between Council Chief Executives (Armagh, Fingal and Offaly) had taken place and a meeting between the three Council Chief Executives and the three Observatories was scheduled to take place later in the month;
- that whilst the Royal Sites and AOI applications were not in competition, national Governments would only put forward one site per year/couple of years. That decision to take forward to UNESCO would be taken by the Irish Government as lead and based upon readiness;
- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council was a partner in both applications and needed to understand what the implications were for Armagh; to make sure there was not duplication of effort and that work being undertaken on one project was complementary or could inform the other;
- Gracehill Moravian Church had been inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as part of a transnational designation (involving Denmark, Germany, UK and USA);
- there were no sites in Northern Ireland on the UK Tentative List;
- that clarification on how to make application to the UK Tentative List was awaited;
- the AOI bid focussed on scientific heritage and they were not aware of any others from that sector;
- that in terms of risk and mitigations, there was significant guidance about the process and what was required. Once on both Tentative Lists (UK, Ireland) a Preliminary Application would be made to UNESCO and assessment of this would determine the likelihood of success;
- the inspiration had come from a visit to Jodrell Bank, inscribed in 2019. Professor Burton had brought a discussion paper about the possibility of seeking UNESCO World Heritage inscription to the Management Committee’s 113<sup>th</sup> meeting on 30 March 2020 and had been driving the project since;
- that Professor Burton had organised a session on “Classical Astronomical Observatories and World Heritage” during the European Astronomical Society in Cork the previous week and had made connections with a group from the Pic du Midi, a high altitude Observatory in the French Pyrenees, which was approx. 2-3 years ahead of AOI on the UNESCO journey and on the French UNESCO Tentative List. The group would be a source of advice;
- there were challenges for all parties and one of the risks was that the ability to progress the application was predicated on other partners;
- the importance of communication with as many different stakeholders;
- the final decision would be made by Member State Representatives;
- that Jodrell Bank had been the only Science and Discovery Centre successful in obtaining funding from Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)/Arts Council England (ACE) due to its UNESCO inscription.

6.8 The Chair and several Members commended Professor Burton on the speed with which the idea had progressed. In particular Dr Lemon commented on the pace of progress taking into consideration the complexities on a UK and Ireland basis.

6.9 Mr Wilson suggested that at the next meeting Professor Burton provide an overview of the UNESCO process and timing. **Action MC 30/6/26-04 - Overview of UNESCO process and timing to be provided at September Management Committee meeting.**

6.10 Dr Lemon highlighted that the World Heritage UK 2025 Annual Conference would take place in Bradford in October 2025 and in 2026 would be hosted in Northern Ireland by the Giant Causeway’s World Heritage Site. She suggested members might want to attend.

- 6.11 Professor Burton reported that he had membership of World Heritage UK and had been invited by them to give an online talk the previous day, as part of a 4-part series on UK UNESCO properties with an astronomical connection. The other three sites were Stonehenge, Jodrell Bank and the Royal Observatory Greenwich.
- 6.12 The Chair thanked Professor Burton and the Management Committee was content to accept the Director's Report.

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

- 7.1 The Agenda and Papers for the ARAC Meeting on 19 May 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 7.2 In the absence of Mr Rooney, who had Chaired the meeting, Mr Briggs drew attention to the recommendations from ARAC that the Management Committee approve the:
- ICT Risk Register;
  - current Corporate Risk Register, noting that there was to be a review of the categorisation of the risks in the register.
- 7.3 The report also outlined two matters escalated to the Management Committee for noting:
- the third audit in the Annual Audit Plan for 2025/26 was yet to be identified;
  - a Review of Risk Management Framework, Policy and Risk Register would be progressed before the next Management Committee meeting.
- 7.4 The Chair explained that due to the absence of the ARAC Chair it was not possible to respond to specific questions at the meeting in progress, however, queries could be raised with the Corporate Manager following the meeting.
- 7.5 The Management Committee approved the recommendations from ARAC.

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

- 8.1 The Agenda and Papers for the SPRC Meeting on 27 May 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.
- 8.2 In the absence of Mr Rooney, SPRC Chair, Mr Briggs drew attention to the recommendations from SPRC that the Management Committee approve policies in relation to Induction; Retirement; Lone Working; Access NI (Policy and Process) and Data Protection and Procedure for Managing a Data Breach.
- 8.3 The report also asked the Management Committee to note the:
- Annual Review of SPRC Effectiveness would be considered at the September meeting;
  - Staff Resource position – SMT had been asked to identify any short term resources needed that would help in the current transitional period and act accordingly.
- 8.4 Due to the absence of the SPRC Chair it was not possible to respond to specific questions at the meeting in progress, however, queries could be raised with the Corporate Manager following the meeting.

8.5 The Management Committee approved the recommendations from SPRC.

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

9.1 The Agenda and Papers for the REAC Meeting on 2 June 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.

9.2 Dr Lemon briefly elaborated on the areas considered. In particular she reported that:

- it had been hoped to bring revised REAC Terms of Reference to the meeting in progress, however, this had not been possible. The Terms of Reference would be brought to the September meeting;
- it was intended to have a draft outline structure of the Education Strategy by September;
- REAC as a whole felt that the Research Strategy was sufficient and fit for purpose, however there was a commitment from the Head of Research to provide a report to the Management Committee on an annual basis on how it aligned with priorities and that it would be beneficial to set KPIs that stemmed from the Strategy. **Action MC 30/6/26-05 – a) Annual report to be made to the Management Committee on how Research Strategy aligned with priorities and b) KPIs that stemmed from the Strategy to be set.**

9.3 In response to comments from Mr Cox regarding the need to consider how to bring the Research Strategy, the recommendation from the SIB report about how to build a critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students and discussions with QUB on collaborative activities together and also the need to baseline how AOP dealt with its Intellectual Property (IP) and its approach to same, Dr Lemon undertook to take these matters on board through REAC. **Action MC 30/6/26-06 – a) REAC to consider how to bring the Research Strategy, the SIB recommendation re building a critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students and discussion with QUB on collaborative activities together and b) to baseline how AOP dealt with its Intellectual Property and its approach to same.**

9.4 Professor Sarzi suggested having a discussion with Mr Cox in relation to IP.

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

9.6 A paper on retaining early-career fellows at AOP through permanent appointments, prepared by Professor Sarzi, had previously been circulated. Professor Sarzi briefly elaborated on the issue the paper highlighted.

9.7 Discussion ensued during which reference was made to the SIB report recommendation in relation to retaining and growing a critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students and that the issue the paper raised required further consideration, before a strategic decision could be taken. Whilst there was support for the concept as a growth strategy, the matter needed to be considered in the context of the Research Strategy and succession planning but also the SIB review in terms of what AOP should look like in the future from a Research perspective, but also in parallel with the Structure moving forward.

9.8 Professor Darnley commented that the approach outlined had been used as a growth strategy by his organisation.

9.9 The Chair acknowledged the matter was a very live issue in light of the recommendation from the SIB report and discussions they were about to enter into with DfC. In terms of the core outcomes of AOP moving forward he considered the first was to ensure the continuation of the research that had been ongoing for 200 years and that there was never a threat to that and further, that it was enhanced and astronomy made relevant through the Planetarium and Outreach.

- 9.10 The Chair asked Dr Lemon to bring the matter to REAC for further deliberation prior to a strategic decision being made. **Action MC 30/6/26-07 - REAC to consider the paper on retaining early-career fellows at AOP in the context of the Research Strategy and succession planning and also the SIB review in terms of what AOP should look like from a Research perspective, but also in parallel with the structure moving forward.**
- 9.11 An Evaluation Report on the Cosmic Explorers Outreach Programme, which had been funded by SFI, and a sample of social media content that schools had generated had previously been circulated. Mrs Mackle drew attention to the reach of the project, which had a lot of uptake in Donegal but also in Monaghan and Cavan. The external evaluation, completed by Guage Impact, demonstrated the impact of the project and provided some ideas to take forward such as attendance at Science Festivals. The project had funded the employment of the Tourism and Outreach Officer and they now needed to make this sustainable. In response to a query from Ms McVeigh, Mrs Mackle confirmed that whilst the numbers would drop there were bookings that would sustain the role.
- 9.12 The Chair commented that AOP needed its own science festival.

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

- 10.1 The Progress Report on 2024-25 Business Plan Objectives previously presented to the March meeting had been updated to show the status of KPIs at 31 March 2025.
- 10.2 The Chair advised that it had not been possible to bring forward a Draft Business Plan for 2025-26 to the meeting in progress.

## **11. FINANCE**

- 11.1 Letter dated 13 May 2025 advising of the Indicative Opening Budget Allocations for 2025-26 and Financial Report showing Management Accounts had previously been circulated.
- 11.2 Mr Blaauw talked the Committee through the financials which had been broken down into income and expenditure across the budget headings of Total entity, Corporate, Observatory and Planetarium showing the actuals for April and May 2025 and forecasts for the remaining months and financial year. He advised that he would be reviewing the figures and assumptions with Department Heads and the Director.
- 11.3 In terms of the Business Plan, Mr Blaauw explained that this could not be achieved until the budget was finalised.
- 11.4 Mr Blaauw responded to queries from Mr Cox regarding the projected deficit, the potential of being able to capitalise project costs and the cashflow position. The paper provided had been based on carrying on without additional funding.
- 11.5 The Chair referred to the developing situation and the importance of the next meeting with DfC. He believed savings could be made in relation to the project when the capital funding came through.
- 11.6 It was noted that the deficit would be reviewed internally before any approach was made to the Department. It was also noted that income through the Planetarium contributed towards making the organisation more sustainable.

## 12.0 POLICY

12.1 A paper providing an update on temporary amendments to policies had previously been circulated.

12.2 Mr Cox proposed that the paper be accepted.

## 13.0 AOB

13.1 The Committee noted the:

- meeting schedule July-December 2025;
- availability of training as outlined in the report;
- Minutes of ARAC held 19 May 2025 (draft);
- Minutes of SPRC held 27 May 2025 (draft);
- Minutes of REAC held 2 June 2025 (draft);
- PR Coverage Report March 2025;
- PR Coverage Report April-May 2025.

13.2 The Chair referred to discussion earlier in the meeting in respect of the December Management Committee and asked members to revert to Mrs Brown in terms of the viability of the proposal.

13.3 Professor Burton reported that he had just (*as the MC was taking place*) received correspondence from Colum Boyle, Permanent Secretary, confirming that OBC 1, as amended following the Casework Committee on 11 June 2025, had been reviewed and the Department was content to approve it. The Department would provide the £3.974m match-funding.

13.4 The correspondence was well-received by the Management Committee.

## 14. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED

## 15.0 AOB

### 15.1 Acceptance of Heritage Lottery Funding

Mr Cox proposed and the Management Committee duly approved acceptance of the funding offer from Heritage Lottery. **Action MC 30/6/26-09 – Acceptance of funding offer from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.**

15.2 Professor Burton undertook to contact Heritage Lottery.

The Chair thanked members for their attendance and those present proceeded to Kepler for the Session with Staff.

The meeting concluded at 12.55 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: