



Business Plan

2025-2026



1. Introduction

Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Corporate Strategy 2021-26 was formally approved by the Management Committee on 20 September 2021.

The 5-year strategy is built around four strategic themes of:

- Enduring Relevance
- National and International Standing
- Offering More
- Pursuing our Priorities

The four streams are independent yet interlocking to provide a secure framework of viability, sustained growth, continued scientific progress and enhanced cultural offering.

A mid-term review of progress against the strategy was commenced in November 2023 and updated to year end 31 March 2024, confirming that whilst some modifications to success factors is required the overarching strategic priorities remain valid. With two year's remaining in the delivery of the current strategy much has been achieved. The review also highlights a number of unforeseen external and internal factors that have shaped AOP's progression and influenced its objectives and future priorities.

Two major drivers continue influencing the 2025-2026 Business Plan are:

1. the first phase of the redevelopment plan for the AOP estate post-OBC approval and
2. the formal partnership entered into with Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies – Dunsink Observatory and Birr Science and Heritage Foundation: The Astronomical Observatories of Ireland.

These projects, coupled with the challenges of public sector funding pressures set the focus for this business plan built around four overarching themes to:

- Maintain Organisational Performance at current or increased levels of service and to continue to deliver across all strategic priorities to sustain our reputation as a distinguished national and international research institute and centre for education and public engagement, whilst at the same time maintaining the highest level of governance and accountability required from a public sector body.
- Maximise Efficiencies and Self-Generated Income to support the achievement of objectives and minimise the impact of stagnant and/or reduced public funding.
- Progress the Redevelopment Project in accordance with the Delivery timetable set out in the Outline Business Case and external funding conditions.
- Participate in the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland (AOI) Partnership in accordance with the MoU and delivery of agreed priorities.

These four core priorities are key to success, mapping across all the Strategic Themes in the Corporate Plan (Appendix 1).

1.1 AOP Core Activities

AOP's statutory purpose is to develop and improve the knowledge, appreciation and practice of astronomy and related sciences. It does this through:

- 1.1.1 undertaking academic research in astronomy at the Observatory
- 1.1.2 delivering an education and scientific outreach programme through the Planetarium and STEM ambassadors.
- 1.1.3 safeguarding and promoting AOP's unique scientific and historical heritage.
- 1.1.4 underpinning these objectives by robust governance, accountability and transparency, and effective internal support function

1.2 Business Plan 2025-2026

This business plan will be the last one framed within delivery of the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Corporate Strategy 2021-2026.

1.3 Provisional Budget

The Department for Communities (DfC) communicated on 13 May 2025 an increase in the annual budget for AOP from £ 2,082k in 2024-2025 to £ 2,186k in 2025-2026.

The increase in funding of £ 104k is an increase of 5.0% per annum

The table below is the communication from DfC advising the Resource allocation for 2025-2026:

Resource Budget

The indicative opening Resource Budget allocation for 2025-26 is set out below.

	2025-26 ALLOCATION £'000
Non Ringfenced Resource DEL	2,186
Ringfenced Resource DEL (non-cash - depreciation/impairments)	696

Accordingly, a provisional budget been prepared based on the non-ringfenced amount of £ 2,186k.

The provisional budget was prepared for the year commencing with the actual numbers for the months from April to August 2025. The remaining seven months were prepared from an extrapolation of the first five months for the remainder of the year. A sanity check was done against the actual results from the previous financial year, 2024/2025 to ensure that the budget results are realistic.

The budget also includes income for the Observatory (Grants for research £ 130.1k) and the Planetarium (Admissions, Gift Shop and Café, Grants for education £ 698.7k).

Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

Provisional Budget - April 2025 to March 2026

	Total 2025/2026	Total 2024/2025
Income		
Corporate	2,186,000	2,102,000
Observatory	158,250	184,688
Planetarium	781,650	796,969
Total Income	3,125,900	3,083,657
Expenditure		
Direct Costs	246,032	212,057
Personnel	2,126,103	2,102,269
Education	18,515	15,303
Sales and Marketing	107,181	81,402
Infrastructure	274,059	266,690
Administration	354,010	405,936
Total Expenditure	3,125,900	3,083,657
Net Surplus/(Shortfall)	0	0

2.0 Strategic Objectives

2.1 Maintain Organisational Performance

AOP's budget pressures have been considered in depth by a Sub-Committee of the Management Committee at two special meetings in December and January 2024/25, when funding pressures were considered including:

- General inflationary pressures
- Provision for pay awards (based on direction from DfC)
- A reduction in overhead contribution from STFC grants
- Anticipated requirements to continue the redevelopment project

The Sub-Committee agreed some initial savings (including one-off, one-year only contributions that will not be available in 2025/26 of £168,000). An indicative opening budget allocation of £2,186,000 has been allocated, subject to final decisions following EQIA consultation, this budget is sufficient to cover AOP's identified inescapable pressures.

Furthermore, taking on board the one-off savings of circa £168,000 included in current estimates, which will not be available in 2025/2026, if the current position of no inflationary increase and/or budget reduction continues in future years the only possible avenue AOP will have to reduce expenditure will be to reduce staff. As well as being detrimental to AOP's ability to meet its objectives, this would require a long lead in time as there will be a delay in savings being realised if redundancy packages are required.

A resource budget is provided in paragraph 1.2.1 based on the above considerations.

Fulfilling the objectives set out below is key to sustaining the unique research-informed character of AOP education offering.

Objective 1: to retain the current baseline complement of research staff necessary to ensure the minimum level of critical mass for a research organisation is maintained.

The current level of research staff is 6.6 full time equivalent which includes 5 tenured astronomers, a fixed term Öpik Fellow and assumes 10% Director and 50% Head of Research. In addition, a small number (between 1 and 3) of Post Doctoral Research Associates (PDRA) are engaged, usually on 3-year projects funded by research grants. Any reduction in staffing levels within Research will have significant detrimental impact on AOP's ability to continue as a credible international research organisation which needs to retain a minimum number of researchers to remain viable and vibrant over the long term. AOP considers its current staffing levels are at the minimum level to provide critical mass for the long-term viability of its research programme, in particular in relation to securing research grants.

In addition to the core staffing currently included in the baseline, AOP has been considering skills gaps which are restricting it from operating at the desired level of performance. In particular, the loss of a part-time temporary Research Assistant, due to initial cost savings agreed, has highlighted the value of a resource to provide software support for a variety of scientific systems, even on a small scale, and how much added value that brings to the organisation.

Strategic Action:

Development of an AOP Research Strategy to assist engagement with external stakeholders and funders, raise AOP's profile as an active research organisation and support the redevelopment plans.

Objective 2: to maintain the vitality of the PhD programme by enrolling a minimum of 3 new Astronomy PhD students each year to maintain a minimum student population of 12 over the 4-year study period.

AOP receives an allocation of one 50% STFC-funded scholarships (the balance of 50% being borne by AOP) per year (or one new student every other year). To maintain a rolling programme of 12 students over a 4-year term AOP needs to plan for an intake of 3 new students per annum, with the need to budget for all 3 from AOP budgets on alternate years. This plan is challenging and not always possible to implement within available resources, resulting in a gradual decline in student numbers. Savings included in current budgets have resulted in a planned intake of 2.5 students in 2024 (1 STFC funded, 1 AOP funded and one part funded shared scholarship with DIAS/Dunsink: The Lindsay Scholar) meaning that AOP's target will not be achieved this year and will result in a drop to an Astronomy PhD student cohort of 8 students in the academic year 2024/25, with additional decline in future years if intake cannot be maintained at an acceptable level.

In addition to the Astronomy PhD programme added value has been achieved through successful applications to the AHRC (Arts & Humanities Research Council) for two enrolled history-related PhD students to the cohort. Whilst these add diversity to the student body, they are outside the target for the Astronomy PhD student cohort and do not impinge on AOP finances.

Strategic Action:

Explore options to safeguard and expand AOP's PhD programme (incorporated into Research Strategy).

Objective 3: to retain a baseline level of staff that will ensure AOP can continue to provide a vibrant programme of activities and events throughout the year to maintain/increase 2025/26 visitor numbers and customer satisfaction levels.

The Education Team currently includes 11.5 full-time equivalent staff to include an Education and Outreach Manager, 2 Operations Managers, 2 Senior Education Officers, 2 Education Officers, 3 Education Assistants a Receptionist and a Tours and Outreach Officer, plus a 10% contribution from the Director. In order to maximise use of the skills sets within the team and increase creativity and maximise flexibility the organisational structure is regularly reviewed. A business case to include provision for payment of an allowance for undertaking work at a higher level is being considered and an opportunity to include a creative post to develop in house dome shows within existing staff resources and/or increased income generation is being explored.

The core structure is lean and supplemented with a budget for casual cover at peak times. Maintaining the high level of staff skills and customer service is the challenge faced if there is over reliance on casual cover.

Visitor numbers in the last two years have been close to their highest ever recorded in the Planetarium and at times are limited by capacity. In particular, the number of schools that can be accommodated is essentially at capacity due to the layout of the Planetarium building. For the summer period, when visitor numbers peak, we demonstrated that providing additional capacity through provision of a marquee will bring in additional numbers, however this cannot be maintained on a regular basis due to both the additional hire cost, and the loss of car-parking. Investment in an events programme to encourage advance booking and target off-peak event slots to where spare capacity is available enables our ambition here to maintain these visitor numbers without having this additional capacity. It is recognised this is a challenging target which may be impacted by external factors outside our control.

Further, AOP has over the past year developed on off-site programme funded through external grants that has allowed us to increase the overall visitor engagement. However the cost of these off-site events are generally covered by the grants, they are not income-generating per-se, though may subsequently lead to additional on-site visitation.

Strategic Action:

Alignment of Operational plans and individual staff action plans with business plan objectives.

Objective 4: continue to safeguard and maintain our built and natural heritage and historic instruments and collections.

Since 2020 AOP has been able to employ a part-time Collections Officer through various funding sources, most recently National Lottery Heritage Fund (project due to end 31/08/2024) this is supplemented by a 10% contribution from the Director (0.53 FTE). Continued investment in AOP's heritage to safeguard its future are key elements within the redevelopment and Astronomical Observatories of Ireland themes. Award of a development grant from National Lottery Heritage Fund will provide resources to engage with the community and deliver pilot projects. This will include 3 new staff members associated with heritage:

- Collections Officer (continuation of a current part-time post at the end of current funding)
- Volunteer Co-ordinator (new part-time post to be recruited)
- Technical/Instruments Officer (new full-time post to be recruited)

Another key area of AOP's heritage is its unbroken weather records with continued daily weather measurements since 1795. To retain the historic manual recording of the weather 365 days a year AOP is heavily reliant on one staff member for the bulk of this work (especially for weekends and holiday periods). A more sustainable rota and payment incentives for occasional weather readers is being explored.

Strategic Action: Alignment of Operational plans and individual staff action plans with business plan objectives

Objective 5: to retain baseline levels of staff that will ensure AOP can continue to maintain a governance framework which reflects best practice and provides the necessary assurances to stakeholders as set out in the Partnership Agreement between AOP and DfC.

In order to be able to deliver its functions successfully AOP relies on a core Corporate Team to support the Director in running the business in accordance with the principles, rules, guidance and advice in Managing Public Money Northern Ireland (MPMNI) and other applicable guidance and instructions. The Corporate Team also contribute to ensuring an effective framework of governance to support the Board of Governors and Management Committee in providing accountability and assurance in the effective performance of AOP is in operation. The baseline staffing level of 10.4 FTE has remained static whilst the workload and demands on the team has risen significantly since first established and this looks set to continue, including support for the redevelopment project and AOI partnership and introduction of new sub committees. Any reduction in current staffing levels would seriously compromise AOP's ability to fulfil its governance commitments and meet the accountability requirements of external funders. The team includes a Head of Finance and Corporate Services, 2 Finance staff, 2 ICT staff, 4 Corporate Support staff and a Grounds & Meteorological Officer. Proposals to realign staff resources to meet the needs of the next phase of the development project are currently being explored. Proposals include the appointment of a Chief Operating Officer to take responsibility for the Corporate, Planetarium and Redevelopment functions of AOP.

In addition to the core staff AOP employs a part-time assistant groundskeeper supported by the Workability NI Programme. This post has minimal cost and provides an important function in creating a good first impression for visitors to the AOP estate as well as a fulfilling employment opportunity for the postholder.

There are many vulnerabilities/critical risks within this team ranging from single point of failure to retained corporate knowledge and unique skills sets. In particular, staff cover to maintain physical recording of AOP's daily weather records 365 days a year is highly reliant on the availability and goodwill of one employee.

Strategic Action:

Alignment of Operational plans and individual staff action plans with business plan objectives.

2.2 Redevelopment Project

The Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Corporate Strategy 2021-2026 outlined the need for the redevelopment of the Planetarium and Observatory in Armagh to:

1. Preserve the 230-year-old Observatory for decades, if not centuries, for many future generations to experience and enjoy.
2. Construct a new LED Planetarium, in addition to the existing Planetarium, as a world-class institution not only for the use and enjoyment of the people of Northern Ireland and the world at large, but as a world-class research and education facility in conjunction with Queens University in Belfast.

The proposed redevelopment plan is separated into two phases:

1. OBC 1 – The planning and design of the new LED Planetarium commencing in the third quarter of 2026-2026 and ending at the end of the fourth quarter in 2027-2028.
2. OBC 2 – The restoration of the existing 230-year old Observatory and the construction of a new LED Planetarium in addition to the existing 57-year-old Planetarium, in itself a heritage building (1968).

During the 2024-2025 financial year, the updated and revised OBC1 for the Development Phase of the redevelopment project was approved by AOP's Management Committee and submitted to DfC.

Funding required for the Outline Business Case (OBC1) was approved by DfC on 30 June 2025. Subject to continued capital funding being accessible in the next two financial years, and in terms of the funding application, a total amount of £ 3,974k has been provisionally approved for the project.

Previously, The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) had allocated funding in the amount of £ 1,323k which was dependent on funding procured from other sources amounting to three-fold of the funding allocated by NLHF.

The funding grant from DfC is 75% of the total funding grant of £ 5.297m, with the balance of 25% being funded by NLHF.

The funds will be provided over the three years ended 31 March 2028 in the allocations reflected in the Table below:

Financial Year	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	TOTAL
NLHF	£210.5K	£687.5K	£425K	£1.323m
DfC	£639.5K	£2,062.5K	£1,272K	£3.974m
Total	£850K	£2750K	£1,697K	£5.297m

The funding provided by DfC will be provided quarterly in advance, while the funding provided by NLHF will be quarterly in arrears upon receipt of all documentation to the specific requirements of the funding grant.

Work to develop the new strategy has commenced now that clarity regarding realistic timelines for AOP's future development to realise its long-term ambitions and vision has been received.

A 'Permission to Start' form for the activities of OBC1 was submitted to the NLHF on 31 August 2025 and granted on 24 September 2025

Objectives:

- Implement Governance and staffing support structure for the AOP Redevelopment Project.
- Maximise use of internal resources and grant funding to deliver in accordance with the Redevelopment Project Plan and funders terms of offer.

2.3 Corporate and Governance

2.3.1 Internal Resources

During the 2024-2025 financial year the Head of Corporate Services and Head of Finance both retired from employment at Armagh Observatory and Planetarium. The two vacant positions have been combined to create the position of Head of Finance and Corporate Services, with effect from April 2025.

2.3.2 Reorganisation

During the first quarter of 2025/2026, the 'SIB Recommendations to Armagh Observatory and Planetarium' report issued on 25 May 2025 includes the following recommendation "AOP should consider evolving its senior management structure to adapt to a more fully commercial role".

2.4 Research

AOP is engaged in front-line research in several key areas of astrophysics, ranging from the study of our Sun and Solar System to distant galaxies. This is in keeping with the long and varied history of scientific achievements of the Armagh Observatory and in close alignment with the broad priorities of the strategic roadmap for European Astronomy.

With its international reputation on such a variety of Astronomy subjects, AOP research authoritatively underpins the unique research-informed education and outreach offering of the Planetarium and supports the training of highly skilled PhD students, which contributes both hiring and educating the next generations in STEM subjects.

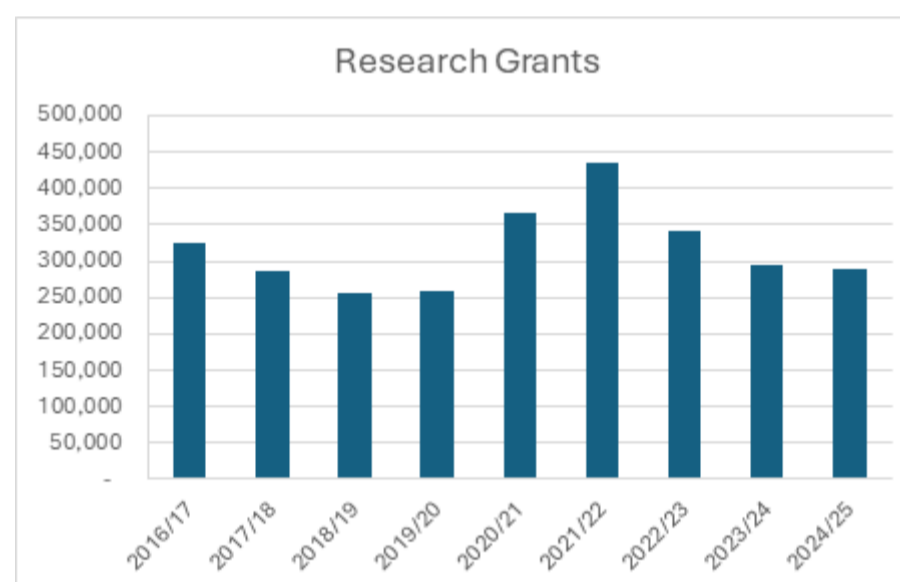
AOP research is delivered by its Director, Head of Research and a staff complement of five Astronomers, in addition to AOP's Öpik fellow, post-doctoral research assistants (typically between 1 and 3) and PhD students (presently 10 on-site), who are all supported by bespoke ICT infrastructure at AOP as well as key resource budget allocations for publishing results in specialised peer-reviewed journals and for travel in order to present such findings at international conferences.

To support AOP research, research staff regularly bid for external grants to fund research 3 PhD students plus a new Opik Fellow commencing work in 2025-26 and also requires operating spares in case of breakdown or other loss. Thus it is anticipated that a minimum of 5 laptops (MacBook Pro) will be procured this year.

It is important to note, however, that AOPs' research grant income is subject to large fluctuations (by up to ~70%, see historic graph below) as the number of applications is limited by the small size of AOP's research personnel and the set frequency of application calls.

For a small organisation, such grant income volatility can have a big impact on the level of research undertaken, since it is through this external funding that AOP can drive specific, new and often also collaborative research projects by supporting research assistants and PhD students.

This funding volatility, compounded by the limited research funding options outside the main UKRI landscape, illustrates how AOP is already at a critically low number of research staff, below which its research would become not only financially unsustainable, but also incapable of ensuring the unique research-informed offering of the Planetarium.



For 2025/2026, research income budgeted is based on current grant income confirmed. In support of its student programme, AOP recruited one new PhD student in October 2024 together with a Lindsay student where the costs are shared with TCD and DIAS. Both of which will incur a full year's cost in 2025/2026. In addition, we have recruited 1 AOP sponsored student, replacing one AOP-sponsored finishing student, and one student partly funded by ESA both commencing in October 2025. Student costs, excluding those fully funded by STFC, have increased by £17k.

2.5 Education and Outreach

AOP offers a comprehensive education programme designed to inspire and educate individuals about astronomy and space science. The programme includes an onsite schools programme tailored to all ages from Nursery to Third Level to engage students with interactive workshops and inspiring full dome content covering Earth, space, and the physical world in order to ignite interest in STEM subjects.

A GCSE programme for Northern Ireland and a Junior Cycle programme for Republic of Ireland schools provide tailored modules for teachers to choose from which link directly with the curriculum.

A vibraprogramme was established in recent years with external funding and provision of a Tours and Outreach Officer. Outreach will continue to now be a core programme for schools that cannot visit us due to geographical distance and also to engage in science festivals and special events.

During 2024/2025 an after-school STEM education programme "Space Cadets" for 7 to 11-year-olds, offering themed, one-hour weekly sessions to cultivate interest in space science was proposed and only ceased due to staffing pressures from the loss of education staff during the course of the year.

Through the "Bold Futures" programme, the planetarium collaborates with local autism support groups to make astronomy accessible to all students. Makaton, British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, Irish and Ulster Scots shows are also available for groups.

Stargazing nights were fully booked, reaching full capacity. Additionally, corporate hire of the dome for music shows was piloted this year, yielding successful outcomes. Our summer season fell short of projected numbers. Insights from the TNI and ASDC conferences confirmed that this was a widespread trend across the visitor attraction sector in the UK and Ireland.

A funding application for the NI STEM Ambassadors programme was successful, securing a two-year contract. Recruitment for two positions, Operations Manager and Education Assistant, has been successfully completed. Additionally, an Education Officer has been promoted to the role of Digital Theatre Producer and Astronomy Communicator.

To maintain high levels of visitor engagement and activity, both in quality and quantity, it is essential to sustain staffing levels within our Education team. This team is responsible for delivering programmes and events and, when needed, assisting in the reception, shop, and café areas. During peak non-term times, they are supported by casual staff, maintained at a level that meets seasonal demands. To grow our audience and visitor numbers we need to also maintain our operating days which are currently Tuesday - Sunday and begin to look at our afternoon market for expansion opportunities.

2.6 Safeguarding and Protecting Heritage

AOP aspires for the Observatory to be inscribed by UNESCO as World Heritage, as part of a transnational nomination involving Armagh with Birr and Dunsink in ROI through the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland partnership. Birr and Dunsink Observatories have been admitted to the UNESCO Tentative List of Ireland; we are now seeking similar status which UNESCO Tentative List of the UK for Armagh. This would then allow us to begin the process for making the transnational application to UNESCO for Armagh–Birr–Dunsink as a single "Property" on the World Heritage list. In addition to consideration of their outstanding universal value (OUV), authenticity and integrity, an important part of the application will be the management plan. This includes the protection of the Property, in particular those characteristics which contribute to the OUV. The preparation of the application is a significant undertaking and will require input from a wide range of skill sets, in particular those involving conservation of heritage.

AOP previously engaged a Collections Manager for 3 years funded by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This grant funding ended on 31 December 2024 creating a funding pressure on AOP to continue the post. This post is critical to the success of a number of ongoing projects, not least the UNESCO World Heritage bid and considered essential to maintain. Provision to continue to fund this post is included in the new Heritage Lottery grant funding received.

The Collections Manager post is maintained at its current level to support ongoing work on UNESCO WH and the redevelopment project. This is now covered through funding received from the NLHF.

2.7 Key Performance Indicators

No	Target	2024/2025 Target	2025/2026 Target	Variance	Variance %	Progress			
						30.06.25	31.08.25	30.11.25	31.03.26
1	Maintain overall on-site visitor numbers:	72,000	67,000	-5,000	-7.5%	15,654	28,981		
	Public	60,000	55,000	-5,000	-9.1%	11,351	24,678		
	Schools	12,000	12,000	0	0.0%	4,303	4,303		
2	Outreach – Maintain off-site engagement numbers	11,500	11,500	0	0.0%	4,500	5,741		
3	Achieve 90% of visitors recording a satisfaction rating of 4 or 5 stars	90%	90%	0%	0.0%	87%	89%		
4	Achieve 5% uplift in income from admissions and trading	545,618	570,000	24,382	+4.5%	126,498	230,513		
5	Non-School Group Bookings	N/A	66	N/A	N/A	21	45		
6	New Space Inspiration Ambassador Sign-Ups	N/A	6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A		
7	Space Inspiration Interactions	N/A	24,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A		

Appendix 1: Mapping Against Strategic Themes

Corporate Strategy Pillar	Business Plan Theme
<p>Enduring Relevance:</p> <p>AOP’s unique heritage makes it a valued asset in terms of tourism, education and research, and a much-cherished presence in the community, both in Armagh and Northern Ireland.</p> <p>We will continue to deepen and enhance that unique combination, ensuring that AOP’s continued role in promoting science retains local, national and international significance.</p> <p>National and International Standing:</p> <p>AOP enjoys a reputation as a distinguished national and international scientific research institute. We will continue to create opportunities and partnerships to enhance our standing as an education provider and a key contributor to the goal of giving children the best start in life. Working in conjunction with education authorities we will maintain and enhance our role as a key institution in local STE(A)M curricula, becoming a regional/national hub for public outreach and explaining Big Data science.</p> <p>Enhanced visitor experience:</p> <p>We are committed to an ambitious plan for state-of-the-art data visualisation facilities. This will allow us to explain and explore ideas in stunning new and engaging interaction. Technology is not the goal, it is the means to deliver, share and inspire.</p> <p>Pursuing our Priorities:</p> <p>To realise our plans and achieve our goals is built on three key priorities (1) state of the art Research and Planetarium facilities (2) the need to grow our capacity (3) the need to add skills across the organisation.</p>	<p>Maintain Organisational Performance at current or increased levels of service and delivery to continue to deliver across all strategic priorities to enhance our reputation as a distinguished national and international research institute and centre for education and public engagement, whilst at the same time maintaining the highest level of governance and accountability required from a public sector body.</p> <p>Maximise Efficiencies and Self-Generated Income to support the achievement of objectives and minimise the impact of static or reduced public funding.</p> <p>Continued participation in the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland (AOI) Partnership in accordance with the existing MoU and delivery of agreed priorities.</p> <p>Progress the Redevelopment Project in accordance with the Delivery timetable set out in the Outline Business Case and external funding conditions.</p>