MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL VISITATION BY THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS HELD IN THE BOARDROOM ARMAGH PLANETARIUM AT 11.00 AM ON TUESDAY 13 MAY 2025

Present: His Grace, The Most Reverend J McDowell (Chair), The Very Reverend Dean S Forster, The Venerable Dr P A Thompson, The Venerable E Cairns, Revd Canon M Hagan MBE, Revd Canon G McMurray, Revd Canon A Totten OBE, Mr G Cox, Ms S Leslie, Archbishop E Martin and Mr R Wilson OBE

Apologies: Revd Canon D Hilliard and Professor M Topping

In attendance: Professor M Burton (Director), Mr M Blaauw (Interim Head of Corporate Services), Professor M Sarzi (Head of Research), Mrs S Mackle (Head of Education and Outreach), Mr J Briggs (Chair of Management Committee) and Mrs L Brown (Corporate Manager)

1. OPENING REMARKS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Annual Visitation, extending a particular word of welcome to Mr Mike Blaauw, Interim Head of Corporate Services.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received as outlined above.

3. DECLARATIONS 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's potential conflicts of interest being Chief Executive of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and a Member of the Board of Governors of the Royal School, Armagh were noted. A potential conflict of interest was also recorded for the Archbishop of Armagh and the Dean of Armagh as Governors of the Royal School.

4. MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL VISITATION OF 7 MAY 2024

The minutes of the Annual Visitation of the Board of Governors of 7 May 2024 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

5.1 There were fifteen outstanding actions arising from previous meetings, eleven of which had been completed. The four remaining ongoing matters would be picked up on during the meeting.

5.2 There were no matters arising raised.

6. CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

6.1 The Chair reported on retirements and appointments to the Chapter since the last meeting advising that Revd Canon Barry Paine and Revd Canon Norman Porteus had retired and Revd Canon Andrew Totten OBE and Revd Canon Gary McMurray had been appointed. There remained two Chapter vacancies on the Board.

6.2 The Chair reported that the appraisal of the Chair of the Management Committee had been completed. Henceforth this would be conducted by a senior member of the Department.

6.3 **Partnership Agreement**
A copy of the signed Partnership Agreement between the Department for Communities and AOP had previously been circulated. Professor Burton reported that a review was under way. Some minor changes, though nothing of substance, had been identified. It was not intended to re-publish until after the 3-year full review.

6.3.1 Mr Cox pointed out that the document set out the relationship between AOP and DfC and the organisation would keep the Governors informed of relevant matters that might come out of this.

7. RESERVED MATTERS

7.1 **Membership Issues**
The Chair reported that Professor Margaret Topping had replaced Professor Alan Fitzsimmons as QUB's representative on the Board effective from 1 May 2025.

7.1.1 Professor Burton commented that the relationship with QUB was of strategic importance to AOP and over the past year this was being developed to expand beyond Astronomy.

7.1.2 Archbishop Martin and Ms Sammy Leslie's terms of office as Board of Governor appointments to the Board were due to expire on 31 December 2025 and 31 May 2026 respectively and both had accepted a second 5-year term.

7.1.3 **The Board approved the re-appointments of Archbishop Martin and Ms Leslie.**

7.1.4 Revd Canon Andrew Totten OBE had replaced Revd Canon Matthew Hagan MBE as a Board representative on the Management Committee.

7.1.5 The continuing membership of the three Board representatives on the Management Committee – Revd Canon Totten, Mr Cox and Mr Wilson was confirmed.

7.1.6 Following a public appointment exercise Minister Lyons had appointed Mr Ronan O'Hara; Ms Gráinne McVeigh and Professor Ruth Hunter to the Management Committee.

7.1.7 **The Board retrospectively approved the appointment of the three new DfC nominees.**

7.1.8 Professor Garret Cotter and Ms Shaaron Leverment had been appointed as Board co-optees to the Management Committee.

7.2 **SIB Review**
A paper on the recent SIB Review had previously been circulated and Mr Briggs took members through the report drawing attention to the two outputs; the seven recommendations; the shared vision and what he described as the 'New AOP'.

7.2.1 During presentation of the report Mr Briggs paid tribute to both Mrs Carol Corvan and Mr Leonard Knox who had recently retired from the organisation, leaving a considerable void. Both officers had undertaken much of the preparatory work for the 'New AOP' and during their tenure had moved AOP into a position where it had gained the confidence of the Department. He also thanked Mrs Sinead Mackle for the advances in outreach and education, particularly since Covid.

7.2.2 Mr Briggs stressed that the overall objective was about making AOP relevant, however, there was still something missing that they could not quite articulate at present and this would involve the place of Armagh, the history of AOP and a unique value proposition that nowhere else had.

7.2.3 Mr Briggs elaborated on each of the recommendations from the SIB Review which had been endorsed by the Strategic Oversight Committee and were recommended for Board of Governors approval:

- AOP should consider evolving its senior management structure to adapt to a more fully commercial role. This may involve changing the role of the Director and appointing a Director of Operations to take the lead on the management of functions other than research and education;
- Once AOP has decided its longer term senior management structure, it should proceed immediately to recruit a new Director of Operations or Head of Corporate Services and a new Head of Finance to replace the managerial capacity and expertise which the organisation has lost;
- Once AOP is notified by DfC that the Development Project can proceed it needs to set out to acquire capital project management expertise either by recruitment or by secondment of a suitably experienced project manager from another public body;
- AOP should recruit or obtain by secondment a partnership/networking manager and a heritage resource;
- AOP should enter into discussions with QUB or another public body to determine whether there is an opportunity to share administrative resources. The scope of the agreement would be a matter for negotiations but might include finance, HR, estates management and IT services;
- AOP should engage with the staff astronomers to develop a strategy to maintain and grow the critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students;
- AOP should collate and communicate information about its wider impacts on the community.

7.2.4 The Chair reminded the Board that it was being asked to make a decision on this matter.

7.2.5 Professor Burton stated that he endorsed the SIB report, had seen the full report and had provided some feedback. He said it succinctly set out the key matters that were essential to consider for the future health and vitality of AOP. He supported the report's focus on the centrality and importance of research and education in delivering AOP's mission as well as the need to retain a critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students to sustain frontline research activity. He also accepted the recommendation on the need to strengthen the corporate function within AOP including in particular the need to do so in order to take forward the plans for the redevelopment project.

7.2.6 Furthermore, Professor Burton advised the Board that it was his intention to retire in 2026 and that the next Annual Visitation would be his last as Director. It was his intention to leave AOP in a strong place to continue its mission of undertaking research, education and outreach in astronomy of world standing; of preserving and conserving its remarkable scientific heritage; and also of being able to undertake the redevelopment project to ensure the vitality of the organisation continued through the rest of the 21st century. He said he would play a role in succession planning and the search for the next Director, the person who would be taking forward the vision.

7.27 It had all been made possible by the support of an extraordinary team of people – staff, Board and Management Committee - who together made AOP an amazing place to work at and to come to. Professor Burton thanked everyone.

7.2.8 Professor Burton said that the dichotomy in responsibilities of Director, of leading a world-class research and education programme and also fulfilling the governance duties of Accounting Officer needed to be addressed as part of the future management and governance arrangements of AOP and before the appointment of his successor. With that in mind he advised that when the Director of Operations was appointed, i.e., the person taking on management and functions other than research and education, he would then take on the role recommended for the Director in the SIB report prior to the appointment of the new Director.

7.2.9 Following the meeting it was intended to email Management Committee members and staff regarding the recommendations from the SIB report and Professor Burton's decision.

7.2.10 The Chair recognised Professor Burton's contribution and the contribution he would continue to make, noting that there would be other opportunities for further comment in due course.

7.2.11 Referring to the organisation's plans, which to some degree were dependent upon decisions being made by DfC to leverage funding, the Chair commented that without the review and structure it could not take these forward. He sought questions from members.

7.2.12 Discussion ensued during which it was:

- agreed that:
  - a copy of the Executive Summary, which detailed the 7 recommendations, be circulated to all Board members;
  - a full copy of the report should be made available to the Governors at the earliest opportunity;
- noted that:
  - the full report was still being finalised however none of the recommendations would change;
  - the organisation was going through a period of change and it was important that some of members of the Strategic Oversight Committee, Management Committee and Governors remained close to the organisation during the change;
  - considerable time had been spent by Management Committee members and Strategic Oversight Committee members and there had been quite a bit of due diligence before getting to the current stage.

7.2.13 Ms Leslie expressed her support for the seventh recommendation and that heritage was being protected. She also enquired about the scope of the partnership/networking officer role and in response Mr Briggs referred to the AOI partnership, the strain this had placed on the organisation and the invaluable support provided by Ms Caitriona Mullan, all of which had led to the recommendation with the recognition that this would be required in relation to AOI and also other partnerships. Ms Leslie reiterated that it would be good to see the scope of the role.

7.2.14 In bringing the matter to a close the Chair noted that further material would be circulated following the meeting. He hoped the Board would be content to grant approval to proceed on the basis of the outline provided, unless some detailed matter was picked up on following receipt of the documentation, which would enable the staff and Management Committee to move forward with the recommendations.

7.2.15 **The Board approved the recommendations from the SIB report and charged the Management Committee with taking these forward.**

7.2.16 Mr Briggs advised that the next step was to engage with DfC advising of the Board's approval and to proceed accordingly.

7.2.17 Acknowledging the level of internal communication, Revd Canon Totten enquired if there was any work going on to seize the moment if the funding did come and communication of that to the wider world, recognising there was a window of opportunity to do so. In response, Mr Briggs confirmed that the opportunity for wider PR would be taken, stressing the importance of momentum and choreography he said that was why a strong Corporate department was needed. He added that they were awaiting the Minister's decision and thereafter would liaise with DfC in terms of what they could say.

7.3 **Astronomical Observatories of Ireland**

The draft Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland Oversight Board, held on 9 September 2024, at which AOP had been represented by Archbishops McDowell and Martin had previously been circulated for information.

7.3.1 The Chair reported that the next meeting was scheduled to take place in September 2025 and would be held in Birr.

7.4 **Updated Outline Business Case for AOP's Estate Redevelopment Project (OBC1)**

An updated Outline Business Case (OBC1) had previously been circulated.

7.4.1 Mr Briggs reported that DfC had requested that the previously submitted OBC be updated and resubmitted. Retrospective approval for the revised document was sought.

7.4.2 **The Board retrospectively approved OBC1.**

7.5 **Confidential item removed**

8. MATTERS FOR REPORT AND APPROVAL

8.1 **Report from Mr J Briggs, Management Committee Chair**

The minutes of five meetings of the Management Committee, six meetings of the Strategic Oversight Committee and four meetings of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee held since the last Visitation had been included with the Papers.

8.1.1 Mr Briggs commented that in 2024 the Strategic Oversight Committee had been formed. This had proved to be a very strong and useful Committee which created the opportunity to discuss strategic issues and insights. Skillfully Chaired by Ronan O'Hara he considered it would be a very useful Committee over the next few years.

8.1.2 In conclusion, Mr Briggs said he was pleased to report that the governance the Management Committee had come to expect had been maintained during the year.

8.1.3 There were no questions raised by members.

8.2 **Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24**
Draft Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25

Mr Blaauw reported that the Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24 had been circulated. The draft Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25 had also been circulated and would be submitted in draft form for audit during the summer.

8.2.1 In terms of the draft 2024/25 Accounts, Mr Blaauw drew attention to the £41k deficit, which was not unmanageable due to cash reserves tail from the previous year. The budget for 2025/26 was in the process of being finalised and thereafter would be submitted to DfC.

8.2.2 **The Board approved the Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24 and the draft 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts.**

8.3 **Director's Report for 2024/25**

At the outset Professor Burton noted that his Report, including the Director's Report to each of the four Management Committee meetings since the 2024 Visitation had also been included as accompanying papers. He reported that AOP continued to run an active research, education and outreach programme, underpinned by sound corporate governance. In terms of AOP's principal functions of research and education and outreach related to astronomy throughout the year AOP had produced approximately 100 scientific publications; delivered approximately 80 talks; edited one book; received 64,000 visitors on site and interacted with a further 24,000 people off-site.

8.3.1 Professor Burton guided the Board through his report elaborating briefly on some of the key highlights in relation to Corporate; Research; Education and Outreach and History and Heritage Activities.

8.3.2 In terms of Corporate Activities, the Board noted:

- AOP Redevelopment Project - a decision regarding match-funding from DfC to enable a grant award from Heritage Lottery to be accepted was awaited, with a 30 June 2025 deadline for acceptance of the award;
- the Astronomical Observatories of Ireland (AOI) Partnership:
  - three broad thematic areas were Research; Education, Heritage and Cultural Programming and Impact and Place Making;
  - first meeting of the Oversight Board had taken place in Armagh;
  - had received Shared Island funding;
  - UNESCO World Heritage aspirations:
    - Birr and Dunsink observatories had been added to the World Heritage Tentative List for Ireland. Applying for AOP's inclusion on the UK's UNESCO Tentative List was the next step;
    - the Outstanding Universal Value statement;
  - application to the Higher Education Authority in the Republic of Ireland for the North South Research Programme in respect of a project 'Strengthening North-South Training and Research in Astronomy and Space Science' (STARS);
  - had featured on RTE's Nationwide programme;
  - the Archbishops' Christmas Message on RTE had been filmed at AOP;
- staff movements - included the recent resignations of Carol Corvan, Head of Corporate Services and Leonard Knox, Head of Finance and Income Generation. Professor Burton expressed thanks to them for their service.

8.3.3 In terms of Research Activities, the Board noted:

- that three research highlights had been included in the Director's Report and that Professor Sarzi would be making a presentation on research;
- Postdoctoral Fellow and PhD Student movements;
- the top three PhD students offered places to commence in October 2025 had all accepted;
- the Memorandum of Agreement between QUB and AOP for PhD students had been signed for another 5 years;
- a Research Strategy had been completed, a copy of which had been circulated at the meeting;

- conferences attended and held;
- election of three AOP astronomers as Presidents to International Astronomical Union (IAU) Commissions;
- the changing publication landscape.

Professor Burton temporarily retired from the meeting during his update on Research Activities to receive an important phone call and Professor Sarzi continued with the update in his absence.

8.3.4 In relation to Education and Outreach activities Professor Burton referred Members to the Annual Report for full details. The Board noted:

- visitor statistics:
  - whilst overall visitor numbers for 2024-25 were lower than the previous year, AOP had performed stronger than other visitor attractions and during the winter months there had been more visitors than previously;
  - an events company now helped AOP to stage and deliver major events, with new programmes;
- the creation of new Dome Shows;
- the visit by NASA Astronaut Cady Coleman;
- AOP had been appointed STEM Ambassador Delivery Partner for Northern Ireland;
- recent projector problems, which were now largely resolved;
- the book edited by Matthew McMahon, Collections Officer and PhD student written by the international planetarium community to mark the global centenary of the Planetarium.

8.3.5 The Board noted that the Wisdom Begins with Wonder Heritage Lottery Project, which ended in December 2024, had enabled the level of History and Heritage activities undertaken during the previous few years.

8.3.6 In conclusion, Professor Burton drew the Board's attention to meteorological events and statistics. In response to a query from Ms Leslie it was confirmed that some of the timber had been retained with the intention of making something from the 300-year old Beech tree that was lost due to Storm Éowyn on 24 January 2025.

8.3.7 Discussion ensued in response to a query from Archbishop Martin regarding the deficit and the fall-off in footfall during which it was noted that:

- whilst school visits were at capacity, when there were cancellations at short notice, which was happening more frequently, it was on some occasions possible to replace that school visit through a waiting list;
- the low visitor numbers for July 2024 had been the anomaly and this had been experienced across the board, not just by science centres, but all visitor centres across the UK and Ireland. Easter Monday in 2024 had been such a bad day that the highest figures for booking holidays abroad had been noted by Tourism NI;
- the Planetarium's visitor numbers were better than pre-covid numbers being 20% greater than 2019, whereas the average across the Association of Science and Discovery Centres was 8% lower than 2019;
- the drop in visitor numbers translated to a fall in income;
- a special exhibition of 10-12 interactive exhibits was planned for the summer, commencing in June;
- visitor numbers were impacted by the weather, however July 2024 had not seen particularly great weather;
- projected visitor numbers were provided on page 70 of OBC1;
- there had been record visitor numbers during mid-term (February 2025);

- AOP actively sought to reach out to schools that were hard to reach or had financial constraints and funding secured had enabled visits to such schools;
- a shortage of Education Authority bus drivers was a likely reason for primary schools cancelling;
- 90% of cancellations were due to bus issues the remaining 10% related to weather conditions or strikes (teachers and transport).

8.3.8 During the discussion about footfall and income, Mr Briggs commented on the scope for a science and arts festival in Armagh, referring to a similar initiative at Jodrell Bank which saw 30,000 visitors over the weekend. He acknowledged that there needed to be the capacity and capability to bring about such an event.

Mr Wilson and Ms Leslie retired from the meeting at 12.25 pm.

8.4 **Research Highlights**

At the outset Professor Sarzi referred to the Research Strategy which identified three main priorities:

- research excellence;
- research training;
- visibility.

8.4.1 The research priorities were underpinned by four enablers:

- our people;
- infrastructure;
- partnerships;
- astronomical facilities.

8.4.2 With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation Professor Sarzi highlighted Kilonova Seekers, a Citizen Science based project on the Gravitational Wave Optical Transient Observatory (GOTO) as an example of research excellence and visibility supported by AOP access to astronomical facilities and leadership in international projects, made possible with DfC funding. The project had led to new discoveries and new astrophysics linked to future Vera C Rubin Telescope Large Synoptic Area Survey (LSST) research programmes. Each day there were around 4,000 classifications from around the work, from 50,000 users.

8.4.3 Professor Sarzi advised that an important element of research was coding. MESA was the software for stellar evolution studies used world-wide and AOP student Ethan Winch had been a key contributor at MESA international school in Sydney in June 2024. This was an example of AOP's research training.

8.4.4 Professor Sarzi turned his attention to grants and in particular the following successful Research Grants which demonstrated efforts to sustain AOP choices in data visualisation based on AOP infrastructure (DVL) and support research training:

- Leverhulme Grant – post to support AOP plans immersive research analysis. Leading to further grant application in software development;
- ESA consortium grant – to fund a PhD student starting in October 2025;

8.4.5 The outcome of two large research grant applications that had been based on the strong research standing of AOP staff and the hard work to weave the AOI Partnership was awaited:

- EU Horizon Advanced Grant – if successful, this would bring funding to build the largest research group of Massive Stars in Ireland;

- Higher Education Authority North/South Research Programme – based on the AOI Partnership, this would fund research and training in Astronomy Research, Education and Heritage.

8.4.6 Professor Sarzi reported on four STFC small grant applications to fund post-doctoral research assistance with a contribution towards essential overheads and elaborated on the challenging funding environment, demonstrating that low staff numbers exposed AOP to large STFC grant income fluctuations, making it critical to replace any retiring or research staff leaving AOP.

8.4.7 The Chair thanked Professor Sarzi for his presentation commenting that it highlighted the critical mass needed and the hope that the association with Queen's University Belfast would help with supporting this endeavour.

8.5 **Business Plan 2024-25 Objectives, including Key Performance Indicators**
Corporate Risk Register February 2025
ICT Risk Register February 2025
The above documents had previously been circulated. It was noted that a separate ICT Risk Register had been development due to the sophistication of computing needs with three separate IT Systems for Corporate, Research and the Planetarium.

8.6 **First Draft Business Plan 2025/26**
Professor Burton advised that the draft Business Plan previously circulated had been prepared by Mrs Corvan before she left. It had been based on two scenarios:
(i) the same funding allocation as had been received in 2024/25 and
(ii) receiving the funding needed to fully operate.
The telephone call he had taken early had clarified the allocation but at this stage he was not in a position to disclose this.

He had commenced discussions with Mr Blaauw and pointed out that the major uncertainty was funding for the redevelopment project. The Business Plan would be completed once the funding position was confirmed.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

9.1 **Annual Review of Information**
The Chair enquired if the Governors were content with the quantity and quality of information provided to enable them to fulfil their role.

9.2 **The Board confirmed that it was content.**

10.0 CLOSING REMARKS

10.1 The Chair thanked all the staff involved in the enormous amount and variety of activities at AOP. He commented that the recommendations for the future gave some indication of the pressures that must have been present since returning after Covid. He thanked Professor Burton for his leadership and Mr Briggs for his contribution and all members of the Management Committee.

The meeting ended at 12.40 pm

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chairman)

Date