

MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY FIFTH MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2025 AT 11.00 AM IN THE PLANETARIUM BOARDROOM

Present: Mr J Briggs (Chair), Mr G Cox, Professor M Darnley*, Ms S Leverment*, Professor M
* via Zoom Mathioudakis*, 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 M Blaauw
(Interim Head of Corporate Services and Finance), Mrs S Mackle (Head of Education
and Outreach) and Mrs L Brown (Corporate Manager)

Also in Attendance: Mr Colin McCrossan, Project Director AOP Estate Redevelopment Project/SIB and Ms
Sarah Villiers, SIB

Apologies: Professor G Cotter, Mr P Kennedy, Dr K Lemon and Mr R Wilson OBE

1. APOLOGIES AND OPENING REMARKS

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 30 JUNE 2025

3.1 On the proposal of Mr Cox, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the meeting of 30 June 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 fifteen actions arising from previous meetings, nine of which it was proposed to close. The
Committee was content to close these actions.

4.2 There were no matters raised.

5. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

5.1 At the outset the Chair reported that with lots happening, the redevelopment project having got under
way and many issues dependent upon each other it was very difficult to give a clear timeline and a
clear recommendation on lots of matters, however, he provided assurance to the Management
Committee that they were being properly addressed.

Management Committee's Annual Effectiveness Review

- 5.2 The Chair referred to the Management Committee's annual Effectiveness Review and sought views on the most appropriate means of completing this.
- 5.3 Mr Rooney pointed out that ARAC had a systematic way of evaluating effectiveness through the Northern Ireland Audit Office Questionnaire; SPRC had tried different techniques including a short questionnaire and discussion at Committee; the Management Committee had in the past completed questionnaires and held focus groups. As reviews were conducted annually there were not a lot of changes from year to year, however, they were useful to touch base and make sure there were no issues of which the Committee should be aware and addressing. In the absence of anything new in terms of good practice, he suggested Management Committee discussion as being as appropriate as anything.
- 5.4 The Chair suggested keeping the matter under review.
- 5.5 The following comments were provided by members:
- it was considered the Management Committee was broadly effective. There were no calls to do something really different and there would be if there was. It was a matter of continuous improvement;
 - with reference to the process of change, the Project Board and future structures were foremost. The Management Committee had adapted and would continue to adapt.

December Management Committee Meeting

- 5.6 The Chair confirmed that the December meeting would start on Sunday 14 December 2025 with an informal engagement event, perhaps in the Observatory, and the Management Committee would commence early on the Monday morning, followed by the staff briefing.

SIB Report Recommendations

- 5.7 With regards to the SIB report recommendations and timings on its implementation the Chair addressed each in turn:
- changing the role of a new Director in the future and appointing a Director of Operations (Chief Operating Officer) - this had been approved;
 - appointment of a Chief Operating Officer - efforts to bring in a temporary COO were being progressed in conjunction with the preparation for issuing a job advertisement. It was likely to be early 2026 before someone would be in place;
 - acquire capital project management expertise - this was deemed to have been achieved with Colin McCrossan, SIB, fulfilling the role of Project Director;
 - partnership/networking manager - currently resourced by Caitriona Mullan, discussions, including with QUB were being had, however there was no firm recommendation at present;
 - explore opportunity to share administrative resources - meetings had been arranged to discuss but there was nothing at present for Management Committee consideration;
 - critical mass of staff astronomers - at the Briefing prior to the meeting in progress Professor Vink had shared details of a project on which he was the Principal Investigator. There were also staff briefings scheduled for Monday 6 October 2025;
 - communicating the wider aspects of work of AOP - this was being progressed but nothing to share at present.
- 5.8 Mr Cox suggested that through SOC a Management Committee response to the SIB recommendations be prepared, to be brought to the Management Committee in December and the status updated at regular intervals until implemented. **Action MC 29/9/26-01 - SOC to draft Management Committee response to SIB Recommendations for December Management Committee meeting.**

- 5.9 The Chair confirmed that during the second part of the meeting the role of the SOC would be discussed.
- 5.10 With regards to the Redevelopment Project, the Chair reported that a formal meeting with the Department had not yet taken place.

CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED

Meeting Schedule 2026

- 5.15 The Chair advised that to reduce the burden and impact of meetings on all it was proposed to make the following changes to the annual meeting schedule from January 2026:
- return ARAC to the same day as the Management Committee meeting each quarter;
 - reduce frequency of SPRC meetings to ½ yearly, to be held on the same day as the Management Committee;
 - reduce frequency of REAC meetings to ½ yearly.
- 5.16 As Chair of SPRC Mr Rooney expressed surprise about not having being consulted about the proposal. He pointed out that SPRC had always met on the basis of there being a need to meet and in reality had met more than four times per annum. He was in favour of reducing the burden on staff facilitating meetings but felt that meetings should be arranged because of need, rather than because of a schedule. The ½ yearly proposal had not been discussed at the recent SPRC meeting. Indeed the SPRC Chair's report suggested the need to meet more frequently.
- 5.17 The Chair was content for SPRC to decide its own schedule and added that it fed into discussion to be had later in relation to the role of SOC and SPRC.
- 5.18 Professor Burton pointed out that he had brought the matter to an SOC meeting and Mr Rooney pointed out that it had not been discussed.
- 5.19 Professor Burton referred to the drain on resources scheduling meetings not already programmed in.
- 5.20 A meeting schedule for 2026 would be drawn up based on the recommendations proposed and that SPRC could decide upon its own schedule.

ARAC and REAC Terms of Reference

- 5.21 Revised Terms of Reference for both ARAC and REAC had been circulated with the proposed amendments tracked. The Terms of Reference, which had been reviewed by the relevant Committee, were recommended for Management Committee approval. The Management Committee approved the Terms of Reference.

Partnership Agreement

- 5.22 The light touch review of the Partnership Agreement had concluded. It was not intended to be republished, however, an updated designed document would be provided.

Membership

- 5.23 In terms of Membership, the Chair reported that the first term on the Management Committee for Professors Darnley and Jackman was due to end on 31 December 2025. A further and final 5 year term extension may be granted, subject to confirmation from STFC and DIAS that their continuing membership was acceptable and the willingness of the individual to continue to serve on the Committee. Formal engagement with STFC and DIAS on this matter would be progressed. Professor Darnley confirmed his willingness to accept a second and final term.

Management Committee Milestone

- 5.24 It was noted that the Management Committee was approaching its 40th anniversary, the inaugural meeting having taken place on 18 October 1985.

6. REPORT FROM DIRECTOR

- 6.1 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.

- 6.2 In terms of Corporate Activities the report provided updates in relation to OBC1 and The National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant; AOI Strategic Oversight Board; Staff Movements and Appointments and Visits to AOP. In particular the Committee noted:

- Permission to Start had been received from The National Lottery Heritage Fund;
- AOI Oversight Board had met on 11 September 2025;
- the resignation of Ceara Ryan, Accountant;
- appointments of Niamh Jordan, STEM Ambassadors Admin Officer; Erin Manson, PhD Student and Dr Ryan Begley, Öpik Fellow and Ashly Simon, temporary Accountant.

- 6.3 Research Activities included updates on the EU Advanced Grant; Postdoctoral Fellows; PhD Theses; PhD Students; HEA North South Research Programme; DVL Workshop and QUB collaborations. The Management Committee noted:

- Professor Vink's European Research Council Advanced Grant award;
- the recruitment process for the Öpik Fellow had attracted significant talent;
- Ethan Winch and Aaron Black had completed their PhDs;
- 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) had been unsuccessful;
- a workshop on data visualisation was scheduled for 9 October 2025;
- an application had been submitted to QUB for a collaborative PhD funded by the Department for Economy.

- 6.4 The Education and Outreach Activities included the Summer Visitor Statistics; Activities; STEM Ambassadors; Miscellaneous Activities; Planetarium Projector; Planetarium Flooding; Space Inspiration Funding and UKSA Cosmic Explorers Project. The Management Committee noted:

- activities during the June-August period had included co-hosting a conference with QUB; livestream screening in the Planetarium of the Rubin First Look Watch Party, the first experiment at Domecasting via the Digistar; Telescope Tuesdays; 'Ask an Astronomer' sessions and 'Cosmic Conversations';
- a STEM skills roadshow was being planned and a STEM NI LinkedIn launched;
- an event was held on Monday 14 July 2025 to celebrate 230 years of daily weather readings;
- the second dome projector was now exhibiting the Sony light engine fault;
- significant flooding had occurred in the Planetarium on Monday 15 September 2025;
- Space Inspiration Programme funding had been awarded;
- the Evaluation Report in respect of the UKSA Cosmic Explorers Project.

- 6.5 The History and Heritage Activities included updates on UNESCO World Heritage; Donations and Accessions and Volunteers. The Committee noted:

- a number of presentations had been delivered relating to the AOI and UNESCO aspirations;

- the pathway to World Heritage Inscription;
- the Historical Astronomical Observatories of Ireland's World Heritage Tentative List application was now included on the UNESCO website;
- AOP, through AOI, had joined a UNESCO network on the island of Ireland – UNESCO Together;
- there had been over three hundred hours of volunteering for the calendar year to date.

Professor Mathioudakis retired from the meeting at 11.57 am.

Confidential discussion removed

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 1 September 2025 had been linked to the Agenda. A report from the Chair of the Committee and an updated Corporate Risk Register had also been provided.

7.2 The Chair explained that following the ARAC meeting there had been some amendments made to the Corporate Risk Register to aid understanding of the document with an updated document being presented for approval.

7.3 In the absence of the ARAC Chair, Mr Rooney advised that the Report from the Chair covered the extent of the areas discussed. In particular he highlighted that:

- ARAC annual self-assessment had been completed - this did not change much from year to year;
- audit of the Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 had been completed with one P3 recommendation;
- the third internal audit area for the year was still to be identified.

7.4 ARAC had made the following recommendations for Management Committee approval:

- ICT Risk Register;
- updated Corporate Risk Register;
- Draft Bi-Annual Assurance Statement;
- Draft Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;
- Fraud Prevention Response Policy;
- Conflicts of Interest Policy.

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 1 September 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.

8.2 In particular Mr Rooney, SPRC Chair, highlighted:

- the main discussion points from SPRC's Annual Review of Effectiveness:

- there was still a role for SPRC with critical issues going forward;
- need to look at staff issues as much as the issues around future infrastructure;
- need to prioritise issues needing attention for future meetings;
- may be need for single issue agendas to allow sufficient discussion;
- some issues/routine business could be managed through correspondence;
- SPRC reviewed the skills gap paper quarterly. For a number of the gaps funding has been the issue. There were a number of additional posts and additional skills required and some would be funded through the redevelopment project. Other gaps that needed to be filled were across the whole organisation and making sure it was fit for purpose for the future. He flagged that this would become a bigger issue for the Management Committee;
- that the pay scales for Research Posts had been identified in regard to large research grant holders and whether AOP was competitive. He suggested this was an issue for REAC to have a look at.
- SPRC was content for the annual Staff Engagement Survey to be launched.

8.3 SPRC recommended Management Committee approval of the:

- Flexible Working Policy;
- AOP Employers Pension Discretions Policy.

8.4 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 In the absence of Dr Lemon, REAC Chair, Professor Sarzi briefly reported on the matters discussed by REAC. In particular he reported on the matters reserved by the Management Committee:

- REAC had reviewed its Terms of Reference and these had been previously circulated and approved earlier during the meeting;
- the Research Strategy had been revised to include Heritage Research, a copy of the reviewed strategy had previously been circulated.

Confidential discussion removed

9.6 Mr Cox prompted discussion regarding the appropriateness of having a strategic direction for the research at AOP rather than general principles during which it was noted that there were arguments for both. Because of the Planetarium it had already been decided to carry out a wide range of research rather than specialising.

9.7 The Chair recognised that there was a need for further discussion on this as it was integral to AOP's future development.

9.8 Professor Darnley felt that the Strategy should deal with income generation, recruiting the best researchers, but that areas of research should sit below the Strategy. Explaining how he had pivoted for an opportunity he said the Strategy should allow researchers the freedom to do that.

9.9 The Chair referred to the SIB recommendation and the need for a critical mass of research. He queried whether Professor Vink's project would bring a niche.

- 9.10 Professor Burton pointed out that when appointing someone in one academic area they may be there for 20+ years and the need to be careful of not going down a path that could lead to a dead-end.
- 9.11 Mrs Mackle reported that it was hoped to bring the Education Strategy to the Management Committee in December.
- 9.12 The Management Committee accepted the report and approved the Revised Research Strategy.

10. BUSINESS PLAN 2025-26

- 10.1 A draft Business Plan 2025-26 had previously been circulated. Mr Blaauw guided Members through the document which was influenced by two major drivers - the first phase of the redevelopment plan for the AOI estate post-OBC approval and the formal partnership between AOP, DIAS and Birr. It centred around the core activities:
- undertaking academic research in astronomy at the Observatory;
 - delivering an education and scientific outreach programme through the Planetarium and STEM ambassadors;
 - safeguarding and promoting AOP's unique scientific and historical heritage;
 - underpinning these objectives by robust governance, accountability and transparency, and effective internal support functions.
- 10.2 The Business Plan had been prepared based on the budget allocation of £2,186,000 and showed a projected loss of £1,200.
- 10.3 It was noted that the draft Business Plan, which had addressed the comments provided by DfC when first submitted, had been resubmitted to the Department.
- 10.4 Management Committee approved the draft Business Plan 2025-26 for formal submission to DfC.
- 10.5 A progress report on the 2025-26 KPIs had been circulated.

11. FINANCE

- 11.1 An Income and Expenditure Report to August 2025 and a Provisional Budget forecast for the financial year 2025-26 had previously been circulated.
- 11.2 Mr Blaauw guided members through the Income and Expenditure Report elaborating briefly on the Year to Date position. He reported that external grant income totalling approximately £54k was still to be included.
- 11.3 In response to a query from Mr O'Hara as to whether efficiencies achieved were negatively impacting on business, Mr Blaauw confirmed that they had to be more conservative about approving expenditure. It was pointed out that as there had been no capital allocation for the year AOP had no ability to replace failing equipment.
- 11.4 Mr Blaauw talked members through the Provisional Budget 2025-26 and in response to a query from Ms McVeigh he confirmed that it included provision for certain unfilled posts.

12.0 POLICY

12.1 A review of Heritage Policies had been undertaken and a paper summarising the changes to the policies and the rationale for same had previously been circulated. Management Committee approval of the amendments to the following policies was sought:

- History and Heritage Policy Documentation Handbook;
- Access Policy;
- Volunteer Policy and Procedural Handbook;
- Loans Policy;
- Conservation and Care Policy.

12.2 Mr Cox advised that he had discussed an amendment to Clause 1.14 of the History and Heritage Policy Documentation Handbook with Mr McMahon, to become:

The Board of Governors and Guardians, acting on the advice of the [AOP] professional staff and having regard to their statutory obligations (particularly paragraph 1(a) of Schedule 1 of the 1995 Order) may take a decision to return objects to a country or people of origin. The museum will take such decisions on a case by case basis; within its legal position and taking into account all ethical implications and available guidance.

Additionally, either at the start or end of the document, where convenient to add 'Definitions' the following definitions be added:

"Board of Governors and Guardians" means the Governors as defined in the 1995 Order.

"The 1995 Order" means the Armagh Observatory & Planetarium (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

12.3 On the proposal of Mr Cox, the Management Committee approved the policies and his proposed amendment.

13.0 AOB

13.1 The Committee noted the:

- meeting schedule October-December 2025;
- availability of training as outlined in the report;
- Minutes of ARAC held 1 September 2025 (draft);
- Minutes of SPRC held 1 September 2025 (draft);
- Minutes of REAC held 1 September 2025 (draft);
- PR Coverage Report June-July 2025;
- PR Coverage Report August 2025.

The meeting was temporarily paused and Ms Leverment retired from the meeting at 12:52 pm.

The meeting resumed at 1.05 pm with Mr McCrossan and Ms Villiers present.

14. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED

AOI

14.32 The Report of the Joint Management Committee to the Strategic Oversight Board presented at the meeting of the Strategic Oversight Board on 11 September 2025, produced by Caitriona Mullan, had previously been circulated.

14.33 The meeting of the AOI Strategic Oversight Board had been very successful.

14.34 Discussions regarding resourcing support for the AOI/Partnership/Networking Officer needed to be taken forward.

15.0 AOB

15.1 A query provide by Ms Leverment before her departure for consideration under AOB had already been raised and discussed.

The meeting concluded at 2.06 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: