

MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY SIXTH MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF ARMAGH OBSERVATORY AND PLANETARIUM HELD ON 15 DECEMBER 2025 AT 11.00 AM IN THE PLANETARIUM BOARDROOM

Present: Mr J Briggs (Chair), Mr G Cox, Professor M Darnley*, Mr P Kennedy, Dr K Lemon, Ms
* via Zoom S Leverment, Professor M 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

Apologies: Professor G Cotter, Professor C Jackman 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 29 SEPTEMBER 2025

3.1 On the proposal of Mr Cox, seconded by Ms McVeigh, the minutes of the meeting of 29 September 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 eight actions arising from previous meetings, three 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 By way of an overview, the Chair reported on good progress on a number of AOP’s major objectives – the redevelopment project; the relationship through AOI with Birr and Dunsink and the UNESCO project and the SIB report recommendations and in particular the relationship with QUB. Discussions with QUB were moving at speed and would be brought back to both the Management Committee and

ultimately the Board of Governors. The relationship with QUB was an issue for the Board of Governors in terms of the character, patrimony and heritage of AOP and they would want to be satisfied that what was being recommended was right for the future of AOP.

Membership Issues

- 5.2 The Chair reported that the term of office for Professors Jackman (DIAS) and Darnley (STFC) was due to expire on 31 December 2025. STFC had confirmed reappointment of Professor Darnley for a further and final 5 year term and Professor Jackman would be replaced as DIAS representative by Dr Eucharia Meehan, CEO and Registrar of DIAS. **Action MC 15/12/25-01 – Issue letters to Professor Jackman, Professor Darnley and Dr Meehan.**
- 5.3 The terms of office for DfC appointees Dr Lemon and Messrs Cox, Kennedy and Rooney were due to expire on 28 February 2026. Messrs Cox, Kennedy and Rooney were all willing to accept a further 5 year term. Discussions with Dr Lemon were ongoing.

Professor Mathioudakis joined the meeting at 11.05 am.

- 5.4 In response to queries from Mr Rooney, it was confirmed that DfC had been notified accordingly and, as required by their Terms of Reference, Membership of Sub-committees, which was to be reviewed every 5 years, would be reviewed at the next meeting.

External Review of Management Committee Effectiveness

- 5.5 Under the terms of the Partnership Agreement an external review of effectiveness of the Management Committee was required every 3 years. As SIB had conducted the Organisational Effectiveness review the Chair reported that he had asked SIB to consider undertaking the effectiveness review of the Management Committee. SIB had agreed to do so and Mr Stutt would commence this work in the New Year. He welcomed the opportunity this provided to challenge everything the Management Committee did, to be an examination of their effectiveness to achieve the redevelopment project and to challenge their relationships with the Department, the Council and staff. He said they had 2 years to bring the project to planning permission and a window of 5 years to really achieve their objectives and they needed to find a different way of dealing with governance. Mr Stutt would be asked to engage with each Management Committee member.
- 5.6 Mr Cox commented that as the SIB report and recommendation 1 related to changes to the Executive structure, it would be expected that the governance structure would be changed to mirror that; the job of a Director, even supported by a Chief Operating Officer, was not pure astronomy and there was a need to make that role effective; and the changes to the Terms of Reference for the SOC, which would be discussed later in the meeting, was now a different proposition with a review coming up. He welcomed the use of the same people who had undertaken the organisational review.

Update on Engagement with QUB

- 5.7 The Chair reported on high-level engagement with QUB with the aspiration to substantially improve the partnership and make it work better. The detail was still to be worked through. Whilst wanting to move forward as speedily as possible there was a need to be careful as it would substantially change the character of AOP and they needed to ensure they got it right.

Hosting of Conference or Symposium at AOP

- 5.8 The Chair reported briefly on discussions with the Archbishop and the desire to hold a major Conference or Symposium at AOP to maintain the profile of AOP and the momentum in relation to the Redevelopment Project. Acknowledging there was currently no budget or capacity to take this forward, he suggested they aim to achieve it by late 2026/early 2027. Further discussions would take place with the Archbishop in terms of making it a reality.

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 the Redevelopment Project; Astronomical Observatories of Ireland; Staff Movements and Appointments; Chief Operating Officer; Passing of AOP's 8th Director Mart de Groot; Passing of Margaret Cherry MBE; Visitors to AOP; Radon Measurements in the Bell Building; UK Involvement in the International Astronomical Union and the AOP Business Plan. In particular the Committee noted:

- Mr McCrossan would be joining the meeting later to update on the Redevelopment Project;
- Offaly County Council had agreed to act as the lead local authority in relation to the UNESCO project;
- discussions with ABC Council relating to a unified approach to UNESCO in Armagh;
- Professor Burton's election as a Trustee to World Heritage UK;
- three appointments had been made through The National Heritage Lottery Fund grant;
- recruitment for a Chief Operating Officer (COO) was under way;
- the engagement event with QUB on 12 November;
- raised Radon levels in the Bell Building;
- Armagh had been cited on at least three occasions in the Royal Astronomical Society's submission to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's review of the value of the International Astronomical Union to the UK Astronomy;
- AOP's Business Plan 2025-26 had been approved by DfC officials. Ministerial approval was awaited.

6.3 In response to a query from Mr Cox with regards to the timeline for the appointment of the COO and what if any other resources/roles needed to be filled to manage in the interim, Professor Burton explained that there were many internal pressures and people stepping up and how to appropriately compensate them for that was one of the challenges. There was also a need to strengthen the grants and governance side of the organisation, part of which it was believed could be supported through the redevelopment funding, and it may also be possible to support this role through the ERC grant.

6.4 Mr Cox said he would like, before Spring and perhaps through SPRC, to see a paper showing how the organisation was operating; providing assurance that it could function in the interim and that even though there were pressures, these were considered tolerable or otherwise.

6.5 Professor Burton pointed out that the staff structure should be something the new COO should have a role in and he was reluctant to make appointments that might be wrong for the organisation. He added that support to make temporary arrangements would be appreciated.

6.6 Research Activities included updates on the EU Advanced Grant; PhD Students; DVL Workshop; UKSA/ESA Proposal; QUB collaborations and Asteroid 7050 Shanekelly. The Management Committee noted:

- the ERC template Supplementary Agreement had been signed between the grant holder and AOP;
- discussions between QUB and AOP regarding the ERC grant;
- commencement of 4 new PhD students – three in Astrophysics and one History;
- each of the new Astrophysics PhD students had completed their MET observer accreditation;
- DVL opportunities and application to UK Space Agency for start-up funding;
- collaborative PhD Scholarship with QUB in History, for the next academic year;
- the naming of Asteroid 7050 Shanekelly in recognition of Mr Kelly's weather reading record.

- 6.7 Mr Cox welcomed the signing of the Supplementary Agreement; acknowledged that the detail was still to be worked out and emphasised that to be at the forefront and compete in a market for talent the learning needed to be applied fairly across existing colleagues and those they would want to bring in in the future as they could only attract world class talent if they were in the right market.
- 6.8 The Education and Outreach Activities included the Autumn Visitor Statistics; Activities; Dome Productions; STEM Ambassadors; Demystifying AI and Membership Scheme. The Management Committee noted:
- that off-site engagement figures were significantly lower than in 2024 due to the ending of two grants which funded this activity. Due to a change in eligibility, Northern institutions were no longer able to apply for funding from one of the funders - Research Ireland;
 - two new activities - a Sleepover and a 'Paint and Sip' Adult event;
 - positive responses from visitors;
 - as dome productions were limited by resource and capacity a 6 month Job Start funded position for a Production Assistant had been advertised;
 - to date, without any advertising, 25-30 members had signed up to the new annual Membership Scheme ("Stellar Annual Membership").
- 6.9 In terms of visitor numbers, Mrs Mackle noted that, with the exception of July and August, these were above those of the prior year. Lower summer visitor numbers was a trend across other visitor centres. The plan for Summer 2026 was to return to weekly themed activities and the soft launch of a membership scheme had also taken place to encourage repeat visitors.
- 6.10 Mrs Mackle briefly elaborated on the pilot Sleepover and, in response to a query from Mr O'Hara, confirmed that safeguarding had been a significant consideration in preparing for the event. Due to safeguarding considerations this activity would be restricted to uniformed groups only.
- 6.11 'Paint and Sip' was one of a range of activities to create vibrancy on Friday nights and aimed at increasing visitor numbers.
- 6.12 With regards to summer capacity, Ms Leverment briefly reported on an initiative at the Centre for Life, Newcastle for its 25th anniversary, whereby they offered reduced price tickets to fill spare capacity which improved the diversity of visitors and attracted new audiences. Mrs Mackle reported that during Summer 2025 capacity was approximately 50% with the exception of special and family events which sold out. Social inclusion was something she was keen to look at and she undertook to explore further.
- 6.13 The History and Heritage Activities included updates on 140th Anniversary of the Grubb 10-inch Telescope; Southern Skies Exhibition and UNESCO Presentations.
- 6.14 The Chair thanked Professor Burton and the Management Committee was content to accept the Director's Report.
- 6.15 With reference to recommendation 7 of the SIB report which related to the wider impact of AOP to the community, the phenomenal work being undertaken and the PR report provided Mr Cox queried how to turn those activities into awareness. In response, the Chair acknowledged that the issue was capacity and capability, but that it did need to be addressed. He added that creating the momentum for the redevelopment project was critical.

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

7.1 The Agenda and Papers for the ARAC Meeting on 17 November 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided.

7.2 At the outset, Mr Kennedy, ARAC Chair, thanked Mr Rooney for Chairing part of the meeting following his departure. He talked Members through the Chair's report elaborating briefly on the areas considered. In particular, he noted that:

- there had been no matters of concern raised during a private pre-meeting with Auditors and DfC;
- he had attended a meeting of DfC Audit Committee Chairs at which the main issue had been concerns about finances. Any overspend during the current financial year would be taken from the budget for 2026-27;
- the Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 had been given a clean audit opinion;
- a break-even position was forecast for the year;
- unlike other ALBs, AOP generated up to 1/3rd of its income from external sources.

7.3 ARAC was content to recommend Management Committee approval of:

- ICT Risk Register;
- Corporate Risk Register.

7.4 The Management Committee approved the recommendations from ARAC.

7.5 Discussion ensued, initiated by a query from Revd Canon Totten, regarding the level of income for a typical ALB during which it was noted that:

- once a public body self-generated over 50% of its income the classification changed to a self-financing public corporation, which allowed for a looser relationship with Central Government;
- the financial impact of any partnership with QUB should be explored;
- becoming more self-sustaining had been high on the agenda at recent DfC Leadership Forums;
- the level of income generated by AOP was relatively high for ALBs in Northern Ireland.

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

8.1 The Agenda and Papers for the SPRC Meeting on 17 November 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided. Mr Rooney, SPRC Chair, took Members through his report elaborating briefly on the areas considered. In particular, he highlighted:

- that the Skills Gap Paper identified both vacant core requirement posts and new posts related to the redevelopment project;
- recruitment for a Chief Operating Officer had commenced;
- the appropriate remuneration for managing the ERC grant, with potentially wider relevance for the organisation and associated Policies;
- the staff engagement survey had been postponed by SMT until the New Year.

8.2 There were no matters recommended for Management Committee approval.

8.3 The Management Committee approved the report from SPRC.

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

9.1 The Agenda and Papers for the REAC Meeting on 25 November 2025 had been linked to the Agenda and a report from the Chair of the Committee had also been provided. Dr Lemon, REAC Chair, took members through her report. In particular she referred to:

- two matters arising from the Management Committee meeting held on 30 June 2025 which had been discussed under Chair's Business by REAC:
 - in terms of the SIB Recommendation regarding building a critical mass of staff astronomers and PhD students and a discussion with QUB on collaborative activities together REAC was unclear what these matters were and was of the view that due to other work commitments there was no capacity to further at present. REAC also noted there was already good communication with QUB;
 - with regards to AOP's Intellectual Property REAC agreed that Professor Sarzi liaise with Mr Cox to draft a one paragraph document on IP;
- the draft Education Strategy outlined 4 strategic objectives with a number of goals and actions;

9.2 Mr Cox undertook to pick up with Professor Sarzi in relation to AOP's Intellectual Property. Regarding the SIB recommendation about building a critical mass of astronomers he commented that during a recent in-person session with astronomers the view was that this was outside their experience and if REAC did not have the bandwidth to progress, then it was a question for Management Committee to consider how to take that recommendation forward. Professor Burton pointed out that maintaining a critical mass was a challenge that was not unique to AOP.

9.3 The Management Committee accepted the report and approved the Education Strategy.

9.4 Prompted by a query from Mr Rooney discussion ensued regarding the absence of a timeline for delivery of the objectives over the 5 years during which it was pointed out that strategies in academic areas were not written in that way and that delivery was dependent upon funding. Dr Lemon explained that being aware of the redevelopment project and unknowns it had been designed to be broader in terms of the commitments.

9.5 Noting that there had been a similar discussion in relation to the Research Strategy, Ms McVeigh queried whether it was a further example of different interpretation of the language used.

9.6 During further discussion categorising the objectives as short, medium and long-term; underpinning the Strategy with an Operational Action Plan, having an annual/mid-point review were all suggestions put forward. Professor Sarzi added that within the Annual Report research activities were linked to the priorities and objectives from the Research Strategy, and committing to provide such a commentary could serve as a way to check progress on both research and education strategies.

9.7 The Management Committee confirmed it was content to accept the Education Strategy and that REAC be asked to consider how to address the points made. **MC 15/12/25-02 - Refer to REAC.**

10. BUSINESS PLAN 2025-26

10.1 A progress report on the 2025-26 KPIs had previously been circulated. The Management Committee was pleased to note that the KPIs were all on target.

11. FINANCE

- 11.1 Management Accounts showing Actual -v- Budget for October, November and Year to Date and a Budget Forecast for the financial year 2025-26 had previously been circulated.
- 11.2 Mr Blaauw guided members through the Actual -v- Budget Operating Results for November 2025 elaborating briefly on the figures, variances and Year to Date position. He noted that income was generated through a Reserves Bank Account and that DfC required a change to be made to the policy.
- 11.3 It was noted that the Actual -v- Budget paper had been uploaded that morning as errors had been identified in the paper previously provided. Mr Kennedy commented that at a finance meeting the previous Thursday they had discussed the October accounts but had not had a chance to interrogate the November accounts. He was also willing to spend a day at AOP in the New Year.
- 11.4 The Committee noted the overview position of break even and that Mr Kennedy would meet with Mr Blaauw to ensure the Management Committee could have full confidence in the figures. The importance of achieving break-even; spending the capital allocation from DfC and capitalisation of expenditure for some of the work already completed, which would require Mr McCrossan's assistance, was stressed. Support for Mr Kennedy's offer of assistance was expressed and the possibility of assistance from Internal Audit suggested. It was also noted that DfC had indicated that Ms Hyland would be happy to play a part going forward.
- 11.5 In conclusion, Mr Blaauw drew attention to the Budget Forecast.
- 11.6 There being no questions the Committee was content with the information presented and to proceed as discussed.

12.0 POLICY

- 12.1 The Management Committee noted the Policy Report and the intention to bring the Use of Bailey House Accommodation Policy to the next meeting.

13.0 AOB

- 13.1 The Committee noted the:
- meeting schedule 2026;
 - availability of training as outlined in the report;
 - Minutes of ARAC held 17 November 2025 (draft);
 - Minutes of SPRC held 17 November 2025 (draft);
 - Minutes of REAC held 25 November 2025 (draft);
 - PR Coverage Report September and October 2025.

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 12.37 pm.

14. CONFIDENTIAL ITEM REMOVED

To appoint one representative from the Management Committee to the Project Board

14.14 In response to a request for the Chair for volunteers Mr Cox made an offer, at least in the early stages of the Board, if there could be a deputy. Mr O’Hara offered to be a deputy unless there was another volunteer.

14.15 Professor Burton advised that the next meeting of the Project Board was Wednesday 17 December 2025 @ 2.00 pm, via Zoom and pointed out that formally only 1 member of the Management Committee could sit on the Project Board.

14.16 Management Committee approved the appointment of Mr Cox to the Project Board, with Mr O’Hara as deputy.

14.17 In drawing the meeting to a close, the Chair thanked the members for their contribution, commenting that they were in a very good place and hoping that the work they would do on board effectiveness would really advise their way forward and allow them to deal with the issues in a much better way.

14.18 With reference to the work being undertaken across the organisation Mr Cox extended thanks to the AOP officers present.

The meeting concluded at 13.07 pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting

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(Chair)

Dated: