

MINUTES OF THE SEVENTY FIFTH MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 20 NOVEMBER 2008 AT 3.00 P.M. IN THE OBSERVATORY BOARDROOM

Present: His Grace, the Most Reverend A.E.T.Harper, (Chair), Dr F. Byrne, Professor M. Merrifield, Professor A. Hibbert, Mr E. Donnelly, Mr A. Peoples, Mr S. Shields, Mrs P. Wilson and Dr R. Oudmajer

Apologies: Archdeacon R. Hoey, Dr Á. Downey, Mrs Sue Hogg, Professor P. Dufton and Professor E Meurs

In attendance: Professor M. Bailey, Dr T. Mason and Mr L. Young

The Chairman welcomed Mr Donnelly, Mr Peoples, Mr Shields, Mrs Wilson (DCAL representatives on the Management Committee) and Dr Oudmajer (Nominee of the Board of Governors on the Management Committee) to their first Committee meeting.

The Chairman asked Mr Young to write to Professor Dyson, who has retired as a member of the Board of Governors and Nominee of the Board of Governors on the Management Committee, to thank him for his contribution to the work of the Committee.

1. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 19 JUNE 2008

- 1.1. The minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2008 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record of the meeting.

2. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- 2.1. **Minute 3.3** Mr Young informed the Committee that the DCAL classify the organization as a statutory corporation and an arm's-length body, not a Non-Departmental Public Body. This classification makes little difference to the level of scrutiny the organization is subjected to.

3. CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

The Chairman referred to the following matters:

- 3.1. Significant progress had been made in resolving the issues between the organization and the DCAL, particularly in relation to the funding issue.
- 3.2. The Observatory is collaborating with the Armagh Public Library to improve the Observatory's archiving arrangements. It is hoped that this collaboration will turn into a longer term project if additional funding can be obtained.
- 3.3. Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, who is associated with Marsh's Library in Dublin, will visit the Observatory with colleagues on 23 January 2009 to view the Observatory's historic books and archives.
- 3.4. Professor Rolf Loeber, University of Pittsburg and the Free University Amsterdam, has a wide range of academic and other interests and access to funding opportunities. He may be able to visit the Observatory on his return to Ireland in January 2009.

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- 3.5. These actual and potential arrangements demonstrate the importance of operating synergistically with other institutions with cross-border and European links and the need to continually search for other sources of income.

4. DIRECTORS' INTERIM REPORTS

Professor Bailey referred to the following matters in the presentation of the Observatory Interim Report:

- 4.1. The Observatory received the necessary uplift in recurrent funding to enable the organization to project a balanced budget for 2008/2009. However, the Observatory will need a significant uplift in the remaining two years of the Comprehensive Spending Review period, namely £170k for 2009/2010 plus £50k in the same year to progress plans for the new Library, Archives and Historic Scientific Instruments Building and £210k for 2010/2011.
- 4.2. A small team is being formed to advance the project for the new Library, Archives and Historic Scientific Instruments Building and participation by members of the Management Committee would be welcomed. Mrs Wilson agreed to join the team.
- 4.3. There is a growing need for the Observatory to improve the cataloguing, conservation and display of its historic library and archives and to bring its museum collection management systems up to date. In the long term, there is a need to employ a professional archivist and curator of archives but, as there are no funds for this task at present, the Observatory has instead come to an arrangement with the Armagh Public Library to provide a museum/archivist service for a period as long as may be agreed by both parties.
- 4.4. The Observatory's historic key performance indicators are detailed in the report and the outcome for 2008/2009 is expected to be more than satisfactory. The target for external grant income of £300k is an aspirational target and a more realistic "business plan" target for 2008/2009 is in the order of £200k.
- 4.5. The value of external grant income shown in the performance table does not take account of the considerable in-kind value of telescope time obtained by the Observatory's research staff. On the suggestion of Professor Merrifield and Dr Oudmaijer the Committee agreed that this should be shown in the future using an appropriate research council measure.
- 4.6. During discussion of the Observatory's participation in the periodic Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the Chairman commented that even though the Observatory receives no additional research income from its participation, it is valuable because it provides an opportunity to compare outcomes at the Observatory with other institutions. Dr Byrne agreed that it was positive to be in the RAE as it provided a measure of excellence which will reflect well on the DCAL.
- 4.7. In response to a question from Mr Donnelly on why the Observatory was funded by the DCAL, Professor Bailey said that the arrangement goes back to when the Observatory was funded by the former Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI). It was argued then that as the Observatory was not a university it should be funded by the museums branch of DENI, which was then taken over by DCAL. The DCAL is a small Department with limited funds and it has continually been a struggle to link the Observatory's objectives with those of DCAL. However, links have been made and a Department which is concerned with culture should be able to support the work of the Observatory.
- 4.8. Professor Bailey referred to the following research grants detailed in the Research Highlights section of his Report:
 - (i) Apostolos Christou is involved in the European Commission 7th Framework Programme on Research, Technological Development and Demonstration, namely the European Planetology Network Research Infrastructure project.

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- The Observatory's involvement will focus on meteoroids and it is anticipated that the project will provide external project funding of Euro 60k for the services of a Research Technician for up to a year over the four-year period of the project;
- (ii) the Republic of Ireland's Discover Science and Engineering programme has awarded funding of Euro 13.5k to a joint Observatory/Planetarium application to support the cost of the Ninth European Symposium for the Protection of the Night Sky meetings to be held in Dublin on 16 September 2009 and then in Armagh from 17 to 19 September 2009; and
 - (iii) Stefano Bagnulo reports that he and Professor Landstreet have obtained for the Observatory a Leverhulme Visiting Professorship, which will boost the Observatory's expertise in stellar magnetism and polarimetry. The award is for £13.4k and will support a visit from Professor Landstreet for a period of eight months in 2009.
- 4.9. Details are given in the Report of the considerable amount of research activity in the Solar System, Planetary Dynamics, the search for Neutron Stars and the mechanism by which massive stars evolve.
- 4.10. The recorded snowfall on 28 and 29 October 2008 was the first time that snow had fallen in Armagh in October for almost 75 years.
- 4.11. The Observatory has begun a new collaboration with Dr Luc Rock, a Research Fellow at the Queen's University Belfast, on a climate project to measure the isotopic composition of rainwater, with a view to understanding better the hydrological cycle for Northern Ireland and the principal sources of precipitation versus season in a changing climate.
- 4.12. Professor Bailey's investigation into the date of birth of the Observatory's founder shows that Archbishop Robinson was born in 1708 and not 1709 as previously thought. John McFarland reports evidence of an early link between Sir William Herschel and Archbishop Robinson in Bath, providing further evidence of an astronomical influence on the Archbishop.
- 4.13. Gerry Doyle reports that the Science and Technology Facilities Council Projects Peer Review Panel met in the Observatory and Planetarium to discuss a number of research projects and programmes over the four days 27 to 30 October 2008.
- 4.14. The new DCAL Minister, Mr Gregory Campbell MP MLA, made an informal visit to the Observatory on 25 September 2008.
- 4.15. The Observatory continued to deliver public lectures, special events and guided tours of the historic building and the grounds as part of its programme of Science in the Community. The purpose of this programme is to help the public understand the work of the Observatory. In response to a question from Mr Shields, Professor Bailey said that income from the programme was very small.
- 4.16. Shane Kelly has produced a summary of the growing range of species in the Observatory Grounds and Astropark and notes that the Observatory is committed to a policy to maintain and preserve the range of existing flora and fauna using modern environmental management techniques to build and increase biodiversity, which is an important part of Government priorities.
- 4.17. Two former Post-Doctoral Research Assistants, Amir Ahmad and Maria Madjarska, wish to maintain a long-term research affiliation with the Observatory as a Visiting Astronomer. After discussion, the Committee agreed that this arrangement should be formalized.
- 4.18. Professor Bailey referred to a number of administrative matters:
- (i) a total of £274k non-cash funding has been awarded from the June 2008 Monitoring Round to fund the Observatory and Planetarium pension scheme deficit at 31 March 2008;
 - (ii) virtually all the recommendations arising from the Internal Audit of the Human Resource Management System have been implemented;

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- (iii) a new and completely revised version of the organization's book of Policies and Procedures was completed on 8 October 2008 and subsequently issued to management and staff;
 - (iv) a copy of the Observatory's most recent risk register is appended to the Report;
 - (v) there has been one accident to report in which a visitor slipped while descending the stairs from the Troughton Dome, but he did not suffer any injuries;
 - (vi) the DCAL informed the Observatory that it has responded to further queries from the DFP concerning the outstanding Pay Remit, and is awaiting a response;
 - (vii) from 1 January 2009 new Freedom of Information regulations will come into force requiring the Observatory to adopt a Government-approved publication scheme, provide guidance on access to information and provide more information at a lower level on the seven classes of information specified;
 - (viii) following a DCAL review of the Observatory's banking arrangements it was recommended that the Observatory's fixed-term deposit account should be closed and the Observatory and Planetarium should dispense with their current bankers and join the NICS pooling arrangements with the Northern Bank. The organization replied to these recommendations in a letter dated 18 September 2008 requesting, in the case of the Observatory, a dispensation to retain the deposit account for cash flow and contingencies purposes and to leave the current banking arrangements unchanged as they are provided free of charge. The Planetarium is charged for banking transactions, but at half the normal rate. The Planetarium will approach its current bankers to give them the opportunity to provide the same terms as those under the Northern Bank arrangements. No reply to the organization's letter on the matter has yet been received from DCAL; and
 - (ix) the DFP, through the DCAL, has advised that because the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) do not cover the accounting rules for charities (which the Observatory and Planetarium accounts are obliged to follow) charities will not be required to implement the IFRS for the next couple of years.
- 4.19. During discussion of the Observatory Risk Register Mr Peoples said that in his experience it was important to identify the real risks to the organization and to take effective action to ensure that inherent risk is larger than residual risk. This is a matter which could be discussed further with Professor Bailey.
- 4.20. The DCAL has recommended that the Observatory and Planetarium take out fraud insurance to provide some degree of recompense for any such loss. The organization will face a minimum additional annual premium of £1.2k per annum, irrespective of whether one or both organizations take out the cover. After full discussion of the matter the Committee agreed that fraud insurance should be taken out.
- 4.21. The organization has been informed that DCAL wish to have members of senior staff present at future meetings of the Board of Governors and Management Committee to act as Observers. As yet no formal approach has been made to the Chairman to seek agreement to this arrangement. During discussion of the role of DCAL representatives Mr Shields said that his primary responsibility was to this Committee and its good governance.
- 4.22. The Observatory's Annual Report for the Calendar Year 2007 and Financial Year 2007/2008 has been placed on the Observatory's website.
- 4.23. During discussion of the recently issued CIPFA reports on governance and sponsorship arrangements with DCAL's arm's-length bodies, which were appended to the Committee papers for information, Professor Merrifield asked about the

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status of the Observatory's Strategic Plan. Professor Bailey replied that there is no 3-year Strategic Plan in place as yet because of uncertainty over future funding. The Chairman added that in the last two years management's energy had been directed at resolving a number of immediate crisis issues. After further discussion the Committee agreed that a three-year strategic plan should be prepared despite the uncertainty over funding and that a small team should be formed to progress the preparation of the plan. If consultants are required DCAL should be asked to fund their costs.

Dr Mason referred to the following matters in his Interim Report:

- 4.24. Professor Bailey addressed many of the administration issues facing both the Observatory and Planetarium in his Report. The Planetarium's bank is willing to offer free banking and we have informed DCAL that the Planetarium wishes to retain its current banking arrangements rather than move to the NICS pooled banking arrangements.
- 4.25. There were a number of minor accidents in the period which have been dealt with appropriately.
- 4.26. The Planetarium Risk Register has been amended to incorporate the traffic light colour coding system recommended by the auditors and is appended to the Report for information. Dr Mason would welcome Mr People's assistance in reviewing the Register.
- 4.27. The industrial injury claim taken out against the Planetarium by an unsuccessful job applicant for alleged age and/or sex discrimination has been ruled out of time by the Tribunal and accordingly there is no case to answer.
- 4.28. The Appeals Panel appointed to hear the grievance raised by a member of Planetarium staff over non-payment of back pay decided in the appellant's favour but unfortunately we still have not received authority from DCAL to pay the back pay due. It appears that the DFP require some further information about this matter from DCAL and we understand that this additional information has been supplied. We have been assured by DCAL that resolution of this matter is high priority for the Department.
- 4.29. Dr Mason distributed a table containing the latest information on the Planetarium's Key Performance Indicators. Visitor numbers, currently just over 27,000, have been disappointing and are likely to be in the region of 40,000 for the year compared with a target of 50,000. However outreach numbers, currently 6,000, are likely to be higher than the year's target of 10,000. Admissions and shop income are affected by the level of visitor numbers and are projected to be considerably lower than target for the year. Cost per visitor/outreach is slightly higher at present than the target for the year and administration costs are lower than target. Staff absence days are significantly lower than the NICS target and visitor satisfaction ratings are 80% on average.
- 4.30. The Planetarium's draft forward plan for 2009 – 2014 is appended to the Report for information. DCAL has indicated that they wish all arm's-length bodies to report on a common planning template.
- 4.31. The Planetarium is scheduled to be inspected by the Chief Science Inspector of the Department of Education. The inspection will assess the educational value of the programmes offered to Planetarium visitors.
- 4.32. The Virtual Planetarium, which allows visitors to see the Planetarium building remotely on their computer, has been launched and so far has attracted 10,000 hits.
- 4.33. The Planetarium has an active programme of outreach in the Republic of Ireland. The portable planetarium is being used for school visits by the Blackrock Castle Observatory in Cork City. Staff have delivered presentations at science festivals in Waterford, Dublin and Limerick and are due to attend the Galway science festival.

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- 4.34. The Director has attended four different events in America and has been invited speaker at events in Portugal and Egypt. The Director will become the International Planetarium Society President at the start of 2009 and will attend functions as guest speaker in Goa, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Singapore.
- 4.35. The Planetarium along with the Planetarium in Hamburg has been invited to participate in a live webcast for the 100 hours of Astronomy event as part of the International Year of Astronomy 2009.
- 4.36. A comparison of Planetarium admission ticket prices with other visitor centres in the UK shows that Planetarium prices are lower. This is not the time to consider price increases although prices may be raised in the future if the economic climate improves.
- 4.37. During discussion of Dr Mason's report Mr Peoples said that the Director's appointment as President of the International Planetarium Society was a tremendous achievement and deserved DCAL ministerial recognition.

The Chairman thanked the Directors for their helpful and informative reports.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 5.1. Professor Hibbert, Mr Donnelly, Mr Peoples, Mr Shields, Dr Oudmaijer, and Mrs Wilson agreed to attend CIPFA "On Board" training on 6 March 2009.

6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The meetings of the Committee in 2009 will take place on 27 February, 26 June and 6 November starting at 10.30 am in the Observatory Boardroom.

Signed as a true record of the Meeting

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His Grace, The Most Reverend A E T Harper OBE BA
Chairman of the Management Committee

Dated: 27 February 2009