NORWICH ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

Public Open Evenings – Review Meeting

Briefing Note for Participants

Friday 15 May 2026 · Seething Observatory, Norfolk

1. Purpose of this Meeting

This meeting has been called to review how we run Public Open Evenings/Talks at Seething Observatory, and to agree improvements that will make these events more sustainable and enjoyable for everyone involved. There are three main discussion topics:

- Volunteer roles – are they the right ones, clearly defined and well understood?
- Getting volunteers – is the current approach working, and are there better ways to manage sign-ups?
- Astronomy activities – what should we offer the public in different weather conditions?
- Car parking approach – Can anything be done to improve this

2. Background

Why this meeting has been called

Concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the current arrangements. Specifically, the volume of pre-event preparation tasks that currently fall on Andrew. He is not willing to continue these next year so we need to find alternative arrangements. Recruiting sufficient volunteers for each event can be difficult. There was a genuine question about whether we can continue in the current format and it is clear that we need to address some of these issues in order to proceed.

This meeting has been called to address those concerns and agree a plan that makes our public evenings more sustainable – without compromising their quality.

The upcoming season

Six public talks have already been confirmed for the 2026–27 season:

Date	Talk
Sat 26 September 2026	Rob Tate: The Good the Bad and the Ugly – The Astrophysics of Sci-Fi Movies
Sat 17 October 2026	Paul Brocklehurst: Mapping The Heavens
Sat 28 November 2026	Adrian Orr: Where are the Aliens? Exploring the Fermi Paradox
Sat 23 January 2027	Mark Thompson: Mars, Secrets of the Red Planet
Sat 27 February 2027	Rob Tate: Einstein For Dummies
Sat 20 March 2027	Mark Thompson: Jupiter, King of the Planets

All talks run 19:00–21:30 at Seething Observatory, Thwaite St Mary, Norfolk NR35 2EQ.

Why these events matter

Public Open Evenings serve two important purposes for the Society. First, they give us an excellent opportunity to engage with the broader community and share our enthusiasm for astronomy – potentially attracting new members. Second, each event typically raises between £350 and £550, making them a significant and reliable source of income. The Society has a strong reason to continue them and to make them work better.

3. Current Arrangements

Volunteer roles

The following roles are required at each public open evening:

Role	Description
Talk Presenter	Delivers the evening's talk. May be a Society member or an external guest speaker.
Volunteer Co-ordinator	Recruits and co-ordinates all volunteers ahead of each event. Ensures all roles are filled.
Car Parking Attendants	Manage vehicle parking on arrival. Multiple attendants typically required (4+)
Tea & Coffee Makers	Prepare and serve refreshments in the cabin throughout the evening.
Runner	Circulates the site delivering refreshments and support to volunteers at their posts.
Attendance & Ticket Payment	Manages entry, checks tickets and handles cash payments.
Dome Astronomers (x2)	One volunteer per dome (Genesis and Herschel). Opens the dome, operates the telescope and engages visitors.
Personal Scope Demonstrators	Members who bring their own telescopes, set up on the pads, and invite visitors to view objects of interest.

Not all roles require astronomy expertise – the Society welcomes volunteers with a wide range of skills.

Pre-event preparation tasks – action required

These tasks have until now been carried out by Andrew before each event. That arrangement is no longer in place. For each talk in the 2026–27 season we must agree who will take responsibility for each task (or group of tasks), and put a simple process in place to ensure nothing is missed.

Because Friday is a regular club night at the Observatory, some tasks can be completed the day before the event. This is an important opportunity – it reduces pressure on the Saturday and means tasks can be done by volunteers who are already on site.

Tasks that can be done the day before (Friday)

- Set out chairs in the lecture hall
- Service the toilets
- Hoovering and tidying where necessary
- Sweep the entrance gate clear of leaves (slip hazard)

Tasks on the day (Saturday, before doors open)

- Put out flashing lights at the site entrance
- Open up the domes and lay out eyepieces (dome operators sometimes arrive at the last minute)

- Turn on path lights
- Move refreshments to the cabin
- After 5:00 pm: collate and print the attendee list
- Turn on the ventilation extractor
- Turn on heaters if required
- In wet weather: erect the marquee / gazebo for the Radio Astronomy demonstration
- Move tickets and merchandise (history booklets) to the cabin
- Turn on the fridge and boiler in the cabin
- Retrieve the cash float and move it to the cabin

A possible sign-off process

One approach would be to assign a named person (or pair) to each task or group of tasks at the start of the season. Before each event, the assigned person confirms on the volunteers' WhatsApp group that they are doing their tasks – and again once completed. This gives the Co-ordinator visibility that everything is in hand without needing to chase each item individually.

This is just one of many possibilities put out as a starting point for discussion rather than an approach seeking approval. The meeting is invited to suggest alternatives or improvements to this idea.

4. Discussion Topics

Item 1: Volunteer Roles

The current roles are well-established. However, it is worth asking whether the list is complete, clearly understood by everyone, and appropriately distributed across the team.

Questions to consider:

- Are all current roles still the right ones? Are any redundant or missing?
- Are role descriptions clear enough that someone new to volunteering would know what to expect?
- Could any tasks from the pre-event preparation list be formalised as a volunteer role (for example, a 'Site Setup Lead') to distribute that workload?
- Could any existing roles be combined, or where no longer needed, retired altogether?

Item 2: Getting Volunteers

Current process

The Volunteer Co-ordinator (Sue Drake is currently willing to continue this) sends a message to the volunteers' WhatsApp group approximately two weeks before each event. Members respond to indicate their availability, and the Co-ordinator then assigns specific roles. Importantly, this assignment step gives her the ability to vary who does what across the season – ensuring, for example, that the same people are not always on car parking. If there is a shortfall, a request may go to the Members' Facebook page or a general email to

members – though this is avoided where possible, as the Society does not want to pressure members who have not expressed an interest in volunteering.

Is this working?

The process works reasonably well in most cases, but two-weeks' notice can sometimes be too short, and there is limited visibility of who is likely to be available across the full season. The event-by-event nature of the process means the Co-ordinator is starting from scratch each time.

Alternative approaches to consider (these are just ideas and not exhaustive or exclusive)

Option	How it works	Notes
Season sign-up sheet	A shared spreadsheet (e.g. Google Sheets) is circulated at the start of the season. Volunteers add their names to the events they can help with.	Good advance visibility; reduces chasing. Requires people to engage with a link and keep it updated.
Role ownership	Key roles have named owners who commit for the season (e.g. the same person always manages car parking). WhatsApp fills any remaining gaps.	Very reliable for core roles. Less flexible; the same people carry more.
Free ticketing (e.g. Zeffy)	We are moving to use free ticketing platform Zeffy to issue tickets and manage attendee numbers next year. Volunteers could be invited via the same system. Zeffy charges no platform fee – unlike some alternatives such as SignUpGenius, which may charge for certain features.	Familiar ticketing format; free to use. Adds a step that not all volunteers may be comfortable with.
Early season commitment	At the start of the season, volunteers are asked upfront which of the six events they can commit to – even without specifying a role.	Maximises advance planning. Circumstances change; may still need re-confirmation closer to each event.
WhatsApp poll	Use the built-in WhatsApp poll feature with specific roles as options, rather than a freeform request message.	No new tools needed; gives more structured responses. Still event-by-event in nature.

These options are not mutually exclusive – for instance, a season sign-up sheet combined with WhatsApp reminders might work better than any single approach on its own.

Item 3: Astronomy Activities – All-Weather Approach

Clear weather

When the weather allows, the format works well: both domes are open, member volunteers set up personal telescopes on the pads, and visitors are free to wander the site. This is, for many people, the highlight of an open evening.

Wet or cloudy nights – current approach

When the weather is poor, the shutters remain closed to protect the telescopes, but the domes are still opened so that visitors can see the scopes. In addition, a gazebo has been erected on these evenings to host a Radio Astronomy demonstration – giving visitors something extra when sky viewing is not possible.

The debate

When weather prevents sky viewing, the domes remain open so that visitors can see the telescopes inside – but the observing pads cannot be used. We have tried to provide additional content on wet evenings, most notably a Radio Astronomy demonstration run from a gazebo erected adjacent to the main building. At the same time, many visitors are pragmatic about poor weather: they have come for the talk (which goes ahead regardless), and on a genuinely wet night many prefer not to linger outside. They understand that we cannot control the conditions, and the domes being open is itself something to see. The question for discussion is how much supplementary effort we should put in on wet-weather evenings, and whether the current gazebo arrangement remains the right approach. One additional consideration is that wet weather is not pleasant for volunteers either so any minimisation of the need for volunteers on these nights will help keep everyone happy.

Case for offering additional wet-weather content	Case for keeping the wet-weather plan simple
On a night when visitors cannot view the stars, offering them something extra shows that we value their attendance and have made an effort on their behalf. For example, the Radio Astronomy demonstration showcases the breadth of the Society's work and gives visitors an experience they would not normally have – something tangibly different from the talk alone. Without supplementary content, a poor-weather evening may feel like it lacks the full experience visitors were expecting.	Visitors buy tickets for the talk, which goes ahead regardless. Most are understanding about weather; the domes are open throughout and that alone is something worth seeing. For example, the Radio Astronomy gazebo requires significant effort to erect, pack away and dry out afterwards – in a context where volunteer workload is already a concern, this overhead may not be justified. On genuinely wet nights, many visitors prefer not to linger outside anyway. A lighter approach may serve them just as well with considerably less effort.

Questions to consider:

- What level of supplementary activity is the right approach on a wet or cloudy night?
- Should we retain the Radio Astronomy gazebo arrangement, modify it, or look at alternatives?
- If we keep the gazebo, how can the workload of erection and pack-down be shared across the team?
- Are there lower-effort options that would still give visitors something worthwhile on a poor-weather evening? Andrew has suggested that a slideshow of images is something that could be an additional wet weather option.

Item 4: Car Parking

Adjacent to the Observatory is an airfield car park. This is used on evenings when visitor numbers are high and the Observatory car park alone would not be sufficient.

Current arrangement

The current approach splits the two car parks across the two halves of the evening. The airfield car park is used during the first talk (approximately 19:30–20:30), with visitors directed there on arrival. The Observatory car park is then used for the second talk (20:30–21:30). This arrangement means that at least two Society members must be present on site for the entire time the airfield car park is open – in effect, standing by in a car park for the duration. It is not possible to consolidate into a single car park for the whole evening, as the Observatory car park does not have sufficient capacity for a full evening of visitors.

Questions to consider:

- Is the current two-car-park split the best available arrangement, or are there improvements worth exploring?
- Are there ways to make the car parking role less onerous for the volunteers involved while keeping both car parks staffed?