

NORWICH ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

Public Open Evenings – Review Meeting

MINUTES

Date	Friday 15 May 2026, 7.30 pm
Venue	Seething Observatory, Thwaite St Mary, Norfolk
Chair	Rob Tate
Present	Rob Tate, Steve Chambers, James Watts, Daniel Burwitz, Kay Tate, Caroline Jessup, Adrian Orr, Emma Rothwell, Paul Brocklehurst, David Davis, Jason Durrant
	Jane McKenzie (online)
Apologies	Sue Drake (provided notes to Rob)

1. Opening and Context

Rob Tate welcomed attendees and explained that the meeting had been called to review how Public Open Evenings are run at Seething Observatory, and to agree improvements before the 2026–27 season begins.

The principal driver was the need to redistribute the pre-event preparation tasks previously carried out single-handedly by Andrew Sutkowski, who has confirmed he will not continue doing so next year. A related concern was that the volume of events in previous seasons – potentially 30+ when group visits were included – had placed an unsustainable burden on a small number of members. It was noted that the coming season is focused on six public talks, which represents a significant reduction in overall event volume. The consensus view was that this alone would ease volunteer pressure considerably.

The four main agenda items for discussion were: volunteer roles; getting volunteers; astronomy activities in all weather conditions; and car parking.

2. Preliminary Matter: Safeguarding

Before the formal agenda items, a concern was raised about safeguarding. A member noted that at a previous group visit – involving children – some volunteers had found themselves alone with children inside the domes, which is an unsafe situation both for the children and the volunteers. Another member confirmed they had been similarly uncomfortable in that position. Both of these had taken place at private Group Visits.

The following points were agreed:

- Group visits of the type that gave rise to this concern will not take place in 2026–27. Children attending public open evenings will be accompanied by parents or guardians throughout.
- The Society has a safeguarding policy on its website, but it was felt that perhaps it is not being adequately communicated or enforced. There is no requirement for volunteers to hold a DBS check under current policy, which relies on accompanying adults having responsibility for the children they bring.

- The policy and its adequacy for today's environment should be reviewed by the committee, particularly in light of any future group visits.

Action:

Action 1: The safeguarding policy to be referred to the committee for review.

3. Item 1 – Volunteer Roles

3.1 Current Roles

The eight established roles were noted: Talk Presenter, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Car Parking Attendants, Tea & Coffee Makers, Runner, Attendance (Tickets) checker, Door manager, Dome Astronomers (x2), and Personal Scope Demonstrators.

The general view was that the roles themselves do not need fundamental change. Specific points raised:

- The Runner and Tea & Coffee roles could be combined where volunteer numbers are low, with refreshments delivered to outdoor posts after the talk begins rather than continuously throughout the evening.
- The role of Dome Astronomer was discussed. Members felt the title does not fully capture what is required: on public evenings, the role demands strong engagement and communication skills as much as technical ability. Reference was made to Kielder Observatory, whose equivalent staff are called "astronomy communicators". It was suggested the expectation of the role should be broadened accordingly.
- Training for dome operation has become ad hoc in recent years, though it was formerly structured and regular. This means that there are few members able to operate the Domes. This should be revived (ideally, before the season begins). In addition, guidance on how to engage effectively with members of the public, particularly on wet nights when no observing is possible would be beneficial.
- It was suggested that volunteers without their own telescopes could bring and use Society-owned Dobsonians (the 12-inch and 14-inch instruments) on good nights, broadening the pool of people who can fill the Personal Scope Demonstrator role.

Actions:

Action 2: Dome/telescope training should be organised in the autumn. To achieve this a willing volunteer trainer needs to be found and training arranged.

Action 3: A pre-season volunteers' training session covering general use of scopes and public engagement should be set up. Volunteer trainer to be engaged and training arranged.

3.2 Pre-Event Preparation Tasks

A significant change for 2026–27 is that Andrew will not be carrying out the pre-event preparation tasks he has previously undertaken. These fall into two groups:

Tasks that can be completed at the Club Night on the Friday before:

- Set out chairs in the lecture hall
- Service the toilets
- Hoover and tidy where necessary
- Health and Safety check (For instance sweeping the entrance gate clear of leaves (slip hazard))

Tasks to be completed on the day (Saturday, before doors open):

- Put out flashing lights at the site entrance
- Open up the domes and lay out eyepieces
- Turn on path lights

- Move refreshments to the cabin
- After 5:00 pm: collate and print the attendee list
- Turn on the ventilation extractor and heaters if required
- Move tickets and merchandise to the cabin
- Turn on the fridge and boiler in the cabin
- Retrieve and move the cash float to the cabin
- In wet weather: decide on wet-weather arrangements

It was recalled that before Andrew took on these tasks individually, it was the norm for members present on Friday club nights to set up for the following event collectively. There was broad support for returning to this approach.

The proposed process – that a rota of volunteers is put together of co-ordinators to take responsibility for the set-up processes for each of the talks during the year. Tasks to be adequately communicated and confirmation completion noted through the Volunteers WhatsApp group. This should provide the co-ordinator having oversight without needing to chase each item.

Action:

Action 4: Rob Tate to produce the event set-up rota and communicate the rota in liaison with Sue Drake (who is overall volunteer coordinator for the events next year). Exact process to be produced and communicated to all for comment and understanding.

4. Item 2 – Getting Volunteers

4.1 Notes from Sue Drake (Volunteer Co-ordinator)

Sue Drake submitted written notes in advance. These were read to the meeting and covered six points:

- The current process works reasonably well, but some volunteers sign up at the last minute, which creates uncertainty. Others respond promptly – which is much appreciated.
- The Kelling Heath clash in the previous season was noted; dates for 2026–27 have already been checked against known conflicts.
- Volunteers must be willing to accept whichever role they are assigned: flexibility is essential so that skills and experience can be balanced across the team and roles rotated across the season.
- Car parking works best when someone experienced is in charge and can manage the team; on a couple of occasions, Sue had to leave the door to assist visitors because the parking team was not yet in position. This highlights that volunteers need to arrive early so they can be in place well before the 7pm start time.
- Sue proposed that each role should have a simple written description so that new volunteers know what to expect. She is willing to write the description for the door role and to co-ordinate collecting descriptions from others, with a view to producing a reference document and Facebook/forum post at the start of the season.
- Sue confirmed she is willing to continue as Volunteer Co-ordinator for 2026–27.

Action: Action 5: Sue Drake to draft the door/ticket role description and coordinate role descriptions from others.

4.2 Season-Wide Sign-Up Approach

Discussion centred on replacing the current event-by-event sign-up process with a season-wide approach. The key points were:

- With only six events, it is practical to circulate a sign-up sheet at the start of the season covering all six dates. Volunteers can indicate their availability in advance, giving the co-ordinator far better visibility and reducing the need to start from scratch before each event.
- This is not either/or: a season sign-up sheet can sit alongside WhatsApp messages closer to each event, catching those who prefer shorter-notice commitments or whose circumstances change.
- Advance sign-ups carry no obligation: if a volunteer cannot attend after signing up, they should simply give notice so their slot can be reallocated. The onus is on the volunteer to inform the co-ordinator, not the other way around.
- Several members expressed enthusiasm for being able to plan ahead; others noted that committing months in advance is not suitable for everyone. A hybrid approach accommodates both.
- Role clarity is linked to willingness to sign up: when people know exactly what a role involves, they are more likely to volunteer for it. Better role descriptions (Action 5) will therefore help recruitment.
- It was noted that repeated requests for volunteers in member communications can be counterproductive: members join the Society for astronomy, not to be volunteers, and volunteering naturally follows engagement. Communications should promote what membership offers, not just request effort from members.

Action: Action 6: Develop a season-wide sign-up spreadsheet and share with Sue Drake for review.

5. Item 3 – Astronomy Activities: All-Weather Approach

5.1 Clear Nights

The existing format for clear nights – both domes open, member volunteers with personal telescopes on the pads, visitors free to wander the site – was considered to work well and requires no change. It was noted that increasing the number of trained dome operators would allow more people to fill the Dome Astronomer role, and that bringing out Society-owned Dobsonians could increase the number of telescopes available to the public on good nights.

5.2 Wet and Cloudy Nights

The existing wet-weather arrangement – keeping the domes open so visitors can see the telescopes, and erecting a gazebo adjacent to the main building for a Radio Astronomy demonstration – was discussed at length.

The case for retaining some supplementary wet-weather content was acknowledged: visitors may have travelled some distance, and offering them something beyond the talk alone demonstrates that the Society values their attendance.

However, there was broad agreement that the current gazebo arrangement is disproportionate in effort relative to its benefit:

- Erecting, manning, and dismantling the gazebo in wet conditions is physically demanding and unpleasant, particularly in winter.
- The gazebo does not dry quickly, creating an additional task (and storage inconvenience) in subsequent days.
- Several members noted that relatively few visitors actually stop to engage with the Radio Astronomy demonstration, especially on genuinely wet nights when people prefer to stay inside.
- Andrew had confirmed that whilst he is content to continue running the Radio Astronomy demonstration in principle, the associated effort of set up and take down is a burden that falls on too few people.

The agreed approach for 2026–27 is as follows:

- The Radio Astronomy gazebo will not be erected as a standard wet-weather activity.
- Instead, a looping astrophotography slideshow will be prepared and displayed in the cabin throughout all events – clear or wet – providing ambient visual content while visitors have refreshments.
- The slideshow should run for approximately 15–20 minutes before repeating. Members are invited to contribute astrophotography images.
- The cabin's existing projector was noted to be of relatively low quality for displaying images. The option of using a large-screen television instead should be explored.
- The domes will continue to be open on wet nights so visitors can see the telescopes and speak with Dome Astronomers/communicators. This alone is considered worthwhile and requires no additional effort.
- A suggested addition for future events: recording telescopic views with a commentary, which could be used as further wet-weather content or for marketing purposes. This was noted as something to explore rather than a commitment for 2026–27.

Actions:

Action 7: Compile a looping astrophotography slideshow for cabin display.

Action 8: Proposal to committee to explore TV screen as an alternative to the projector. (This should be dependent on the success of 7)

6. Item 4 – Car Parking

Car parking generated substantial discussion given its operational complexity and impact on volunteer workload.

6.1 Use of the Airfield Car Park

It was confirmed that the Society will continue to use the adjacent Seething Airfield car park as overflow. This is the only practical alternative to parking on the public road, and there was general agreement that managed parking makes a positive impression on visitors.

It was noted that historical practice (prior to approximately 2009–10) was for all public visitors to park on the road, with the observatory car park reserved for members and volunteers. This became contentious with local residents and is not a preferred option today.

The specific terms of the Society's arrangement with Seething Flying Club regarding use of the airfield car park were not fully known to those present. The question of whether a staffed presence is always required, or whether visitors can be left to self-park once directed in, should be clarified directly with the Flying Club's chairman.

Action: Action 9: Steve Chambers to contact Seething Flying Club Chairman (Alex) to clarify obligations and whether unattended airfield parking is permissible.

6.2 Operational Approach

A range of operational points were discussed:

- Current arrangement: the airfield car park is used during the first session (approximately 19:30–20:30), with the observatory car park used for the second session. Variations on this have been tried; all have advantages and drawbacks, particularly around the crossover period when first-session visitors are still departing as second-session visitors arrive.
- A 20-minute interval between sessions was raised as a possible way to ease the crossover pressure. This was noted as something to consider but was not agreed at this meeting.
- Members and volunteers could be encouraged to park at the airfield car park from the outset of each event, freeing observatory car park spaces for visitors who arrive late or who

have mobility needs. However, the area at the observatory where volunteers normally park can have problems with mud and water so it was generally agreed that parking there for volunteers should continue.

- Advance information sent to ticket-holders should make clear: that they may need to park at the airfield, that a torch is needed, that the walk from the airfield is approximately 300m (4 minutes) and that observatory-side parking is available for those who are unable to walk that distance.
- The disabled/mobility-impaired parking bay at the observatory requires clear, visible signage, and current markings may be fading. This should be reviewed before September.
- It was raised that an airfield car park duty is a low-intensity but isolating and sometimes cold role, particularly in winter. No volunteer, especially women, should be stationed at the airfield alone. Advance assignment of this role would allow the volunteer to plan (e.g., parking their own car there, bringing appropriate clothing).

Action:

Action 10: Include parking, torch, access, and weather guidance in pre-event emails to ticket-holders.

Action 11: Check and refresh disabled parking bay signage before September 2026.

Action 12: Ensure airfield car park duty is always covered by at least two volunteers; assign the role in advance.

7. Other Matters Raised

Several broader points arose in discussion that were noted but are not within the scope of this meeting's agenda:

- Visitor conversion to membership: it is a national challenge across astronomical societies that public event visitors rarely convert to members. First-time visitors make up the large majority of attendees, and a significant proportion may be visiting the area temporarily. Improving the public-facing quality of talks and ensuring they are accessible to a general audience (rather than an astronomical one) is important.
- The 2026–27 talk programme has been deliberately selected with general accessibility in mind to make them more accessible to a non-specialist audience.
- Marketing of member activities to non-members. Member talks could be promoted more actively via the Friends of NAS Facebook group (approximately 1,700 members) as “here is what members get” content, without opening the talks up to non-members. This distinction – advertising what membership offers, whilst not creating a public event – was considered important.
- Society communications: the volume of volunteer recruitment messages in member communications has been off-putting to some members and it was suggested that this may have contributed to departures. A more balanced tone that promotes member benefits alongside requests is recommended.
- A member suggested a new type of event – a telescope surgery or help session for newer astronomers struggling with equipment – as a future concept, distinct from the current public talk format. This was noted for future consideration.

8. Summary and Close

Rob Tate summarised the agreed position:

- Volunteer roles are broadly right; role descriptions will be written up to help recruitment.
- A season-wide sign-up spreadsheet will be developed and reviewed with Sue Drake, who continues as Volunteer Co-ordinator.

- Pre-event preparation tasks will be redistributed using named assignments with a WhatsApp sign-off process, with Friday club nights used for the bulk of setup work.
- The Radio Astronomy gazebo will not be erected on wet nights as standard. A looping astrophotography slideshow in the cabin will provide ambient content at all events.
- The airfield car park will continue to be used; terms of use with Seething Flying Club will be clarified. Better advance information will be provided to ticket-holders on parking.
- A pre-season volunteers' training session will be arranged.

Rob thanked everyone for their contributions. The meeting closed at approximately 21:05.

Actions Summary

Ref	Action	Owner
1	Refer the Society's safeguarding policy to the committee for review to ensure it reflects current best practice, particularly in relation to public-facing events.	Committee
2	Dome/telescope training should be organised in the autumn. To achieve this a willing volunteer trainer needs to be found and training arranged.	Rob Tate
3	A pre-season volunteers' training session covering general use of scopes and public engagement should be set up. Volunteer trainer to be engaged and training arranged.	Rob Tate
4	Produce and communicate the event set-up rota in liaison with Sue Drake (who is overall volunteer coordinator for the events next year). Exact process to be produced and communicated to all for comment and understanding.	Rob Tate
5	Draft the door/ticket role description and request and coordinate role descriptions from others.	Sue Drake
6	Develop a season-wide volunteer sign-up spreadsheet (covering all six events, all roles) and share with Sue Drake for review before circulating to volunteers.	Rob Tate / Sue Drake
7	Compile a looping astrophotography slideshow for cabin display. Volunteer to be identified to pull this together.	Rob Tate
8	Proposal to committee to explore TV screen as an alternative to the projector. (I think) This should only be looked at after the slideshow has been created and this approach tried.	(Pending 7)
9	Contact the Chairman of Seething Flying Club (Alex) to confirm current requirements for use of the airfield car park, specifically whether a staffed presence is obligatory at all times.	Steve Chambers
10	Ensure pre-event ticket confirmation emails include: likely use of airfield car park, need for a torch, availability of observatory-side parking for those unable to walk from the airfield, and winter conditions guidance.	Rob Tate

Ref	Action	Owner
11	Ensure the disabled/mobility-impaired parking bay at the observatory is clearly marked and signed. Review signage before the September 2026 event.	Committee
12	Confirm that airfield car park duty is always staffed by a minimum of two people and that no volunteer is stationed there alone. Assign roles in advance so car park volunteers can plan accordingly.	Sue Drake / Rob Tate

Minutes prepared from audio transcript and briefing note • Seething Observatory, May 2026