Sidmouth Science Festival
Annual report 2026



The purpose of this report is twofold: (1) to give festival sponsors and the public a brief introduction to the Sidmouth Science Festival; and (2) to report on the 2026 festival, giving a sense of its impact and reach.

1. Introduction

The Sidmouth Science Festival has hosted an annual science festival in Sidmouth since 2012 and organises events about science, technology, engineering and mathematical disciplines all the year round in the Sid Valley and East Devon. The Sidmouth Science Festival became a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) in 2016. The website (www.sidmouthsciencefestival,org) provides full details of the festival programme and other events run by the charity. Sidmouth Science Festival supports the local economy.

1.1 Aims of the CIO

The first aim of the CIO is to inform, inspire, promote and advance the education of the public in science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) disciplines; and show how these disciplines impact on our everyday lives by integrating science, art, music, comedy and drama with stimulating technical events. The second aim is to reach out to all parts of the community, particularly those who would not normally engage with STEM subjects such as the more socially disadvantaged or those less confident with respect to this subject matter. The third aim is to promote STEM subjects as career options for young people.

1.2 Regular events

The annual Sidmouth Science Festival is run by volunteers and takes place over 10 days every October. It is now one of the largest science festivals run by volunteers in the UK. There are two family days, one in town at the beginning of the festival, and one at the end of the festival at the Norman Lockyer Observatory (NLO). Talks and guided visits take place throughout the week. People from local, national and international organisations and businesses generally donate their time as exhibitors or speakers at the festival. In recent years, feedback has been collected from visitors and all those who play a part in the festival to understand what has gone well, what challenges remain, and how to improve the festival the following year.

Regular events throughout the year include the monthly Café Scientifique talks at Kennaway House attended, on average, by 50 people. The schools-based programme also runs throughout the year with volunteers organising scientific activities in local schools. Each year, local primary schools participate in an art project with a specific theme, culminating in an exhibition at Kennaway House Art Gallery on Super Science Saturday. This attracts many children who want to show their artwork to family and friends. Schoolchildren also attend the festival to take part in organised activities.

1.3 Festival Sponsors

The role of sponsors is crucial to the success of the Sidmouth Science Festival. The funds they provide are an important contribution to the cost of the annual festival. The costs cover venue hire, fees of some presenters, marketing and insurance. All those who run the festival are volunteers. All but the NLO day, some talks with festival partners, and the visits are free to visitors, but many make voluntary contributions when attending festival activities. Festival sponsors receive recognition in the marketing and publicity.

2. Report of the 15th Sidmouth Science Festival 2026

A successful 15th Sidmouth Science Festival was delivered by over 75 volunteers between 9-18th October 2026 and attended by about 3000 visitors, over 40 exhibitors, and over 35 speakers. Some speakers also gave talks to students at Sidmouth College. Over 40 organisations took part in the 2026 festival (see table). Festival sponsors donated approximately £4,500 of the £16,000 it cost to put on the festival (see sponsor logos). Other funds came from ticket sales and public donations which increased this year, partly because attendance increased.

This year, the collaboration between art and science was highlighted by a well-attended and fascinating talk on the history of colour. Science and art also came together through the work of two

local artists who brought the events to life visually and made the festival even more engaging for families and younger audiences. The full programme of events with photographs and artistic sketches, and a PowerPoint presentation of the highlights of the 2026 festival, are on the website.

New this year was the Festival Observatory which offered several ways for visitors to contribute their thoughts about science and the festival (see below)

2.1 Festival family days 2026

Both Super Science Saturday and the family day at the Norman Lockyer Observatory (NLO) were well attended and had a great atmosphere. On Super Science Saturday, over 3,000 attendees were recorded across six venues in the town centre, and increase of 20% on last year's attendance. On the NLO day, there were 218 paying adults and an estimated 400 children, a big increase on the previous year's figure, helped by the dry and sunny weather. At the popular robot workshop, 257 signed up, another big increase. Most children attending were of primary school age. Teenagers from local secondary schools, scouts and guides, and university students ran or volunteered on many of the exhibits.

Super Science Saturday continues to be very popular and well-attended. Exhibitors included representation from universities, colleges and local schools, and professional institutions. The geology venue featured a series of short talks and a range of geology exhibits to handle and explore. The market hall was used for the first time; the 'Wonderstruck' scientific show with rockets and explosions was held there and proved very popular. For families with children the STEM based activities in the Parish Church and Kennaway House proved to be extremely popular. The Sid Vale association Building was made into a kind of 'natural world' venue, with several exhibitors, including the popular 'Invertebrate Zoo' organised by the University of Plymouth where insects and other invertebrates could be seen and handled.



Wonderstruck explosions, Jed Falby

NLO Family Day 2026 was designed to appeal to youngsters of all ages. As with every year the hottest ticket was for the Space Detectives "Virtual Reality Adventure". Devon Science showcased their new show "The Force Frontiers Show"; this explained the more dynamic (explosive) side of science and was a big hit with every age group. The marquee was packed for their shows. As always, the Institute of Physics put on a solid show demonstrating that science can be fun; this involved everyday objects such as a slinky.

Also popular with very young children was our "Meet the Artist". Each session taught children the basics when drawing and colouring. There was an opportunity to meet the author of the book "Stargazing for All". This gave the author a chance to meet and talk about her work, and to show youngsters what they could expect to see in the night sky.



NLO Family Day

The weather was glorious for October, and this gave us the opportunity to set up a range of Solar telescopes. This meant the public could safely view the Sun and its eruptions (prominences); this was very popular and resulted in a stream of interested people.

There were 4 talks this year given by eminent speakers from the University of Exeter and the Met Office, covering two main themes. The first pair of talks were about the search for Exo-planets, and what constitutes a habitable planet. The second pair of talks were about weather forecasting and the importance of forecasting space-weather.

As with other years we offered walking tours around the grounds of the observatory. Our guide talks about the life of the Lockyer family and some of the important people that were involved with the family. These were well attended mainly by family groups covering a range of ages.

Another big draw on the day was the "Jet Car Build & Race" where 40 self-build jet cars are built to a certain specification using crafts provided and, under adult supervision, children decorate the car

to their own design. Towards the end of the day's events these cars are subject to a speed trial along a designated path. This means that families stay right to the end of the day to race their cars. Our aim was to highlight the positive effect that the NLO and the Science Festival has had on the youth of Sidmouth. The programme of planetarium shows was tailored, for specific age groups. Sessions covered: (1) the night sky aimed at older children and families with an interest in Astronomy and Science; (2) mythology and stories about the night sky with "Story Telling Under the Stars"; and (3) "Astronomy for Kids" for very young children and their families.

The Festival Observatory was an innovation this year and adopted a new method to invite visitors on family days to contribute their observations about science, the festival and their experiences. This included counter selections about travel and motivations; postcards completing "Science is…", a "Today I discovered…" Board; and a short online survey. Together, these sources provided a useful picture of how visitors arrived, what brought them to the festival, how they describe science, what caught their attention, and what they would improve. The strongest combined message is that science at the festival was experienced as enjoyable, hands-on and full of discovery. Fun was the most frequent motivation recorded on the counters; postcard responses emphasised experiments and positive feelings such as fun, interest and excitement; and the discovery board captured specific learning moments, from magnifying glasses and insects to magnets, fossils, AI and explosions (see figure). Online survey comments also praised the programme, demonstrations and volunteers.

2.3 Schools programme in 2025-2026

Volunteers ran scientific activities and workshops for 165 pupils in two schools during 2025-26 and attended the Dorchester Science Festival. In addition, 540 pupil hours from three schools were spent on a variety of activities during the 2026 festival week with help from East Devon Countryside Rangers, The Sid River Catchment Group and Sidmouth Arboretum. This year's hexagon art project had the moon as its theme and involved 10 primary schools; more than 1600 hexagons were made, grouped together by school, and displayed at Kennaway House Art Gallery during the 2026 festival.



Schools' Art in Kennaway House

2.4 Talks and visits during the 2026 festival

During the festival there were 21 high-quality talks covering, for example, the changing climate and coastal erosion, health screening and the science of the mind. Most took place at Kennaway House with a few at other venues. Around 1,380 people attended these talks, again an increase on 2025. Popular events, showing the diversity of topics, included talks on: Sidmouth's changing climate, coastal erosion and engineering, and offshore wind; the science of the mind; the science of magic; sport and sudden death; prostate cancer screening; and talks exploring the connections between food, our health and the natural world. Also new for this year was an interactive comedy show on the Higgs Boson and particle physics by a Cambridge scientist, a lichen field event, and a coastal watch.



Brian Golding's climate talk, Jed Falby

2.4 Marketing, publicity and evaluation

The marketing programme used a combination of print, public relations, website and social media to promote the festival across Sidmouth, East Devon and Exeter. Media coverage, support from local organisations and partners and increased social media followers helped raise awareness and extend the festival's reach. The website continued to provide a central source of information, with particularly strong visitor numbers during September and October. An internal review of this year's festival, based on responses by visitors to the Festival Observatory, and by volunteers and team members have been analysed to highlight possible improvements for next year's festival.

In conclusion, the Sidmouth Science Festival goes from strength to strength, continuing to attract new visitors, exhibitors, speakers and volunteers, and to support the local economy. We thank all those who took part, and particularly the festival sponsors and volunteers who enable this festival to take place.

Figure: Words used by visitors at the Festival Observatory to describe Science







Organisations involved in the Sidmouth Science Festival

The Meteorological Office	Tipton St John Primary
University of Exeter	Newton Poppleford Primary
University College London	Sidmouth Primary
University of Plymouth	West Buckland
Institute of Physics	Feniton Primary
Institution of Mechanical Engineers	Offwell Primary
Devon Science	Sidbury Primary
NHS Somerset Foundation Trust	Whimple Primary
NHS Yeovil District General Hospital	Payhembury Primary
NHS Royal Devon University Healthcare	West Hill Primary
Centre for Dynamic Soils	Awliscombe Primary
Space Detectives	Sidmouth College
Sidmouth Parish Church	St John's School Sidmouth
All Saints Church	The Maths School, Exeter
The Arts Society	Colyton Grammar School
Sidmouth Scouts and Guides	ExeTinct
Sid Vale Association	Lyme Regis Museum
Sid Valley Biodiversity Group	Marine Life
Sidmouth Arboretum	Seahorse Trust
Sid River Catchment Group	Kennaway House Art Gallery
East Devon Countryside Rangers	Norman Lockyer Observatory
South West Lichen Group	

Thanks to our sponsors and festival partners

