

Choosing an Open Homes approach

There are different approaches you can take to running an open homes event. Which one you choose will depend on factors like your budget, the number of homes, the geographic spread of homes and the target audience you want to attract.

We've presented some of the different options here, including insights from other open homes organisers. You may already feel that one of these approaches suits you best but it's worth looking at the alternatives.

A summary of the options

You can 'mix and match', but the main options for open homes events are these:

Drop-in

Where the event organiser and householder specify a date and time when visitors can turn up, e.g. '10.00 to 17.00 on Saturday 28 September'

Bookings

Where visitors book a slot to see a house they are interested in

Tours

A group tour by bus or on foot of the homes taking part in the open homes event

A central hub

Somewhere like a community centre or cafe acts as a focal point for the event

Piggybacking

Where the event is linked to a bigger initiative like an arts trail or open gardens event

1. The 'drop-in' approach

This option means visitors can turn up and look around an open house at any time during the event. Opening hours are defined, whether it be a day, evening or weekend, but a visitor does not need to book or specify when they plan to drop in. This gives visitors more flexibility but means that the hosts need to be prepared for a visit at any time.

If your homes are easily identifiable from the street (with markers, flags, balloons, etc.) you may attract the occasional passer by who perhaps didn't know they wanted to visit a green open home.

Many Heritage Open Days operate on a drop-in basis (www.heritageopendays.org.uk), not least because this approach takes less co-ordination than setting up and managing a booking system.

There is a risk that the popular houses may become overcrowded at times, and this could be hard for the host and disappointing for the visitors. Longer opening hours, volunteer stewards, or simply asking people to come back later if it gets really busy could help to make sure this isn't a problem.

“This year we've extended the opening hours to allow visits to be spread over a longer period – 10.00 to 13.00 and 14.00 to 17.00. This reduces crowding and allows more visits in the day.” | Neil Williams, Lewes Eco Open Homes

A drawback of the drop-in option is that the people opening their homes may have concerns about letting anyone turn up at their house at any time. To alleviate this anxiety, you can suggest that hosts set limited opening times, and make sure there is a steward at each home asking for people's details in order to deter opportunists.

Note, too, that it may be harder to count how many visitors have attended without a booking system. But you can set up a sign-in sheet or a simple way of counting people as they arrive.

2. Booked visits and tours

This approach involves setting up a booking system for people to visit houses on a certain day and time, arranged in advance.

SuperHomes (www.superhomes.org.uk) and the Green Homes Network in Scotland (www.bit.ly/QDJ4sL) are examples of initiatives which do this.

A booking system does make the day more manageable for hosts, particularly in the most popular houses, who will know exactly how many people are coming and at what time. Dedicated time slots mean the host can run a tour of the house ensuring everyone gets to see all the 'green' features, making it a better experience for the visitor as well.

“We found that showing groups of 15 around worked much better than trying to provide a meaningful experience to an endless stream of couples and individuals.” | Chris Bird, Transition Town Totnes

A booking system is a good option if security is a concern, as it allows you to ask for visitors' personal details. You'll also be able to monitor numbers more easily and can get back in touch with them if you need to. Knowing in advance who will be visiting their home and when may also reassure your open homes hosts.

But a booking system won't suit everyone. A manual system is time consuming for volunteers, while an automated web-based system will be complex and/or expensive to set up, so for smaller groups expecting lower numbers of visitors, the extra complexity is probably not worth it. Consider asking hosts to provide an email address if they want to take bookings and manage the process themselves.

“The main drawback is admin. It takes a bit of time to confirm time slots with each visitor. But on the day we look more organised as people arrive and we tick them off and know their names.” | Tina Holt, Transition West Bridgford

Potential visitors might not want to book in advance, and once at the house might prefer to look around on their own and ask questions on a one-to-one basis instead of in a group. Therefore a booking or tour-only system may put some people off coming at all.

Note, too, that visitors who have pre-booked might not turn up on the day. This is disappointing for the hosts (and you as organisers), and also deprives others of the chance to visit those homes because the slot was taken.

3. Bus or walking tours

You could arrange group visits to each of the houses in your event with a bus or walking tour. This way all visitors have a similar experience, see all the homes and benefit from the same learning experience. The Carbon Co-op has used this approach to running an open homes event (<http://carbon.coop>).

A bus tour makes sense if the homes that are part of your event are very spread out. It can also have the environmental benefit of helping to reduce car travel but of course you'll have to factor the costs of e.g. bus hire, fuel, a driver and insurance.

It also makes life easier for hosts who only need to open up their homes to a set number of visitors at fixed times for each tour, so it will take less of their time and they can prepare in advance.

Visitors could get more from a prepared tour where they will be able to ask questions. Whether it is a walking tour or a bus trip, they will get to know each other during the trip which may make the experience itself more sociable and fun, and the chance to discuss what they have seen could be as valuable as seeing the technology itself in terms of inspiring action at a later date.

“People get so much more out of open homes events if they go on the journey together. They're not just taking in the technical information about the houses but sharing their own experiences and discussing how they might adopt these improvements together.” | Jonathan Atkinson, Carbon Co-op

However, you'll probably end up with fewer visitors by taking this approach, as you're limited by the number of people any one home can accommodate. Some people will be put off by having to commit to the whole tour, but the visitors you do get may be more serious about energy saving and more likely to go on to install similar measures in their own homes.

4. A central hub

In addition to the open homes which are the focus of your event, you might choose to set up a central hub (e.g. in a local community centre, library or obliging cafe) where visitors can pick up information about the event and the improvements on show – especially useful for visitors who don't have internet access.

You could invite other local organisations or installers to set up stalls at the hub, arrange refreshments and talks, or even book a band.

A hub can be a good way of promoting the event, as you might pick up interest from other users of the building.

This approach gives visitors a chance to talk to volunteers or experts away from the homes. They might have more questions about what they have seen and would like to get a non-biased answer, which householders themselves might not be able to give. If they are interested in installing any of the measures they've seen, they'll have the opportunity to pick up more information about how to go about it, and if installers are present they can start the ball rolling.

You probably don't want to have so much going on at the hub that you distract visitors from going to see the houses. Transition Town Totnes follows its open homes weekend with an Eco Fair the following weekend that showcases suppliers, installers and advisors and aims to encourage visitors who were enthused by the event to take the next step.

“The second time we ran an event there was a lot going on at the ‘hub’ so it took a while before anyone appeared at the houses. We plan to have less at the hub next time, or just use a stall at an existing community market and do a lot online.” | Anne Thomas, Transition Black Isle

More resources are needed for the hub approach. You'll need volunteers to staff the hub, a suitable venue available on the right date, and, most likely, additional expenses to factor in. It will also add to the time needed to plan and organise the event.

You could recoup some of the costs by charging exhibitors for having a stand, but the presence of installers and other businesses promoting their services may raise questions about your impartiality. One way around this is ensuring there are a number of installers at the event, and encouraging visitors to get more than one quote.

5. Piggybacking

You could tag your event on to a bigger event taking place in your area, such as a green day or a local celebration, or time it so that it happens at the same time as a related event like an open gardens day, heritage open homes day, or an energy event (like EU Sustainable Energy Week, www.eusew.eu). This will help attract attention and could be useful if you are running an event for the first time or if you only have a handful of homes to showcase.

You could benefit from the publicity and buzz of a larger event and you might get more visitors because more people are 'out and about' or better aware of what's going on. Big national or regional events will publicise widely and potentially attract a wider audience than your own marketing efforts could.

"Next time we plan to run the event as part of a county-wide or national event so that there is publicity to a wider audience." | Lorna Bonthrone, Sustainable Wallingford

Linking up with the organisers of an existing event might save you time on planning and organisation, and you could benefit from your partner organisation's advice and support to make your event a success. For example, if there is an established open homes event running in a neighbouring village or town you could consider joining forces rather than setting up something new from scratch.

"We organised a two-county-wide event, working with lots of local eco groups, as well as individual households. Some groups had previously run open days in their own towns and villages. The aim was to create some momentum by having lots of towns put on an event in the same week." | Caroline Harmon, MEA

Bear in mind, though, that if the wider event has a different (i.e. non-energy) focus you risk mixed messages in the marketing, not reaching your target audience or losing potential visitors to something they see as more exciting.

"We have un-hooked ourselves from Heritage Open Days as we felt the heritage link was not very helpful - it was an association that people did not understand." | Adrian Phillips, Cheltenham Green Doors

Furthermore, bigger events tend to have a bigger geographical spread. If you want to focus your event on local homes and local people then this might not be the right approach for your group.

"Last year we joined the wider Energy Saving Trust open day but there was not the same local effort and interest. This year we intend to do more ourselves to promote it." | Anne Thomas, Transition Black Isle

And finally...

Whatever approach you take, it needs to fit with your area, be right for your organisers (and your budget) work well for the people who will open their homes, and be easy to promote to local people.

The **Green Open Homes** network supports low carbon retrofit by promoting existing open homes events and helping new initiatives get going with resources, practical support and funding.

We've produced lots of other information sheets like this one covering legal and insurance issues, volunteers and marketing. See www.greenopenhomes.net



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