

Guide for open home hosts

Most people find that opening their home as part of a green open homes event is a worthwhile and enjoyable experience.

This short guide to give you a few tips and pointers so that you can be confident everything will run smoothly on the day.

Beforehand – preparing your home

Be a good neighbour! Tell your neighbours what you are doing and invite them along – they are quite likely to be interested in seeing your improvements themselves, particularly if their house is similar to yours. They may also be able to help with publicity. It also minimises any surprises for them on the day in case you get a lot of visitors.

Check with the organisers about **signs or banners** outside your home – if they are being provided then it's important to use them. It will help visitors know that they have got the right house, and it may reassure your neighbours to see that the 'open home' in the street is clearly identifiable. If it isn't provided, then make your own by sticking posters in the window, on the door or on the gate.

Do a **risk assessment**. This sounds formal but it simply involves looking around your home, including outside, to spot any potential dangers, e.g. slippery steps, trailing cables, trip hazards. If you can't do anything about any of the potential risks, then just make sure you mention them to visitors, or make signs saying 'mind the slope', 'watch your head' etc. Do this in conjunction with the organisers, as they may spot things that you have become accustomed to in your own home (and their insurance may require it).

Put any **valuables** (including sentimental items) or breakables out of reach. Put them all in one room and keep that door closed so that it is out of bounds to any visitors, with a sign on the door stating the room is private. Likewise if there are any areas of your house that you do not want people to visit, then lock these doors and put up 'no entry' signs.

Check with the organisers what the insurance arrangements are. You must also advise your own insurers that your home will be open for visits – check that you have adequate cover, otherwise you could be liable if an accident happens.

If you have **pets**, it is best to keep them out of the way. Not all visitors will be animal lovers, and it may be stressful for a pet to deal with lots of strangers in their home. Consider having someone to take them out for the day.

Make sure the **toilet** is easily accessible if you're happy for visitors to use it – consider putting up a sign.

You could set up a registration table (or a sheet on the wall) inside the front door for **signing in**, and/or give out labels for name badges so you know who's who if you're giving a tour. The organisers are likely to want details of those who attended for monitoring purposes. It's also good for your own security, and nice to be able to address people by name!

It is up to you if you want to provide **refreshments**. Tea and cake usually proves popular but there is absolutely no pressure to do home baking in addition to opening your home.

If you do provide refreshments, you might want to put out a collection tin for a charity of your choice. Alternatively, some local groups may reimburse you for the cost. On a practical level, it is a good idea to wait until visitors have already looked around before serving hot drinks.

“Encourage tea and cake! The informality and conversation time this creates really helps.” | Kate Gathercole, Herefordshire New Leaf

Structuring visits

Speak to the event organisers about the structure of the visits. They may leave it up to you whether to allow visitors to drop in whenever they want, or to set specific times for people to arrive. However the organisers may prefer all the homes to have the same structure and should let you know which approach they plan to take.

If you are not happy with the way the event is structured, speak to the organisers who can probably

be flexible. For example, if the house suddenly fills up, people probably won't mind waiting outside for a few minutes, or coming back in half an hour. And if you have a friend or a volunteer with you they can help you manage if you do get a sudden influx.

If tours are planned then think about how long a tour might take, and how many visitors per tour is feasible, then feed this back to the organisers. Think about what people will want to be looking at when they visit your home, the size of your home, and how many people at a time will be able to see the features you want to show them.

Think about how you will structure the tour and divide it into time slots. For example, 5-10 minutes for arrivals/introductions, 15-20 minutes guided tour, 10 minutes for questions, 15-20 minutes for refreshments and discussion, 5 minutes for completing feedback forms. This will help to avoid visits over-running.

Bear in mind that having visitors to your home all day can be tiring.

“Don't over-extend yourself. Last time we offered just five tours on one day. This was easier to handle than our previous openings when we did tours on Friday evening, Saturday all day and Sunday afternoon.” | Harriet Martin, Superhomes.

What information to provide

The visits are all about people coming to hear your own story and experiences; you are not expected to be a technical expert (although if you are people will of course be interested in this). But make sure that the most likely technical questions can be answered through factsheets, your in-house volunteer, an installer or an advice centre.

What you can provide is the opportunity to see energy saving improvements in 'real life', and to be able to tell people about how you went about installing them, what the pitfalls were, what you learned from the experience, and how you've benefitted from the improvements.

When you talk to householders, think about covering the following points :

- Why did you want to make an improvement. Cold home, high bills, damp problems, or just to make your home greener?
- What options did you consider, and why did you choose to do what you did?
- What did the work entail. Did you do it yourself or use professionals? How long did it take, how much did it cost and what level of disruption was involved? How easy was it to find a builder or supplier? Did you get recommendations?
- Were there any unexpected obstacles and how did you overcome them?
- What difference has it made? e.g. a warmer or more comfortable home, less damp and mould, lower bills or any other surprising changes?
- What are the key dos and don'ts that you would pass on?

Remember that different people have different motivations; some are looking for carbon savings and reduced energy use, while others will be inspired by a more comfortable home or saving money.

Information and display material is helpful for people who arrive early and you are still talking to the previous visitors. If you have before and after photos, you could display these, along with any leftover materials or samples.

Check with the organisers if they can provide any leaflets or information sheets that you can give out. They might want to create a case study on your home to give to visitors. If not, is this something you could do yourself?

“Photos and easy-to-read displays, before and after energy graphs, samples of materials e.g. insulation, a talk by the householder and/or architect or others involved in the project all proved useful.” | Tina Holt, Transition West Bridgford.

Early or late arrivals

It is worth thinking beforehand about how to deal with people who arrive early or late for *booked* tours, and agree with your helper(s) what you will do. It is your home – you have every right to ask them to come back later if they arrive very early, or not to let them in if they are very late.

If you are accommodating people who arrive early, you might be happy to let them wander around and have a look for themselves, or you may prefer to create a ‘waiting area’ with chairs and things to read. This could even be outside, if you have a small house, but should probably be covered in case the weather is inclement.

Dealing with different types of people

People who come to visit your home will generally be enthusiastic and grateful that you are opening up your home, and are most likely to be very pleasant towards you, and interested in what you have to say.

In the unlikely event that you find some visitors are a bit harder to manage (‘difficult’ behaviour you are most likely to come across is someone who is over-enthusiastic!), it can be helpful to decide beforehand with your helper/volunteer how you will deal with people who overstay their welcome, ask too many questions or generally talk too much.

Some tips include:

- Say beforehand approximately how long a tour of your home is likely to take, particularly if you are running booked tours only. That way, it doesn't appear rude if you begin to hurry people along. If you're uncomfortable with this, your volunteer can help by telling visitors things like: “it's five o'clock now, let's leave [your name] in peace” or “the next group is starting to arrive now, so we'll need to make some room for them”.
- You are not expected to be an expert on everything, so if you can't answer every question, that's fine. If you know where they can get further information, then do direct them to this.

- If someone constantly interrupts you with questions, ask them to save them until the end (and make sure everyone else gets a chance to ask their questions first).
- If someone is negative, don't become defensive; remain assertive with a calm authority.

Remember you're the expert about your own home's retrofit. Others may have more technical knowledge, but they don't know your home, your reasons for doing certain things and the difference it made.

Volunteers

Get as much extra help as you can on the day to meet and greet, tick off names, look after incoming visitors as the previous tour ends etc, and definitely ensure you have at least one helper with you all day.

Agree beforehand who will do what, but some suggestions about how volunteers can help are...

- Meeting and greeting, signing visitors in and out (if required), ensuring people have name stickers (if used) and counting visitor numbers
- Making drinks and taking coats, umbrellas, etc.
- Assisting with basic housekeeping things, like highlighting the nearest exits, where the toilet is and providing refreshments
- Ensuring visitors complete evaluation forms (if provided by your group)
- Providing leaflets and advice on where to find further information
- Talking to anyone waiting for a tour, keeping them in an appropriate area of the house and letting them know how long they'll need to wait

- Providing access to any resources available at the house, case studies, more information, maps of the event.
- Helping to usher people out if required!

People come to learn from the householders, so don't expect volunteers to recount your story for you. They won't have all the information and the experience will not be as good as if you were doing it. If your volunteer has expert experience in a particular area – say they are a plumber – you might be able to get them to speak about details around installing a solar thermal system which could complement your own story – but it should not replace it.

And finally...

Have fun! It's not all hard work, and it's a great way to meet like-minded people and join in with something lively and community-spirited.

“Opening your home can be “very worthwhile, has great feel-good factor, excellent way to spread good practice - do it!” | Sally Cooke, Greendor.

“[What I enjoyed was] meeting the volunteers and the people who came to visit. Many of whom were quite knowledgeable about sustainability issues.” | Peter, Bristol Green Doors householder 2010

“The interest by visitors in even the smallest things. Exchange of hints and tips/ideas; overwhelming numbers but great in a way to find so many folk had an interest.” Irina, Bristol Green Doors householder 2010

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