

Recruiting and supporting open homes hosts

It goes without saying that a successful open homes event depends on the participation of a number of engaging householders willing to open their homes to the public.

How do you find these people and support them throughout the course of the project?

Finding householders to participate takes a long time; you might need to start looking for potential homes 8-12 months before your open homes event.

And before you start to select houses it's useful to establish both a **set of criteria** which you would like your open homes hosts to meet (e.g. certain number of measures installed, lifestyle etc) and to define the **geographical area** your event will cover – although you may choose to be flexible here in case you get a lot of interest from just outside the area you set.

Ways of recruiting open-homes hosts

Use the obvious channels first, then if you still need more households, try widening your approach:

- 1) Start with your core group and any other people you know who have made eco-improvements to their homes. And in turn ask if they know of anyone else who could be encouraged to sign up.
- 2) Use your usual communication channels, such as your newsletter, website and social media.
- 3) Ask other local sustainability groups, transition groups or the local Green Party, plus any 'non-green' community groups who may be interested.
- 4) Have a launch event and invite press (send a press release) to see if you can get people interested.
- 5) Contact householders with visible improvements or installations (e.g. solar panels).
- 6) Contact local architects, suppliers and installers and ask if they have clients who would be interested in opening their homes for the event.

Carefully consider how you word your adverts and invitations to encourage a wide range of households with a variety of improvements to take part.

Information to collect

When you sign up a householder as an open homes host, you'll need to systematically gather information such as what improvements they have made to their home, parking and access details, and what days and times they are willing to open their homes.

You may not need all this information immediately, but it helps to gather as much information as you can as soon as you can, to give you more time for planning and publicity.

Some groups who have run open homes events have found it useful to use standard questionnaires to collect information about each home.

Once you have interest from a household...

Visit the homes to meet the householder, check the house is suitable and answer any questions about the event.

Be specific about what is involved – provide verbal and written guidance about what householders will (and won't) be doing and about the support you'll give them. Keep it simple and straightforward: don't bombard them with too much information.

Keep in touch with householders to let them know how things are progressing (it may be several months between them signing up and the open homes event actually taking place).

Run group events for householders and volunteers. This gives everyone a chance to meet and feel more involved in the overall event, and gives you a chance to provide them with more information.

There are template guides in the Green Open Homes website for volunteers and open homes hosts.

Events and meetings

If you can, find time to run a series of introduction and 'training' sessions for the householders to avoid misunderstandings and worries, and to clarify the roles of the hosts and volunteers. These sessions are a great opportunity to run through any issues people may have about opening their homes.

Ask householders who have participated previously as open home hosts to come along and give feedback on their own experiences, and, if they're willing, act as mentors throughout the whole process. Include Q&A sessions, social time for everyone to meet other householders and volunteers, and most of all, make it fun! Householders are giving up their own time and opening up their homes – it is important that they feel valued and that they enjoy taking part.

At these events, it is useful to provide an overview of:

- What to expect overall – potential numbers of visitors, how they might arrive, that there will be a range of levels of understanding (from expert to just inquisitive).
- What times homes will be open, if there is a booking process, and if so, how this will work.
- What to say to visitors – it is up to them, but if they need help in organising their thoughts then there is a suggested outline for telling their story in the 'guide for open homes hosts' on the Green Open Homes website.
- Clear expectations of the level of technical detail needed from them during visits i.e. just what they know already – if this is little or no technical knowledge then that is fine, they are not expected to know the answers to every question. Explain that an open homes event is about real people telling their own stories about real homes.

“Gather together a dedicated group of people, allow each owner a lot of freedom (e.g. when they open, what they show), seek good local publicity.” | Adrian Phillips, Cheltenham Green Doors

Information

Provide householders with relevant information for them to look over in their own time. You could provide all of this in one go, or 'drip feed' the information so as not to overwhelm anyone. If you take the latter approach, start with general information, and then get more specific as the event draws nearer. Some things that householders may find useful include:

- General guidance sheet (you could use or adapt the guide on the Green Open Homes website).
- 'Job descriptions' for householders, stewards and other volunteers, so that householders are clear about what they need to do and also what support they will get.
- Admin guidance (plus any necessary paperwork, e.g. risk assessment sheets etc). English Heritage has produced useful risk assessment guidelines for Heritage Open Days that you could refer to: <http://bit.ly/15jxuIJ>
- Checklist of things they'll need for the event (e.g. sign-in sheets, evaluation forms).
- Ideas of things that would be useful to show visitors but aren't essential (e.g. before-and-after photos).
- Clarification on what they do or don't need to provide for visitors, e.g. (accessible) toilet, refreshments, spaces to sit down, somewhere to leave coats.

There are templates from other successful open homes initiatives on the Green Open Homes website which you might find useful to refer to.

Event packs

Immediately prior to the event, provide all the materials the householder will need for the event. This might include:

- Signage
- Information sheets about technologies they have installed (but make it clear that they are not expected to be technical experts – the event is about real people telling their own stories).
- Other leaflets of interest
- Sign-in sheets/visitors book
- Evaluation/feedback sheets
- Sticky labels and marker pens for making name badges if appropriate
- Relevant samples (e.g. of insulation materials) if you can get hold of them. More information here: <http://bit.ly/1dqfOFq> (pdf)

"It is useful for each house to have a summary of information to give to people...Some general leaflets about other environmental things going on in the area are also a good idea." | Anne Thomas, Transition Black Isle

Other tips for supporting your hosts ...

- Recruit as many volunteers as possible – the more help that householders have, the better.
- Where possible, ensure that volunteers are matched with a suitable home, e.g. one where they get along well with the householder, or where they have appropriate knowledge and/or interest of the improvements on view.
- A couple of weeks before the open homes event, run a ‘dress rehearsal’ if possible. This gives householders the chance to go and view other houses participating in the event.
- Set up a booking system or confirm well in advance the specific times and dates when your event will take place.
- Can you provide cleaners to clean householder’s homes before and/or after the event (maybe you could get donations/sponsorship from a local business to cover this)?
- During the event itself, make sure there is always someone in the house with the householder.
- Tea, coffee and cake will go down well with visitors, but since you may not want householders to bear the cost, you could reimburse them, get seek donations from local businesses, or agree that householders have a collection pot (either to cover their costs or to donate to charity)?

“We arranged a Saturday a couple of weeks before the event for people who would be opening their homes or otherwise occupied on the day to be able to go round and see some of the homes and this also gave people a chance to practice what they would say.” | Anne Thomas, Transition Black Isle

Finally ... show appreciation

One of the most supportive things you can do is to make sure householders know that they are valued. As well as saying thank you verbally, you could send a letter or card afterwards, provide a summary of feedback on the whole event and about their particular home, organise an evening out to celebrate and run follow-up events to keep the network going and to keep people interested and enthused.

“It is hard work but rewarding too. Treat the householders well, they are your prime asset.” | Kate Watson, Bristol Green Doors

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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