

# Recruiting and supporting volunteers

*This resource will give you some pointers on recruiting and supporting volunteers for your open homes event.*

*There is also a Green Open Homes 'Guide for Volunteers' which you might find useful to give to your helpers.*

Before you begin recruiting volunteers, you need to think about a few things. We've set out some questions here that we think it pays to have an answer to in advance of any recruitment activity.

## ***What's in it for you?***

Most open homes events require a lot of help in different areas (stewards, facilitators, guides, administrators, fundraisers etc). So, unless you're planning a very small event which your group can handle by itself, recruiting a volunteer team with a range of interests and skills at an early stage is a high priority. A diverse volunteer team will mean you can tap into lots of different ideas and experience.

## ***What's in it for your volunteers?***

Different volunteers will have different motivations, so in your recruitment materials, emphasise that volunteering for your group will have a variety of benefits so you appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Some may want to learn more about energy saving measures, others to meet new people and make new friends. A few volunteers may be thinking about career development and improving their CVs, while many more may simply enjoy donating their time and skills to a worthy cause.

## ***How will you ensure your volunteers are suitable?***

Think about what you need to know about a potential volunteer. Application forms are recommended by volunteering support agencies such as Volunteering England because you can gather lots of information fairly easily. The downside is that they are quite formal, and may put some people off, especially if they're long or complex. You could ask for a brief personal statement outlining why they want to volunteer for you, what they can offer and what they would like to get out of it.

Probably the best method is just to arrange an informal chat or meeting. This allows you to get to know the volunteer and gives them the opportunity to ask you questions about your group and the role. It does take quite a bit of time so be realistic about your ability to meet everybody.

For obvious security reasons, it's also good practice to get some references for volunteers who are going to be helping in people's houses. It's worth making sure that you will be able to turn away unsuitable applicants and have not inadvertently committed yourself to accepting everyone who applies. Whichever process you choose, be clear about that from the start.

### ***Have you factored in enough time to support your volunteers properly?***

If you haven't, you really need to. Supporting volunteers can be time consuming, but it's definitely time well spent. It isn't fair to recruit volunteers and then manage them poorly – and doing so will make it much more difficult for your group to recruit in the future.

### ***Have you got a clear communication plan?***

Many groups lose volunteers because of poor communication. That could be anything from overwhelming them with too many emails to leaving it so long between updates that they lose interest. Because you are likely to be recruiting well in advance of your event, you'll need to manage your volunteers' involvement carefully to keep them engaged. It helps to have a plan in place even before recruitment begins.

Make it clear from the start how often (and in what format) volunteers can expect to hear from you, and do your best to stick to it. Bear in mind that not everyone likes emails!

### ***How will you deal with any issues that crop up?***

Volunteers are ambassadors for your group, so you need to ensure that they are representing you as you would wish. It can be awkward to address the problem of a volunteer not acting in the best interests of the group, because that person is giving their time for free. However, the best thing you can do in this situation is act swiftly and sensitively. Having a clear idea of how you might approach this unlikely scenario should give you the confidence to deal with any issues effectively. Volunteering England has some useful guidance on this topic at <http://bit.ly/1e1Xdir>

## **Recruiting volunteers**

If you have a clear answer to all the questions above, you're ready to recruit your team. Here are some tips to help you with the recruitment itself.

### ***The basics***

When designing your recruitment materials it helps to set out the tasks you want volunteers to perform in a clear role description. If you need to recruit for more than one type of role make sure you have a role profile for each. The role of an admin assistant will quite differ to a volunteer steward.

Make it clear what sort of time commitment you are expecting for each, including any time required for training and meetings. And be clear about when you want volunteers to be active – during working hours, or in the evening and at weekends? State what you intend to provide in the way of expenses; if you can afford it, support with travel and/or subsistence might allow more people to volunteer for you.

### ***Signing people up***

Make sure you advertise your roles in as varied a way as possible to get a good range of volunteers. Word of mouth is a very effective way to recruit, so encourage your existing group members and volunteers to spread the word. Put up posters and get some leaflets out. Use any green networks that cover your area, especially focusing on other groups with similar

goals that might want to work with you in partnership. Once you have some open homes hosts on board they may well know people willing to help with the event – as a volunteer steward on the day or dropping off some leaflets for you.

Don't rely solely on 'green' avenues for recruitment. Volunteering agencies can help, and, although they'll charge a fee, it's probably money well spent as they can reach a wide audience and offer you their advice and expertise.

## Supporting volunteers

Once you begin building up a team of volunteers you need to offer them adequate support to keep them motivated and prevent them getting overwhelmed. Here are some pointers for keeping volunteers engaged:

### *Induction & training*

A good induction is invaluable. Your volunteers will need information about your group, the event, and their role. You will want to cover all the basics, such as contact details, what to do in emergencies, what your responsibilities are and what the responsibilities of the volunteers are going to be.

You should also outline any training you want the volunteers to undertake at the very beginning, even if you haven't arranged the sessions yet. (As stated above, don't start recruiting before you have decided this). Explain what format the training will take. Will it be something simple like reading through a volunteer handbook? Perhaps you will be arranging training sessions led by your group or by a local partner organisation, or you might ask more experienced volunteers to lead a session. Don't assume that all your volunteers have the same training needs. Fine out how much they know: some of them might know more about domestic energy than you do and won't be happy to be sent on a compulsory training session.

### *Ongoing support & communication*

Let your volunteers know exactly what they are going to be doing as well as where to go for help and information if needed. Ideally, assign each volunteer a main contact at your group so that they can build up a good working relationship.

Try to involve volunteers in decision-making as far as possible. This will keep them engaged, show that their input is valued and give them a stake in the project. A brainstorming meeting could be a good way to do this, and also offers an opportunity for volunteers to meet and get to know each other.

Other tools you could use (less sociable, but still effective) include group emails (e.g. using Google Groups) or simple online surveys (e.g. Survey Monkey). Keep your contact lists and contact details up to date, and if you need to get an urgent message out to volunteers, try to call them rather than relying on emails.

### *Maintaining momentum*

Unlikely as it may seem, you may have a quiet spell at some point where you don't have much for volunteers to do. If this happens, there is a danger that some of your volunteers could lose interest, so think about whether you can delegate to them any of the tasks the core group were planning to do. Some might relish the opportunity for more challenging project work, and the core team might appreciate the help too. Other volunteers will be happy to have a break and come back when there's more going on.

During quiet periods, take extra care to keep your volunteers updated on what you are doing behind the scenes so that they understand why it's gone a bit quiet. If there's anything you can do in these quieter spells to maintain volunteers' momentum, such as running workshops, training sessions or just some socials, you should consider it. It may create extra work, but will help avoid volunteer drop-out.

At the end of your project, consider if, and how, you will stay in touch with your volunteers. You may just run the one event, in which case you might not need

to stay in touch with volunteers – beyond saying thank you, of course. If you plan to repeat your open homes event – and we hope you will – it is worth keeping your volunteers active. Those that had a positive experience the first time round (hopefully all of them) are quite likely to help out next time. Something as simple as a few email updates and perhaps a post-event feedback session might be enough.

## Losing volunteers

Volunteers can drop out for a variety of reasons, only some of which are within your control, so don't worry if some move on – it happens. But if you are losing a lot, it might be a sign that you are doing something wrong.

If volunteers do leave, it pays to ask them why in case there is an element of your support you need to improve on. Allow people to feed this back in a variety of ways as some people might be able to express in writing what they could never say face to face. Feedback forms where the wording is already there and all they need to do is tick a box might also help you get an honest answer, especially if the form is anonymous, but make sure there is space for them to elaborate on their answers if they wish to.

## More information

For more detailed guidance on recruiting and retaining volunteers for community groups see Volunteering England's comprehensive guide at: <http://bit.ly/1dGuQni>.

The PlanLoCaL guidance on working with volunteers focuses specifically on the community energy sector (pdf): <http://bit.ly/1e1YKF9>

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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](http://www.greenopenhomes.net)



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