

Why green open homes events work

People opening up their homes and talking to others about the 'green' improvements they have made is an excellent way to inspire greener behaviour.

There are genuine success stories from established green open homes events, which resonate with much of the research on theories of behaviour change and 'social norming'.

"The greatest strength of the Open Days events seems to be the power of real-life experience and the telling of a 'story' by an ordinary citizen about their own home ... the value of the story being told by 'someone like us' could be lost in a rush to impose order and consistency." | Killip and Hamilton, Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford (<http://tinyurl.com/q5apuow>)

If you are considering an open homes event you probably already think it's a good idea. But if you need any more convincing, here are seven good reasons to go for it.

1. The novelty factor

Open homes events can be fun, engaging, and attract a broad range of people, making them a really good way to spread the word about the benefits of low carbon improvements. The idea of opening up homes has proved to be popular in recent years, for example through arts trails, open gardens and heritage open days, as well as eco open homes events.

Open homes events can engage people and social groups that might otherwise not be interested in eco-renovation, or that would be less likely to respond to more conventional ways of sharing your message (like putting on a talk or giving out leaflets).

2. Social networks

New ideas and technologies tend to spread (or 'diffuse') via social networks. Open homes events are great ways to encourage the spread and acceptance of low carbon homes. It's likely that open homes hosts will invite their friends and neighbours to take part in the event, and it will provide a talking point and an opportunity to discuss some of the issues. Hopefully, they in turn will tell others about the event and what they learned, which may inspire others to take action too.

3. Identifying with people

Providing the opportunity for people to see improvements made to homes, especially those which are similar to their home, makes 'green'

adaptations seem more accessible. Research on social theories of behaviour shows that we are more likely to act in alignment with a 'social norm' if we identify with the group that the behaviour is linked to. So when people visit houses, part of what they are looking at is whether the person living in the house is like them, or has a lifestyle they aspire to.

If visitors see improvements which are carried out by people like them, whom they relate to because they live in the same sort of house or have a similar lifestyle, they are more likely to follow their lead.

"People are as interested in the books on your shelves as the low carbon improvements you're showcasing."
Dan Weisselberg at Bristol Green Doors

4. The value of trust

Hearing about low carbon improvements from a trusted peer makes the information much more impactful and more likely to be acted upon.

At open homes events you get to hear the practical, real-life, 'warts and all' report from someone in your community. Hosts can explain what they did and why, what worked and what mistakes they may have made, and visitors will trust these messages much more than a sales pitch from a stranger.

Plus there is local intelligence to glean, such as the availability of tradesmen with particular skills, or a supportive local authority or community group. All of this is invisible to manufacturers and will not be evident in product literature or design guides.

5. Telling a story

People find stories or narratives much more memorable than lists of facts, and a narrative about the results of low energy improvements will be much more compelling than a list of benefits. So open homes events where there are real stories and case

studies make energy saving home improvements more inspiring.

6. Social norming

Research shows that we are strongly influenced by what we believe most other people do in the same circumstances – in other words, what we consider to be 'normal'. Social norming is about how we form an impression of what the typical behaviour is of those around us, and then consciously or unconsciously follow suit. So if you are able to point out a 'norm' (for example, making low carbon improvements to homes), people are more likely to make changes to their own homes to meet the norm.

It can be difficult to show a norm when it comes to the (otherwise fairly invisible) behaviour of people within their homes, so an open homes event is an excellent way of making this visible. If you have lots of homes that have all made energy efficient upgrades then it will appear even more 'normal'.

7. Stronger communities

In some neighbourhoods, getting people engaged in any kind of community-level activity can be a struggle. But open homes events can appeal to a broad audience. People of all ages and backgrounds will be interested, and it is a good way to get people out and about and talking to each other - a bit like a street party or an arts trail. You will also be creating opportunities for a range of people to get involved; as part of the main organising group, as an open homes host or as a volunteer steward.

Want to know more?

The theories of behaviour change ('social norming', 'availability heuristics' etc) are dealt with in more detail in the PlanLoCaL resource '*Behaviour change: theories, approaches, guidance*' <http://tinyurl.com/qj5atm9>

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