

## Choosing an open homes approach

There are different approaches you can take to running an open homes event. It's important to pick the ones that meet the needs of your home-openers and your target audience.

You'll also need to consider factors like your budget, the number of homes, the type of properties in your area, the geographic spread of homes and your time.

This is one of a series of information sheets for community groups organising green open homes events. Find the rest at [www.greenopenhomes.net](http://www.greenopenhomes.net)

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### **The drop-in event**

This option means visitors can turn up and look around an open home 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 the visitors more flexibility and means that the hosts should be prepared for a visit at any time during opening hours.

The drop in approach is good for local neighbours, areas with high foot traffic, and attracting people who aren't able to commit to a specific booking time or tour. The drop-in approach may also be more attractive to families and younger people, increasing the inclusivity of your event.

Many Heritage Open Days events ([www.heritageopendays.org.uk](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk)) operate on a drop-in basis. This approach takes less co-ordination than setting up and managing a booking system. If your homes are easily identifiable from the street (such as terraces or detached houses 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.

There is a risk that the most popular homes may become overcrowded at times, and this could be hard for the host and disappointing for the visitors. The home opener may also have concerns about letting anyone turn up at any time. You could look at options such as specific opening hours, using volunteer stewards to greet and manage expectations, or simply asking people to come back later if it gets really busy to help to make sure this isn't a problem.

*“Extending the opening hours allows visits to be spread over a longer period, reduces crowding and allows more visits during the day.”*

**Neil Williams, Lewes Eco Open Homes**

Note, too, that it may be harder to count how many visitors have attended without a booking system. If you are thinking of having a sign-in sheet to record visitor numbers please read the data protection guidance in the next section.

## **Booked visits**

This approach involves setting up a booking system for people to visit properties on a certain day and time, arranged in advance. SuperHomes ([www.superhomes.org.uk](http://www.superhomes.org.uk)) and the Green Homes Network in Scotland ([www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk)) are good examples of initiatives that use booking systems.

There are a variety of online booking and form-making tools that are low cost, easy to use and can automate the booking process. You could try an appointment platform like Calendly or a form-builder like Jotform. You can then share your online booking page as a link in a marketing email, Whatsapp, social media, or on QR codes on posters and flyers.

A booking system with dedicated time slots makes the day more manageable for hosts, particularly in the most popular homes, who will know exactly how many people are coming and at what time. Booking systems cap numbers in the home, which can make the experience more comfortable and rewarding for visitors.

Hosts can run guided tours with each batch of visitors, ensuring everyone gets to see all the ‘green’ features in their home. Alternatively, once at the home, booked visitors might prefer to look around on their own and ask questions on a one-to-one basis.

*“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**

Booked slots may also be helpful for homes that are hard to drop-in to due to the property type or location. This could include flats or homes within larger developments, park homes, and rural homes.

A booking system is a good option if security is a concern. You’ll also be able to monitor visitor numbers more easily and can get back in touch with them if you need to.

## Protecting people's data: booking systems and sign-in sheets

If you are collecting personal details via a booking system or a sign-in sheet, it's important to be compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). This is fairly straightforward, and you can read our *GDPR for open homes events* checklist for a compliant booking system.

Visitors need to know why you're collecting their details, what you'll use the information for and how long you'll keep it. You will also need their permission to contact them following the event so make sure you include this as part of the sign-up form, for example as a tick box.

Free or low-cost platforms like Calendly, Eventbrite, JotForm and Microsoft Forms are easy to use for booking systems or sign-up forms, and the data is then only accessible to the organisers. Please refer to our GDPR checklist to make sure you have completed all the relevant steps.

A tablet, laptop or phone can be used at the door by stewards to sign in visitors or check bookings. A virtual form is much more data-secure than having a publicly visible paper sign-in sheet. Paper sign-in sheets may be easy for your hosts or volunteers but please make sure they are promptly given to the event organiser, stored securely, and shredded after the details have been used for their stated purpose.

The main drawback for using a booking system is that setting up and managing your system takes a bit of time. You'll also need to think carefully about who in your community might be disadvantaged by this system, such as those without internet access. Can your target audience easily access and use your booking page? Is there a phone number they can call for assistance?

*"The main drawback is admin... But we also look more organised as people arrive and we tick them off and know their names."*

**Tina Holt, Transition West Bridgford**

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 may deprive others of the chance to visit those homes because the slot was taken. Being able to send reminders through your sign-up platform could reduce the chances of this happening.

## Bus or walking tours

You could arrange group visits to each of the homes in your event with a bus or walking tour. This way all visitors will have a similar experience, see all the homes and benefit from the same learning experience. The Carbon Co-op used this approach to running open homes events in 2019 ([www.carbon.coop](http://www.carbon.coop)).

A bus tour makes sense if the homes that are part of your event are very spread out. Bus tours have the environmental benefit of helping to reduce car travel, and they are inclusive to people who don't have cars or can't drive. However, you will need to factor in the costs of bus hire, fuel, a driver, and insurance, and the time for managing the personal details of booked participants as per GDPR requirements.

Accessible buses or the use of taxis may improve the ability of those less physically mobile to see the homes. When considering this, make sure the homes they are attending are also suitable for people using mobility aids or who may need to sit down often.

Tours make life easier for hosts, who only need to open their homes to a set number of visitors at fixed times for each tour. The event will take up less of the host's time and they can prepare in advance.

Visitors could get more from a prepared tour where they will be able to ask questions. They will get to know each other during the trip, which may make the experience itself more enjoyable. More importantly, discussing what they have seen could be as valuable as seeing the technology itself in terms of inspiring future action.

*"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**

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, and some people will be unable to commit to a whole tour (think about your target audience). However, the visitors you do get will be serious about energy saving and more likely to go on to install similar improvements in their own homes.

## **A central hub**

In addition to the open homes that 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 café) where visitors can pick up information about the event and the improvements on show. This is useful for attracting local residents who might not have heard of your event, people who may be unable or not comfortable visiting the homes, or those who don't have internet access.

You could invite other local organisations or installers to set up stalls at the hub, or go further by arranging refreshments, talks, or even music. The hub is a good way of promoting the event, as you might pick up interest from other users of the building or passers-by.

This approach gives visitors a chance to pick up more information in the form of leaflets or product sheets. They can also talk to experts who might talk more candidly than a homeowner.

You probably don't want to have so much going on at the hub that you distract visitors from going to see the homes. You could get around this by running the two events at different times, but close enough together that they are linked. Some groups follow their open homes weekend with an Eco Fair showcasing suppliers, installers, and advisors, with the aim of helping visitors who were enthused by the event to take action in their own home.

*"The second time we ran an event we organised a lot of things at the 'hub' and people took a lot of time there, and 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 more 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 to have a stand, but the presence of installers and other businesses promoting their services may raise questions about your impartiality. One way around this is encouraging visitors to get more than one quote.

## **Piggybacking**

You could tag your event on to a bigger event taking place in your area, such as a green day, local celebration, or time it so that it happens at the same time as a related event like an open gardens day, arts trail, Heritage Open Homes day ([www.heritageopendays.org.uk](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk)), Sustainable Energy Week ([www.eusew.eu](http://www.eusew.eu)), or Energy Savers Week ([www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)). This will help create more 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. Big national or regional events will publicise widely and potentially attract a wider audience than your own marketing efforts could.

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. For example, if there is an established open homes event running in a

neighbouring village or town you could consider joining forces with your booking system and insurance rather than setting up something new from scratch.

*"We organised a two-county event, working with lots of local eco groups, as well as individual households. Some of the groups had previously run open days within 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. It should also work well for the people who will open their homes, and be easy to promote to local people.

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This information sheet was produced by the Centre for Sustainable Energy. We're committed to supporting low carbon retrofit by promoting open homes events and helping you get going with resources, practical support and funding.

You can find more advice at [www.greenopenhomes.net](http://www.greenopenhomes.net).

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