

Green open homes: guide for volunteers

Volunteers are vital to making sure open homes events run smoothly and are a good experience for everyone involved. This guide is to help clarify your role and give you some tips to help you prepare.

This is one of a series of information sheets for community groups organising green open homes events. Find the rest at www.greenopenhomes.net

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The volunteer's role

Opening a home to the public can be quite a lot of work for the host, particularly if they don't have friends or family available to lend a hand. As a volunteer, you can help relieve the pressure, and having an additional friendly and approachable person on hand will improve the visitors' experience. There's a range of tasks you might end up being responsible for, such as: welcoming visitors, keeping track of the number of people in the home, organising refreshments, providing advice (if you happen to be very knowledgeable), aiding with accessibility, or something else the host might struggle to do on their own.

"Volunteers are essential at the homes - to help manage numbers, enable the household to feel at ease, and to gather visitor evaluation."

Jo Hamilton, previously Oxfordshire ClimateXchange

Preparing for the day

Before the event, discuss with the host what sort of help they need, and when the best time is for you to arrive. Make sure you know your way around their home – the key areas of interest for visitors, where the toilet and exits are, which areas are out of bounds to visitors... and most importantly how to make a good cup of tea. If the home is part of a larger building or complex, like a block of flats, make sure you know how to get to and from the main entrance.

Have everything to hand that you are going to need, such as visitor sign-in sheets, leaflets, stickers and pens for name labels, evaluation forms, etc. A safe place to keep all this is useful – or you may prefer to use a deep pocket or a shoulder bag.

If the host is running scheduled time slots or tours for visitors, check how these will work and how you can help. Discuss how you will manage visitors at busy times and

choose a maximum number of people that can realistically be in the home at any one time.

Helping with visitors

If you can do most of the 'meeting and greeting', it means the host will be able to concentrate on talks, questions and running guided tours. If you're able to, check whether visitors have any accessibility or mobility requirements when they arrive and work with the host to see how these can be met. This could be as simple as having chairs for people to sit down, or a sign on the toilet door – easy things to do even before visitors show up.

As visitors arrive, ensure that they sign in (if needed) and if they're happy to, consider using name stickers so that the host can address them by name. Take their coats if appropriate, and make sure they wipe their feet!

Count visitor numbers throughout the day to ensure you have an accurate record (although in a popular home, you may not manage to get everyone).

Open home events often ask visitors to sign in on a piece of paper, tablet, or another device. If you are signing in visitors on a piece of paper, make sure their personal details are kept discreet, for example by using a fold-over clipboard. Follow the instructions of the host and event organisers for handling and safely storing the documents or electronic devices until the end of the event.

Your visitors are likely to be very interested and enthusiastic, but if there are difficult or demanding questions, the host might be glad of some help dealing with them. You could point them to flyers or to the organisers' contact details so they can find more information elsewhere.

If the host is providing refreshments, you could make drinks or offer snacks on their behalf and offer to wash up afterwards. Try to give out drinks at an appropriate time so that visitors are not walking around carrying hot drinks or food.

Make sure visitors complete evaluations before they leave (if provided by your group), and direct them to further information and guidance if they are interested.

Helping with time management

Keep an eye on the time, especially if you're swapping over with another volunteer at an agreed time or if the host is running structured tours. You can give visitors a reminder of how much time is left, move questions along, or give out feedback sheets 5-10 minutes before the end of the allotted time.

Other ways of helping to chivy people along include giving people their coats back, telling visitors something like: "it's five o'clock now, let's leave our host in peace" or "the next group is starting to arrive now, so we'll need to make some room for them".

Be aware of the mood of the group too. You could help to move things along if the discussion has become too detailed for most of the group, especially if there is still a lot to look at and not much time left. Interjecting with a reminder of the time and what else is left to view are tactful ways to do this.

Early or late arrivals

Check beforehand what the host would like to do about visitors who arrive early or late. You may need to be quite firm and ask early visitors to come back later if they arrive very early, or not let them in if they are very late.

If you are accommodating people who arrive early, invite them to take a seat or look at a display, chat to them about what other open homes they have seen, and make sure there are plenty of leaflets to read.

And finally...

Enjoy yourself! Being a volunteer helper for an open homes host can be fun and rewarding, and you will meet lots of people. Open homes events are a fantastic way for people to learn more about energy improvements they can make to their homes and are great fun to be a part of. You may just learn something useful yourself.

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.

www.cse.org.uk

communities@cse.org.uk

Charity 298740

St James Court, St James Parade, Bristol BS1 3LH