

Recruiting and supporting volunteers

This guide gives some pointers on recruiting and supporting volunteers for your event.

There is also a Green Open Homes *Guide for volunteers* which is useful to share with your volunteers once recruited.

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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Things to consider before you start

What's in it for you?

Most open homes events will require a lot of help in different areas: stewards, facilitators, guides, administrators, fundraisers, and more. So, unless you're planning a small scale event that your core group can handle by itself, recruiting new volunteers at an early stage is likely to be a high priority.

What's in it for your volunteers?

Different volunteers will have different motivations (if you're already volunteer, you'll know this!). In your recruitment materials, emphasise the range of benefits of volunteering to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. A few volunteers may be thinking about career development and improving their CVs, while many more may simply value donating their time and skills to a worthy cause. Think about what specific roles or tasks your group needs doing, and what you need to know about a potential volunteer.

Have you thought about your screening process?

Probably the best screening method is an informal chat, a meeting, or a volunteer open evening. Screening allows you to get to know your potential volunteers and gives them the opportunity to ask you questions about your group and the role.

Application forms are a recommended part of screening because you can gather lots of information fairly easily. The downside is that they can be quite formal or long, which may put some people off. You could ask for a brief personal statement

outlining why they want to volunteer for you, what they can offer and what they'd like to get out of it.

Consider using an online form to keep all the personal information in one place (for example, Jotform or SurveyMonkey) and stay compliant with data protection laws (GDPR). Alternatively, people could phone or email you, or complete a paper sign up form. Offline options are more accessible to people who are not digitally literate, but they require different GDPR considerations. Paper forms should be uploaded to a password-protected document, stored securely and then shredded.

Before you collect people's information, read our guide *GDPR for open homes events*.

It's also good practice to get references for volunteers who are going to be helping in people's homes. Make sure that you will be able to turn away unsuitable applicants (or find a more suitable role for them) and don't inadvertently commit 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 time well spent. It isn't fair to recruit volunteers and then not manage them well and a poor reputation may make it more difficult for your group to recruit in the future. Before you start recruiting, plan the systems and processes you'll use, and consider the needs of the people who might volunteer for you.

Good communication

Many groups lose volunteers because of poor communication. That could be anything from overwhelming volunteers with too many messages to leaving it so long between updates that they lose interest – tricky when you are likely to be recruiting well in advance of your event.

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. Consider the digital platforms available to you but bear in mind that not everyone can access apps like WhatsApp or Microsoft Teams, while others don't use emails. You could add a question to the application form asking volunteers what their preferred communication channel is before you decide your format.

A process for resolving conflict

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. Preparing a strategy for how to approach this unlikely scenario

should give you the confidence to deal with any issues effectively. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has some useful guidance on the topic of *Solving volunteer problems* ncvo.org.uk.

Recruiting volunteers

If you have a clear answer to all the questions above, you're ready to start recruiting. Here are some tips.

The basics

When designing your recruitment materials, 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 be quite different to a volunteer steward.

Be clear about the time commitment you are expecting, including any time required for training and meetings. And be specific about when volunteers will be active i.e. during working hours, in the evening, at weekends, or for specific event dates?

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. And if there is anything else you can offer, like training opportunities or the chance to be in a documentary, set this out too.

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, get some leaflets out, and get busy on social media. Use any networks that cover your area, physical or online, especially focusing on groups that might want to work or partner with you. Once you have some open homes hosts on board, the hosts might know people willing to help with the event, too.

Volunteer agencies can help, and, although some charge a fee, it could be money well spent as they can reach a wide audience and offer you their advice and expertise. As a community organisation you may be eligible for free or discounted support.

Remember to design a simple, accessible and GDPR compliant process for signing people up. If you do this step thoroughly, you can tick off a lot of steps in one go - contact details, availability, references, prior experience, communication methods, expectations, etc.

See the *GDPR for open homes events* guide for more information.

Supporting volunteers

Once you begin building up a team of volunteers you need to offer them adequate support to keep them motivated, but also keep in mind that you don't want to overwhelm or bore them. Here are some pointers for how to keep volunteers engaged:

Induction and training

A good induction is invaluable. Your volunteers should receive 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 your volunteers are going to be. Depending on their role, they may need extra kit on the day, which you should provide.

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 will have the same level of knowledge – find out. Some of them might know more about domestic energy than you do already.

Ongoing support and 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 your volunteers in ongoing decision-making where appropriate. This may help 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 WhatsApp broadcasting or simple online surveys. You'll need to get permission from volunteers to be part of a WhatsApp group (as part of the sign up form) and set clear boundaries for members accessing other members' contact details – you don't want someone pilfering contact numbers from a group chat without consent.

Keep your contact lists and contact details up to date and GDPR compliant. And if you need to get an urgent message out to volunteers, try to call them rather than relying on emails or texts.

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 will 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 to it 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 what's happening. If there's anything you can do in quieter spells to keep up 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. The key is to find a balance that suits your volunteers. Sometimes no news is still news so make sure to let people know even if there are no updates.

Losing volunteers

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

If volunteers do leave, it's useful to ask why in case there's something you can improve on. Allow for feedback in a variety of ways. Written feedback forms might help you get an honest answer, especially if the form is anonymous, and do include space for them to elaborate if they wish.

For more detailed guidance on recruiting and retaining volunteers for community groups we recommend the National Council for Voluntary Organisation's comprehensive volunteer recruitment guide: www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance.

Recognition and celebration

If you plan to repeat your open homes event – and we hope you will – it is worth keeping your volunteers motivated by recognition and celebration. Those that have a positive experience (hopefully all of them) will likely support your next event. So don't waste all the time and effort you've put into recruiting, training and supporting your volunteers by never contacting them again.

Make sure if you are re-imbursing costs to do so promptly, and keep promises, for example training opportunities. Perhaps a post-event feedback session to get their thoughts on how it all went and how to improve in the future could be helpful. In any case, make your volunteers feel valued. Thoughtful recognition like thank you cards, wrap-up emails, awards, vouchers, an end of event party, and sharing the glowing comments from visitors or event funders are all meaningful ways to show appreciation for their help making your event successful.

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.

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