



'I could do that' – Ecohomes bridge the confidence gap

AECB Trustee Mischa Hewitt shares his enthusiasm for Eco Open Homes, arguing that there is no better shop window for the sustainable building sector, so it's well worth getting involved.

Every presentation on retrofitting starts the same. An outline of the scale of the problem, mentioning our 25 million or so leaky, energy inefficient houses that need to be retrofitted between now and 2050 to meet our climate targets. This is then translated to a figure of one whole house renovation every minute, between now and then! This is a huge challenge: how on earth do you inspire and galvanise people on this scale to make the improvements needed?

Already, there are fantastic examples of houses that have been renovated to a very high standard, notably the homes that were part of the Technology Strategy Board's 'Retrofit for the Future' competition, or the Sustainable Energy Academy's 'Old Home Super Home' network. Many are featured on the Low Energy Buildings Database¹ -- but this is an unashamedly professional resource. In parallel, we have to engage, motivate and mobilise the majority – the customers who will be inviting the professionals in.

Open House and Green door events

To address this, Open House or 'Green Door' events have simultaneously sprung up in places as far and wide, from Brighton to Bristol, from Llanidloes to London, from Nottingham to Norfolk. The idea of these mainly volunteer-organised events is simple: people who have done things to improve their homes open their doors in a 'show and tell'.

The events are generally free, and houses are viewed by tour or by 'dropping in'. Visitors are shown around by the householders themselves, or by professionals who were involved in the project. The houses demonstrate different approaches to environmental renovation and new build, through insulation methods, renewable energy, water saving, wastewater recycling, rainwater harvesting, green roofs and use of natural and recycled materials.

¹ <http://www.retrofitforthefuture.org/>

Praising her local events, Dr. Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion said: “The annual Eco Open Houses event is a great chance for people to see for themselves the innovative work being done ... to increase the efficiency of our housing.”

The friendly, informal approach encourages householder-to-householder discussion, and enables people to meet neighbours who have eco-renovated their houses and hear first-hand about the benefits, barriers and opportunities for energy, carbon and financial savings. These are conversations between real people who have done things to their home, who are independent, impartial and not trying to sell anything. People learn directly from the experience of others, so they can learn about making realistic changes to reduce their ecological footprint, whilst at the same time indulging the universal desire to nose around other people’s homes!

“It’s a wonderful penny-drop moment when you encounter a good idea in practice and think, ‘Oh! I could do that!’” said one Bristol visitor.

Energy saving pledges

After their visits, people are encouraged to complete a feedback and pledge form which asks them what changes they would like to make to their house and their behaviour over the next few years. Actions they pledge range from things that cost nothing, such as turning thermostats down or not overfilling the kettle, to concrete measures such as cavity or solid wall insulation, or renewable energy systems. When added together, the potential saving from the events is large; for example at Eco Open Houses in Brighton & Hove in 2010, there were 936 visitors, over a third of whom completed pledge forms. If adopted, the pledges from the event would have resulted in savings of over 5.98 MWh of energy, with 1,404 tonnes CO₂ saved.

Just think: if all the pledges from that one Brighton event were fulfilled, then there would be 953 installations of energy efficiency and renewable energy equipment which would be over £1.1 million of business - around £3,175 per visitor!² Whilst it might be said that some of those people would be undertaking the work anyway, the point is that people target particular houses to research the technologies they are interested in, and to help them decide what to do.

And this is where the real opportunity to local businesses and the AECB is; people need skilled and knowledgeable professionals and tradespeople to undertake the work – in fact, one of the most common questions asked at open homes events is “can you recommend a good local contractor?”. As one couple commented in a note after an event in Gloucestershire: “[The tour] was very useful; now we are encouraged to carry on investigating and will contact those whom you recommended.” During one of our Brighton and Hove events, another motivated household saw a house with a PV array, the next day they booked on one of our Introduction to Photovoltaic training courses, and then went on to get a 4kWp array installed on their house!

Why are open house events good for business?

² Eco Open Houses 2010 report - <http://ecoopenhouses.org/media/Eco%20Open%20Houses%202010%20Report.pdf>

- One of the reasons people attend events is to find out about suppliers and tradespeople who are reputable, reliable and trustworthy. The houses and their owners householders are the best possible testament to the quality of work of the contractors.
- The imminent introduction of new financial mechanisms such as the Green Deal and Energy Company Obligation will raise the profile of eco renovation. But to be convinced, people need to be able to see what works and what doesn't. Having access to quality tradespeople will be crucial even if they use other mechanisms to fund the work, such as low interest loans.
- The events are already targeted. From looking at the demographic, a typical visitor is a mid 40's, home owning, employed professional. These are people who are in a position to undertake the work.
- The events are aspirational, popular and people want to get involved.

How can we make it happen everywhere?

At this early stage, a strong, accessible, national network of retrofitted houses demonstrating deep carbon emission reduction is vital to get things moving. Each locality needs well documented exemplar projects that professionals and householders can visit and learn from, to help them visualise the changes they can make to their home. The local examples can then build up to a regional network and together comprise a national network, showcasing a wide variety of retrofit techniques, approaches and technologies.

Unfortunately, in these austere times, there is not much funding available for such events. There are small pots of money, the National Lottery's Awards for All for example, that can be useful for setting up an event, but generally nothing to deliver repeat events. With the current political climate, this is unlikely to change.

However, for the sustainable construction sector, investing effort into these events could pay dividends, in terms not only of generating business, but also business with clients who are already motivated, well-informed and have a realistic grasp of what is feasible and what will be involved.

With the potential benefits to local businesses of showcasing their work, the AECB with its strong track record and emerging local groups network, could be well placed to develop and run events to showcase members' work. In the past, some people have criticised some of the projects involved in events as not being to a high standard, lacking a robust methodology, or missing the best options for a house. Great! Let the AECB build on the depth, skill and knowledge of its membership to show how good quality, low energy refurbishment can be realised, and fill the knowledge gap.

Recently, the Energy Saving Trust published guidance on how to run an event, so if you're in a AECB local group and there's not an open house event in your area, why not download the guidance as a starting point, have a discussion with your local group, draw up a list of you projects you'd like to showcase, and take it from there?³

³ Successful energy saving open homes events (EST) 2011
<http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/Professional-resources/Housing-professionals/Existing-housing/Energy-saving-open-homes>

The sociable pleasure of teaming up with others who share your interests and goals shouldn't be underestimated. As one homeowner put it: "Weekends like these are great... it heightens the reality that there is a rapidly growing market for sustainable construction and energy efficient living."⁴. It's a great boost for everyone involved.

Mischa Hewitt is sustainability consultant and project manager and a Trustee of the AECB. He has been running the annual Eco Open Houses event in Brighton & Hove since 2008; this is a collaborative project between Low Carbon Trust, Brighton Permaculture Trust and Brighton & Hove City Council.

Forthcoming Eco Open House Events

- 17th & 18th March - Bristol Green Doors: <http://www.bristolgreendoors.org/>
- 24th and 25th March - Shrewsbury Green Doors: <http://www.shrewsburygreendoors.co.uk/>
- 15th & 16th September - Stroud Eco-renovation Open Homes: <http://www.stroudopenhomes.org.uk/>
- 24th to 28th October - Eco Open Houses in Brighton & Hove: www.ecoopenhouses.org

Is there already an eco-open-houses event coming up in your area, that's not on this list? AECB members can post a notice on the AECB forum [Events board](#) (log in first).

If no-one in your local open homes group belongs to the AECB, why not consider [joining](#), and then you will have access not just to the events listings, but to all the skills and resources in our sustainable building community. Community groups can join AECB as Supporters, or, if they would like a listing on aecb.net, as a Small Business; contact emma@aecb.net if you need more details.

- More information and inspiration from another Eco-homes network, from West Bridgford near Nottingham: download Tina Holt's AECB conference presentation here http://aecb.net/PDFs/conference11/AECBworkshopTinaHolt_v2.pdf

⁴ Successful energy saving open homes events (EST) 2011