Closing Doors on Green Open Homes Events?


Principal author: Dan Weisselberg - Director
Executive Summary

Bristol Green Doors is a Community Interest Company (CIC) with the aim of ‘normalising domestic retrofit for sustainability’, necessary to support cutting the 27% of CO₂ which comes from UK homes. Since 2010 its activity has been carried out through peer-to-peer learning at green open homes events and its website.

At green open homes events, householders who have carried out green retrofits, show visitors improvements they have made describe what they have learnt and visitors see how they can change their own homes.

Bristol Green Doors has run seven successful citywide events and has been described as “UK leaders in green open homes activity”. Over forty green open homes events have been supported by Bristol Green Doors through replication, guidance and provision of resources. Lack of funding saw no citywide event run in 2016.

Founded against a background of positive government aims and industry confidence, Bristol Green Doors has found stop-start government policy around energy efficiency and retrofit extremely challenging. With no secure income and a lack of retrofit activity locally and nationally, it recently gave notice that green open home events in Bristol will need to be delivered very differently in future.

Bristol Green Doors is facing dormancy - its aims cannot be realised in a sustainable manner and its core objectives cannot meet local funding streams’ criteria. Nationally, many other organisers are struggling too.

Despite working with over twenty retrofit trades that have provided nearly £35,000 of income, sponsorship is increasingly hard to secure. Over 50,000 users have accessed the www.bristolgreendoors.org website and therefore opportunities should exist to both enable retrofit and generate income through advertising yet analysis of the last twelve months digital activity has shown interest in retrofit to be worryingly low.

Locally, Bristol Green Doors has contributed in numerous ways to the city’s reputation and developing energy scene. However, projects need to be knitted together more effectively and more strategically. Nationally it has achieved profile in the retrofit world through successful projects and case studies but green open homes and events need stable drivers that do not focus on fuel poverty.

The retrofit issue is of national even global significance and yet struggling for traction in the UK. As far as ‘normalising retrofit’ for energy efficiency is concerned, the UK has barely moved out of the Innovators stage. Green open homes events are necessary before the ‘adoption’ tipping point occurs but this will not happen whilst changes in policy, stop-start energy efficiency schemes, the virtual axing of feed in tariffs etc continue to slow down the transition from early adopters to the ‘early majority’.

Bristol Green Doors has achieved a lot both locally and nationally but the systematic dismantling of any policy framework to support retrofit for energy efficiency in UK homes is of real concern to us. More efforts of local and national politicians, policy makers and industry leaders are needed to support the development of the retrofit industry to meet the UK’s carbon reduction targets.

This report summarises Bristol Green Doors’ position and identifies these key learning points to support more sustainable community oriented learning about retrofit:

- Green open homes activity must be recognised as an essential part of building a retrofit market
- An effective national voice for events is needed to enable UK delivery of more events more effectively
- The involvement of third parties is required to support and integrate strategy locally
- Our community is our principal asset but it is changing and consequently its effectiveness may too
- More green retrofit activity should be celebrated and shared digitally
- Policy makers must embrace green open homes events’ value and role to sustain retrofit demand
- Secure funding streams are needed to support green open homes activity else burn out will occur
About Bristol Green Doors

**Bristol Green Doors is a Community Interest Company (CIC), its aim is normalising domestic retrofit for sustainability. This is necessary to support cutting the 27% of CO2 which come from UK homes. Since 2010 our activity has been carried out through peer-to-peer learning at green open homes events and a website www.bristolgreendoors.org.**

At green open homes events householders who have carried out low carbon retrofit show visitors the improvements carried out and describe what they have learnt. They share their motivations, experiences, costs and contractors’ details. Visitors ask questions, get ideas and see how they can improve their own homes.

Bristol Green Doors was founded in 2010 against a background of passionate community activity and confidence in industry. There was a sense that government widely accepted the increased information, knowledge and confidence necessary to transform our housing stock, and would implement a strong and effective policy framework accordingly.

With the Stern report still fresh and the UK Climate Change Act and Committee recently founded, our CIC’s aim was to go from being an event, to facilitating replicability, to becoming a sustainable concern. We never thought that six years later the retrofit landscape would look quite as sparse as it does in the winter of 2016.

This November Bristol Green Doors held a Celebration Event for householders and stakeholders to recognise its achievements since 2010. At the event we also gave notice that we are unable to continue running as we have and that green open home events in Bristol will need to be delivered very differently in future.

As there is no secure income, no funding streams and a lack of retrofit activity nationally and locally, Bristol Green Doors is going into “hibernation”. We have reluctantly accepted that our aims of celebrating and normalising domestic retrofit in a sustainable manner can be neither realised nor meaningful within the current market.

Despite this and the paucity of national political leadership, we still believe in the aims of Bristol Green Doors CIC and that what we and householders have been doing in Bristol and across the UK is a necessary and important cog in the wheels of change of the retrofit industry.

This is a brief summary of Bristol Green Doors’ experience and position today. It highlights both our achievements and the challenges facing us and similar organisations going forward. It also outlines a series of key learning points we feel must be recognised to change the situation for a longer term and more sustainable delivery of peer to peer, community oriented learning about retrofit.

**The report is split across eight key areas.**

i. Green Open Homes Events
ii. Supporting Others
iii. Bristol and Europe’s 2015 Green Capital
iv. Community
v. Open Homes and the digital offer
vi. The National Retrofit Picture
vii. A Sustainable Activity or a Marketing Service?
viii. Financial Outlook
1. Green Open Homes Events

“Bristol Green Doors are UK leaders in Green Open Homes activity” – Simon Roberts OBE, CEO Centre for Sustainable Energy.

Since 2010 Bristol Green Doors has run seven citywide events featuring around 200 home openings, 10,000 visits from the public and involved 500 volunteers. Over 75% of visitors to our events describe them as ‘excellent’.

Our householders are typically owner occupiers who have carried out or funded their home retrofits themselves. Over one hundred different homes have been opened for BGD and we have maintained an enthusiastic group of householders. In 2015 50% of our openers were first timers.

All our major events have been put on based on a mixed funding model using grants, event sponsorship and operating reserves generated through consultancy and other commercial activities.

Bristol Green Doors has always sought move the retrofit agenda away out of the early – adopter/ pioneer / ‘green bubble’. It developed a popular branding and actively sought out relationships with the trades to support this. The messaging has been a critical factor leading to numerous partnerships with a range of not for profit and commercial organisations including Energy Saving Trust, Centre for Sustainable Energy, Bristol City Council, Kellaway Building Supplies, The Ecology Building Society and The Boardwalk Property Co, as well as builders and renewable generation installers.

Between November 2015 and February 2016 we ran run two small ticketed ‘Single Home Single Measure’ events that generated a modest income and maintained some profile. Due to lack of funding we were unable to run a citywide event in 2016.

Bristol Green Doors is not aware of any potential future funding that will cover operating and delivery costs of our activities.

Key learning going forward

- Green open homes activity must be recognised as being an essential part of building a market sustainable energy retrofits and of a national energy efficiency strategy by government and industry
2. Supporting Others

Over forty UK and ROI green open homes events have been supported by Bristol Green Doors through replication, direct guidance and provision and of open access resources.

Bristol Green Doors set out with the intention of sharing its learning to support other organisations and events around the country with aims similar to our own. From the outset our delivery attracted the attention of both the Energy Saving Trust and Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) whom we have since partnered in a range of activities to support growth of green open homes events locally, regionally and nationally. These have included Ready for Retrofit in 2013 and most recently the delivery of the Green Open Homes Network.

For a couple of years the benefits of consultancy and mentoring provided us a cash surplus from which we were able to run events, develop and provide resources, and work towards a more sustainable business model. Whilst the operational delivery of events is a relatively straightforward business, we have worked hard on systems, particularly digital ones, to make it less demanding on staff and householder time.

During 2014-15, due to the political and economic climate, it became extremely clear that that the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) would have significantly less budget to support activity such as ours and the Green Open Homes Network, and we learnt that many organisers around the country were struggling with fundraising and delivery.

Key learning going forward

- An effective national voice is needed to promote ideas and share systems which will enable UK delivery of more events more efficiently and sustainably
3. Bristol and European Green Capital 2015

Bristol Green Doors was considered such an asset to the city that it was twice a featured project in Bristol's European Green Capital bids (2014 & 2015) the second of which was successful.

From the outset, Bristol City Council has been supportive of our activities. It is politically committed to tackling climate change. It provided grants between 2010 and 2012 in the belief that, as its Sustainable City and Climate Change Manager Alex Minshull recently stated, “Bristol Green Doors should have been off and running by now”.

Since the 1990s Bristol has established itself a city of both innovation and green activity and has a number of events and initiatives based around these and celebrating ‘ideas’. This is great for the city and just a few of the notable local successes include Aardman, Sustrans, the Soil Association, Pieminster, CSE and The Green Register.

Whilst this activity is exciting and attractive we believe that around lower carbon, energy, efficiency and retrofit, the bubbling pot of projects need to “knit together” more cohesively and effectively. To avoid momentum being lost (and other projects losing their way), this strategic planning may need to be pro-actively managed, very possibly by a third party.

Some concerns still simmer around the effectiveness of the council’s engagement. Its Warm up Bristol retrofit scheme’s delivery partner went bust in 2015 and, despite referrals being written in to the business plan and supplied, we and other community groups received little or no income.

Their Community Energy Fund, provided by DECC to facilitate the city being a community energy exemplar, was launched in 2016 as ‘an inclusive approach towards supporting and enhancing the activities of the local energy scene’. Bristol Green Doors has found the criteria of the fund disappointingly challenging to meet and decided not to change our strategy and core objectives to meet funding opportunities.

We acknowledge these are very challenging times for our council as local government has been forced to get smaller but we hope a more integrated approach will be possible in the future to ensure what exists and works well can be maintained.

Key learning going forward

- Recognise the need for integration of third parties to support strategy development
4. Community

“As a local success story, inspiration and founding member, Bristol Green Doors is a cornerstone of the Bristol Energy Network (BEN)” – Dave Tudgey, founder and projects manager, Bristol Energy Network

Within Bristol alone, over one hundred householders have opened their homes for our events. They open up for a range of reasons but fundamentally as one very recently stated, it is because “it makes us feel we can do something”.

We have noticed the demographics of our householders changing since we started with more couples with very young families opening up. Their enthusiasm is obvious but so too is the tightening of the housing market making it harder and harder for people to afford the capital cost for improvements that are being showcased.

We nurture and reward our householder community, putting on specific events for them, supporting their own activities when related. We recognise they are our bread and butter, as we can’t run the events without them. Over the years they, and we, have been supported by around 500 volunteer Event Stewards from a number of sources but most energetically and excitingly, graduates from UWE’s Built Environment courses.

Since 2010 we have developed a community of interest which is in danger of losing its voice. Our newsletter, mailed out to over 2,000 people interested in what we are doing, has been consistently well read. Bristol Green Doors has developed and maintained a presence over social media and has 1700 Twitter followers and 500 Facebook likes. This community, if used intelligently, could be a valuable resource supporting the energy efficiency market and new policy.

Within Bristol there are many pro-active and committed individuals and organisations working for sustainable local energy. Greater integration and less competition for funding and audience could bring added benefits to many parties but this is often hampered by time and availability of volunteer project managers.

Key learning going forward
- Be mindful of the value of the community but also how it is changing and how effective it is
5. The open homes Digital Offer.
Since 2010, over 50,000 different users have accessed our website www.bristolgreendoors.org.

We live in a digital age and one in which social networks are prevalent and influential. A review following three years of activity concluded that considerable potential existed for the website to be more like our events, providing peer to peer learning and a valuable support tool for the public throughout the year. This view was supported by; the University of Bristol with whom we developed a Digital Green Doors app in 2012-13, a business development study carried out by The Business Greenhouse in 2014 and Bristol based Digital Marketing agency Strategy Com.

While peer to peer learning and relationships are often best developed in person the impact of open home events can be significantly enhanced by a supportive digital offer and in March 2015 Bristol Green Doors received the highest score of all DECC 2015 Community Energy Grant applications for the web based Route to Retrofit.

The site was designed and built to share our openers’ experiences, manage data for more effective event experience and aimed to move our activity from ‘inspiring’ event visitors to ‘enabling their retrofit’ via linking up web visitors both with the householders and the trades used by them. We hoped that this, and a post Bristol2015 ‘effect’ as the European Green Capital, would create more web traffic encouraging increased advertising and click-throughs to trades, and provide a meaningful revenue stream.

Frustratingly we have not seen the increase of traffic we had hoped for but this may well be down to some of the issues of slowing momentum already identified in this report. However, the concept is still very young and there is no evidence to conclude this cannot become a platform providing both meaningful facilitation of retrofit and revenue generation. We do acknowledge that a major obstacle to be overcome is resourcing it as all content updating is demanding of time and inevitably sees third party development costs.

The Carbon Co-op in Manchester is the first organisation with whom we have shared the Route to Retrofit website framework.

Key learning going forward
- Encourage more green retrofit activity to be celebrated and shared digitally

Learning 24/7 using the app - Bristol Green Doors 2013
6. The National Retrofit Picture

Bristol Green Doors has influenced the national retrofit debate. It delivered the DECC funded ‘Tackling the Terrace’ EWI project in 2012, fed into the Green Deal debate and was a featured case study in 2016 Westminster Sustainable Business Forum report Warmer and Greener (May 2016).

Much of the UK’s 25 million housing stock is old and often cited as some of the worst in Europe. Around 30% of these homes are solid wall and improving their energy efficiency is complicated. Problems with retrofits continue to be reported by BRE and others and addressing the problem at scale is necessary. The role of the retrofit industry to reach legally binding carbon reduction targets is worth billions of pounds a year.

Even prior to Bristol Green Doors’ starting in 2010, the UK has been subjected to a range of schemes and incentives designed to encourage retrofit but, in part due to their stop-start nature, little momentum has been achieved and now we really feel the hit of this. Most recently and pertinently the Green Deal and its difficult customer journey has lead to even more trade scepticism. We have awaited the Bonfield Review all year but we are still no wiser on what policy drivers will be brought forward to support this change.

It is of real concern, given the scale at which it is required, that retrofit for energy efficiency currently has no national profile and again seems a ‘fringe activity’. In addition, given what we know of our householders and the Diffusion of Innovations theory (see below), as far as ‘normalising retrofit’ for energy efficiency is concerned, the UK has barely moved out of the Innovators stage. The issue is of national significance and yet struggling for traction.

In July 2016 DECC announced it wanted to reduce CO2 emissions to 57% of 1990 levels by 2030. It did this despite a huge policy vacuum existing and with no immediate signs of it being filled. We fear this ambition could be the epitaph of DECC, whose closure was announced in July.

The consequences of Brexit mean we are now in a position of even more uncertainty and fearful of more delays as thousands of pieces of legislation will be rewritten and departments reconstructed. This is not good for momentum so we can only hope the Prime Minister’s ambition for industrial, infrastructure and environmental issues being brought closer together can be effective very soon.

This is essential as, despite a number of political champions over the last few years, there has been little coordinated activity across departments. For example: the generation of renewable energy has increasing public support yet subsidies still exist for fossil fuels; the scrapping of zero carbon homes regulation (despite it being a vehicle to build understanding of systems and the value of efficiency measures in the construction industry) is contradictory. To us it is obvious more consistency will better support meeting UK CO2 targets.

Green open homes and events can make an impact but need a supporting framework. We recognise the need for action across the housing sector but as the ‘fuel poor’ are extremely unlikely to open their homes to share their learning, it is within the higher emitting, owner-occupying sector that the carbon reduction prize really is.

Key learning going forward

- Policy makers need to accept the value and role of green open homes events
7. A Sustainable Activity or a Marketing Service?

Bristol Green Doors has worked with over twenty retrofit trades and services since 2010, providing sponsorship and advertising opportunities to the tune of nearly £35,000.

Bristol Green Doors set out to be a self sustaining social enterprise growing in scale and impact as demand for retrofit increased. We have always believed that green open homes events and associated activity provide an ideal mechanism to facilitate the successful adoption (normalisation) of retrofit by engaging ‘innovators’ to support ‘early adopters’ until the process becomes self-sustaining and spills over to the ‘early majority’.

We want to be part of the active economic and social activity gearing up to meet the UK’s carbon emission targets and improving quality of life. We have modelled and tested a range of income streams but all are dependent on market demand for, and an interest in, retrofit. This is now proving impossible as since our inception there has been a systematic dismantling of the policy framework leaving many commercial and social enterprises in this sector at risk. From a national level down we need targets, strategy, framework, plans, policy, stimulation, investment and confidence to lead towards a new self sustaining market and behaviours.

As shown in section 6, we provide ‘value’, though it is difficult and time consuming to measure. In 2013, the head researcher managing a University of Bristol economic impact assessment study described Bristol Green Doors as being "a significant but unquantifiable part of the noise of decision making and thus are providing a role marketing retrofit".

All the behaviour change and social marketing models we know and have looked at, support the idea that open homes events (or similar) are necessary before an ‘adoption’ tipping point occurs. Critically maintaining the momentum they support and create locally is challenged by competing or incompatible standards (changes in policy, stop-start schemes, drops in feed in tariffs etc) which slow down the rate of adoption and the transition from early adopters to the ‘early majority’.

To support our activity, we have been struck that sponsorship has become harder to secure (our income from 2015 was less than 50% of sponsorship raised in 2012) and so consequently the day to day management of Bristol Green Doors is challenged logistically and financially. This is not sustainable.

The implications for Bristol Green Doors of this have been is that we remain dependent on volunteer activity and grant funding, the role of which we see as being for trialling, testing, stimulating and enabling significant activity ‘over the line’ and normalisation of retrofit is a long way from being ‘over the line’.

**Key learning going forward**

- Secure funding streams are needed to support this activity else burn out will occur
8. Financial Outlook

BRISTOL GREEN DOORS CURRENTLY HAS THE FUNDS TO RUN UNTIL 30TH JUNE 2017. IF WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO SECURE ADDITIONAL FUNDING WE WILL BE FORCED TO MAKE THE ORGANISATION DORMANT.

We are proud of what we have achieved since 2010 but having reviewed finances and all of the above, the directors have regretfully agreed that a different course of action, focus of activity and method of delivery is required to make both green open homes activity work in Bristol and secure the survival of the Community Interest Company beyond December 2016 feasible.

In response to this the course of action has included cutting major operation expenses by reducing office space and subsequent rent and lowering staff hours and hourly rate from July 1st 2016.

To make the most of what remains of our resources our efforts are going to be concentrated on facilitating better integration of relevant activity in the local green energy sector, maintaining the website and promoting awareness for change on a national level.

The directors will meet in February 2017 and review responses to this report to determine whether Bristol Green Doors CIC will continue trading past its year end 30th June 2017.

Open Homes events - A window of opportunity? – Bristol Green Doors 2013
Summary

Bristol Green Doors has achieved a lot both locally and nationally since it was founded in 2010. Thousands of people have visited our homes and website and learnt from our householders. Since starting green open homes activity has grown rapidly across the UK, much with our support.

We have developed a strong brand and reputation amongst a community we have built and worked closely with a range of commercial and not for profit partners and sponsors to celebrate and normalise domestic retrofit. We have played a role in enhancing Bristol’s reputation as a green city and explored a range of ways to fund our activity and make it as sustainable as possible.

This has been done against a backdrop of rapidly changing government strategy and momentum within the retrofit industry. After six years, the rate of uptake of retrofit for energy efficiency in UK homes is of real concern to us. We do not feel that the country is on a secure trajectory to meet carbon reduction targets in the domestic housing sector nor that do there is understanding in the sector how to change this.

The lack of retrofit activity both nationally and locally in the critical high consuming, high carbon emitting, owner-occupier sector and absence of secure income and funding streams for ourselves, has meant we recently gave notice that we are unable to continue running as we have. Green open home events in Bristol will need to be delivered very differently in future. Our organisation is facing complete closure.

For more sustainable community oriented learning about retrofit to exist we recommend the following:

- Green open homes activity must be recognised as an essential part of building a retrofit market
- An effective national voice for events is needed to enable UK delivery of more events more effectively
- The involvement of third parties is required to support and integrate strategy locally
- Our community is our principal asset but it is changing and consequently its effectiveness may too
- More green retrofit activity should be celebrated and shared digitally
- Policy makers must embrace green open homes events’ value and role to sustain retrofit demand
- Secure funding streams are needed to support green open homes activity else burn out will occur

Much is very uncertain nowadays but we believe a significant way our supporters can help us is by drawing the attention of local and national politicians, policy makers and industry leaders to this report and asking them how they can support the development of the retrofit industry to meet the UK’s carbon reduction targets.

Thank you.

Bristol Green Doors directors Ben, Chris, Dan, Jamie, Kate, Layla and Tom – December 2016