

Seeing is Believing

AECB Guest Author – Andrew Warren

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“The cheapest and cleanest energy choice of all is not to waste it.” I have lost count of the number of commentators who have reached this (in many ways blindingly obvious) conclusion. But the fact remains that we in Britain continue to live in some of the coldest, leakiest homes in Europe.

We have to ask ourselves why it is that quite so many people, who could perfectly well afford to improve the energy performance of their homes, simply put up with living in such cold and wasteful conditions. I suspect one of the main reasons must be simple ignorance of the potential for improvements available.

If so, we need to be promoting rather more Seeing is Believing. And bearing in mind that more fuel is burnt in our homes than in our industry or our cars, shouldn't we be concentrating most upon the energy performance of the places where we live? And knowing that the vast majority of these buildings will still be being occupied after 2050, shouldn't we be seeing what in practical terms could be done to upgrade the existing stock?

We can all agree with that in theory. The problem comes when we stop to think about what on earth can be done regarding improving our own homes. For many, it can be all a bit difficult to find out what best to do, and who can best do the work.

But over recent years, quite a lot of older homes have had their energy performance seriously improved. Based on the Seeing Is Believing mantra, a network has been created by those pioneers who have not only been prepared to invest in improving their own homes, but are prepared to throw open their doors, and invite other prospective improvers to visit.

All over the country local initiatives have been created, which arrange for such homes to be opened up to visitors over, say, an agreed weekend.

There is no question that such Open Home occasions have been enormously successful. Not just in getting visitors more knowledge about what improvements can be made in homes similar to their own. But also offering useful practical guidance on which tradesmen can reliably be approached to do the work.

Much of this has happened owing to the determined enthusiasm of architect/engineer John Doggart, (awarded the OBE in 2013 for services to energy and the environment). Formerly the boss of Energy Conscious Design, in 2007 he started the “OldHomes, SuperHomes”. This includes only homes that have realised the ambitious concept of making investments that deliver 60% energy savings. The National Energy Foundation (of which both he and I have been trustees) in Milton Keynes now coordinates this. www.nef.org.uk
There are some 200 of these exemplar SuperHomes able to be visited – his target is 500, with one within 15 minutes travel time of practically everyone on mainland Britain.

This initiative has won prestigious Ashden Awards in the UK, and in 2014 was given the top Europe-wide award for energy efficiency outreach from the European Commission.

Feedback reveals that practically all SuperHome owners now rate the comfort of their homes as Good or Excellent after retrofit, compared with just 8% before retrofit. This shows that the type of whole house refurbishment that produces a 60% plus carbon saving will usually deliver massively improved comfort levels as well: a win-win situation.

Another finding confirms that solid wall insulation is high up the list of measures that can deliver dramatically enhanced comfort in older homes. SuperHomers say that they are very happy or happy with their internal wall insulation regarding its impact on their home’s warmth (96%), the length of time the house stays warm (92%) and the speed at which the house reaches temperature (85%).

Separately, an informal Federation of Open Homes networks has been created, which last year I was invited to chair. Participants organise occasions when energy improved homes in a locality can be visited. It is not a requirement of participation that a 60% SuperHomes improvement rate be achieved.

An analysis of eight other local schemes from all around the country reinforces many of the findings of the SuperHomes research.

A high percentage of visitors are home owners, and older than the norm: in Brighton for instance the average age of visitors was 48. Most are in employment, and in the ABC1 marketing categories. Quite a few attend out of professional, as well as personal, interest.

Most are already considering making improvements: in Bath 72% of visitors said that was the main reason for attending. Both in Monmouthshire and Bristol at least half were interested in quite specific technologies.

The motivation of visitors seems to be spread between three very different spurs to action. Few claim to be the rational economic actors that Treasury theoreticians believe us all to be. When asked about the anticipated benefits of energy refurbishment, visitors' ranked "saving money on bills", "reduced environmental impact" and "greater comfort" almost equally as the most important benefits.

Many visitors are seeking confidence and information to help them take the next steps; they are often looking to those whose homes they are visiting to provide reassurance. For instance, some 98% of visitors in Frome expressed pleasure at having attended, a figure matched elsewhere.

And critically post hoc follow-up seems to have established that visitors do intend to put their new knowledge into practice: at least one-third intended to spend £5,000 or more on energy improvements. A survey of past SuperHome visitors indicates that 41% of past visitors who responded went on to install energy saving measures within 24 months of their visit – and 1 in 5 went on to invest significant amounts (between £3000 – £35,000) on them.

Many of the Open Home schemes are operating largely as a result of hard work by enthusiastic local volunteers, often assisted by an enlightened local authority and some local sponsorship.

But it is all a bit hit and miss. There are vast areas of the country where nothing as systematic as Open Days is taking place.

This is a real shame. If we really are to improve the energy performances of the vast majority of our 26 million homes, each of which continues to waste energy, I believe there can be few more effective ways of delivering that ambition, than ensuring that Seeing really can be Believing.

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