



## Sheds for Sustainable Development Project

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### Summary of key messages:

Studies have shown that Men's Sheds provide meaningful and supportive activity that can have positive impacts on men's health. However, the characteristics of sheds as volunteer-led organisations can make their development and sustainability precarious. Using qualitative methods, this study has identified the key sustainability and development challenges that Men's Sheds face.

The most prominent challenges for sheds were the **acquisition of suitable premises**, ensuring **financial sustainability**, their ability to **recruit new members**, and dealing with members with **complex health needs**. Most notably, the need for core volunteers with skills and knowledge of such activity was vital to their development. Our early findings indicate that Sheds would benefit from external support and assistance with such tasks.

### Background

The community based model of Men's Sheds was first founded in Australia in the 1990s as a response to increasing concerns about men's health<sup>1</sup>. Since that time, Men's Sheds have grown exponentially, with sheds operating across the UK, Ireland and wider Europe. Sheds are practical communal spaces where men take part in social and practical activities, such as woodworking and gardening<sup>2</sup>. Such shed activity has been linked to health and wellbeing benefits in men, such as decreased social isolation and loneliness and increased sense of purpose<sup>3</sup>. The typical demographic of Men's Sheds is older retired men (aged 60+), yet the supportive nature sheds can benefit men of all ages, especially those who are unemployed, or have been marginalised through physical or mental disability<sup>4</sup>.

Sheds are volunteer-led organisations, with activities driven and organised by the men for the men to fit with the immediate needs of shed members<sup>4</sup>. However, with a reliance on shed members who are predominately older retired men, or have existing health needs, the sustainability of Men's

<sup>1</sup> Earle, L., Earle, T., Von Mering, O. (1996). Sheds and male retirement. The place to go to and come back from. *Australasian Leisure for Pleasure Journal*, 1(1), 5-19.

<sup>2</sup> Golding, B. (2015). *The Men's Sheds movement: the company of men*. Chicago: Common Ground Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, E.J., Munoz, S.A., Leslie, S.J. (2018). The personal and community impact of a Scottish Men's Shed. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 26(4), 527-537

<sup>4</sup> Crabtree, L., Tinker, A., Glaser, K. (2017). Men's sheds: the perceived health and wellbeing benefits. *Working with Older People*, 22(2), 101-110

Sheds is precarious. With sheds growing at a fast rate in the Scotland (and UK more widely), evidence on the sustainability challenges faced by sheds and policies supporting their development is needed.

Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project aimed to identify the key development and sustainability challenges facing Men's Sheds.

## Methods

Data informing this briefing derive from:

- (i) Semi-structured interviews with six key shed stakeholders from third sector support groups, local authorities, Scottish Government and Men's Shed associations operating in Scotland.
- (ii) Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with shed members from five different sheds across Scotland (62 shed members).
- (iii) Participatory workshops with five Men's Sheds exploring the topic of sustainability and development.

The Men's Sheds that took part in the study were from different demographic and geographical areas to represent the variety of sheds with diversified profiles.

## Key findings

- Findings showed that Men's Sheds had a particular set of characteristics that affected their ability to be sustainable:
  - They attracted *predominantly older men*, some with health issues related to ageing or long-term disability that prevented them from taking part in development tasks/ activities.
  - Members were *mostly retired* and did not want to take part in 'work-like' tasks that mimicked their time in employment
  - The *ethos* that Men's Sheds are an informal and flexible space created 'by the men for the men' and dictated that members are not placed under any obligation or responsibility to take part in prescribed tasks.

This affected their ability to source willing and able volunteers with the skills and knowledge to complete core tasks involved in setting up and operating a Men's Shed.

- The most prominent challenge for all sheds was the **acquisition of premises**. This included:
  - *the availability of suitable premises in local areas that fit with member needs (e.g. accessibility, space)*
  - *the ability to secure full ownership or negotiating low-cost long-term leases from public authorities*
  - Knowledge of legislation/ paperwork/ applications and capacity to engage.
- A further prominent challenge was their ability to **source funding** and generate income: This included:
  - *inability to pay for start-up and running costs, such as rent and bills*
  - *a lack of skills from shedders of how or where to apply for funding grants*

- *inability to put pressure on members to produce items to sell because of shed 'ethos' of being a relaxed environment free of obligation*
- Interviews showed a number of other sustainability and development challenges faced by Sheds:
  - How to ensure the **health and safety** of members: getting the men to engage with regulations and adhere to rules, monitoring the safety of members with physical and mental disabilities/limitations, the high cost of training and reliance on informal in-house alternatives that requires volunteers.
  - Their ability to **recruit new members** and sustain existing memberships: attracting members with required skills and knowledge who are willing to volunteer, attracting younger members, sustaining current memberships with wide range of activities, the ability/ capacity to advertise and market shed (social media, funds for advertising materials, and capacity for more members).
  - Their ability to deal with members with **complex health needs**: negotiating responsibility for care/ supervision, communicating with health and social care workers, ensuring health and safety cover (e.g. insurance, liability), onset of Dementia/ Alzheimer's in current members.

### **Discussion/ Implications**

The nature of Men's Sheds as volunteer-led organisations means that they are facing a number of challenges that may affect their sustainability and development. Unlike many other volunteer organisations, the ageing/retired demographic of Men's Sheds means that members are often physically unable or unwilling to take on responsibility for administration or leadership tasks. The inherent 'ethos' of sheds as informal obligation free environments only adds further complication.

Considering challenges associated with recruiting members with relevant skills and capability to start up or operate a Shed, our findings suggest that Men's Sheds would benefit from external assistance to support their sustainability and growth. In particular, strategic and tailored on the ground support around core tasks, such as applying for premises, complying with health and safety regulations and managing and sourcing shed funding. Such assistance would then allow Shed members, especially those older and retired, to focus their time and energy on fostering a relaxing and informal environment that is more encompassing of their needs.

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