



## **Sheds for Sustainable Development Project: the health and wellbeing impacts of Men's Sheds on their users.**

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### **In summary:**

Studies have shown that although men are more likely to face illness and mortality, and are more likely to take part in risky behaviours than women, they are less likely to use formal healthcare. Men's Sheds have been identified as a potential way for men to access support and take part in positive health behaviours in an informal 'male friendly' environment. This briefing outlines emerging findings from in-depth interviews with 62 members of five Men's Sheds in Scotland. Our findings suggest that the characteristics of Men's Sheds, in offering practical and social activity in a space that is inclusive of all men, impacts on the mental health, physical health, and social wellbeing of Shed members. Findings also suggest that the supportive atmosphere of Men's Sheds allows men to share personal challenges as well as life skills and experiences in a safe and socially acceptable environment.

### **1. Background**

Research has found that although men are more likely to face illness and have a lower life expectancy than women, they are less likely to use formal healthcare, such as GPs or mental health services. This can make men a 'hard to reach' group for preventative healthcare. In particular, men are more likely to engage in risk behaviours, such as heavy alcohol use, and are more prone to poorer mental health and higher suicide rates. Retired and unemployed men can also be at risk of social isolation and loneliness due to loss of social networks. Although research has touched upon the role of gendered interventions for health improvement, UK policy and practice has yet to consider differences in male behaviours and the possibilities for 'male-friendly' interventions.

One potential solution is Men's Sheds, a grassroots community model that started in Australia in the 1990s. Sheds are practical communal spaces, typically workshop areas, which provide opportunities for men to take part in social and leisure activities in a relaxed and unstructured environment. Sheds are a particularly important space for men who are marginalised through mental health issues, unemployment or negative life changes. Sheds also provide opportunities for men to socialise in a socially acceptable space that is completely free of alcohol, unlike typical male traditions of visiting a pub to meet colleagues and friends.

Although some evidence exists of the impacts of Sheds on their users, studies are mostly small-scale and the links between Shed activity and health and wellbeing are still reasonably unknown<sup>1</sup>. Further, most of the studies are from Australia, with very little evidence from the UK, despite their rapid growth in this country. Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project set out to fill in this gap using an in-depth study to identify the health and wellbeing impacts of Men's Sheds on their members.

## 2. Methods

Data was collected from five Scottish Men's Sheds using in-depth interviews with 62 shed members. The Sheds that took part in the study were from different demographic and geographical areas to represent the variety of Sheds existing in Scotland. The findings are based on self-reported changes in health and wellbeing from the individuals questioned and not objective measures.

## 3. Emerging findings

The average age of the Shed members studied was 67 years old, and although participants as young as 24 years old were interviewed, the majority of those attending the Sheds were older and retired. Findings suggest that the Sheds had three specific characteristics that impacted on the mental health, physical health, and social wellbeing of their members:

- **Practical/ educational:** space to take part in practical activities, where skills are learned and shared, such as woodworking and health talks.
- **Social/ interactive:** space to socialise and interact with others and form social relationships and networks.
- **Inclusive/ supportive:** an informal and flexible space where men of all backgrounds are included and can gain social support and share experiences in a safe 'male-friendly' environment.

Our emerging findings suggest that in taking part in Men's Shed activities, the **mental health** of members was impacted in the following ways:

- **Increased confidence** through taking part in practical activity and learning and sharing skills and from social interacting with others where they may have not done so previously.
- **Decreased depression** from having something to do and a focus in life, as well as opportunities to socialise and share experiences of depression with other men.
- **Increased feelings of happiness** from having something to do and look forward to, and from having a sense of pride, achievement and satisfaction from making things and helping others.
- **Increased relaxation, escape and calm** from being able to escape from personal issues outside of the Shed, and a chance for respite for those caring for others.
- **Increased sense of purpose** from having something to do and something to look forward to, especially after retirement. This was particularly related to having increased opportunities to get out of the house, keep busy and socially interact with others.

Our emerging findings suggest that in taking part in Men's Shed activities, the **physical health** of members was impacted in the following ways:

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly, D., Steiner, A., Mason, H., & Teasdale, S. (2019). Men's Sheds: A conceptual exploration of the causal pathways for health and well-being. Health & Social Care in the Community.

- **Improved mobility** from increased physical activity at the Shed and decreased sedentary behaviour from not sitting at home with nothing to do. This was felt to impact on their overall energy and stamina levels.
- **Decreased alcohol use** as a result of attending a Shed (as a sober environment). This included some members who had issues with excessive alcohol use and addiction.
- **Recovery from physical illness or injury** through sharing experiences and gaining help and support from other Shed members, and having something to do that distracted them from symptoms.
- **Improved health knowledge** through health visitors coming to their Sheds to talk to them about physical health issues, such as stroke prevention and male cancer awareness in a space where they felt safe, secure and supported to discuss such issues.

Our emerging findings suggest that in taking part in Men's Shed activities, the **social wellbeing** of members was impacted in the following ways:

- **Increased social support** from other members for personal issues or health problems, as well as support with taking part in activities and completing tasks. This was seen as a way of overcoming adversity, such as health issues, without having to seek formal external help.
- **Increased social networks** through meeting new people and forming new friendships. An opportunity to socialise and share experiences with other men was viewed as just as important as taking part in practical activities, especially after retirement.
- **Increased feelings of social inclusion and a sense of belonging** from coming to the Sheds because of the informal welcoming and supportive environment. This was often described as 'camaraderie' and 'comradeship'.
- **Decreased social isolation and loneliness** as a result of coming to a Shed, meeting people and socially interacting. In particular, those who were alone through loss of a partner, or had difficulty leaving the house.

#### 4. Implications

Unlike other community based organisations, Men's Sheds offer a space where men can access health benefits in an informal and 'male friendly' way. In particular, they offer men opportunities to share their personal experiences, issues and challenges with other men in a socially acceptable and safe environment. Identifying effective preventative health models is important to be able to effectively engage with men as a 'hard to reach' group. Specifically, older and retired men who may seek to take part in meaningful activity and maintain social networks after ending employment, and who may be more susceptible to age related health issues. This study is the first large scale in-depth exploration of the health and wellbeing impacts of Men's Sheds in the UK, therefore contributes to a significant gap in knowledge. These emerging findings show that sheds have the potential to be recognised in UK policy and public health practice as an effective and alternative intervention for men's health for men who might not normally engage with more formal services.

For more information on the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project please contact Dr Artur Steiner, Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University [Artur.Steiner@gcu.ac.uk](mailto:Artur.Steiner@gcu.ac.uk).