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## Sheds for Sustainable Development: Briefing Paper 1

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### Summary of key message:

**Studies have shown that Men's Sheds provide meaningful and supportive activity that can have positive impacts on men's health. However, as volunteer-led organisations their development and sustainability can be precarious. Using qualitative methods, this study has identified the key challenges that might jeopardise the growth of Men's Sheds. The most prominent challenges include the acquisition of premises and sustainable funding sources, and the need for willing volunteers with core knowledge and skills to support the running of each shed. Our early findings indicate that Sheds would benefit from external support and assistance with essential tasks, such as applying for premises, complying with health and safety regulations and managing and sourcing shed funding.**

### 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 can take part in social and practical activities, such as woodwork and gardening. 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>2</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>3</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. Therefore, volunteers are required to source premises, raise money for equipment and tools, and organise and supervise inclusive activities for men of varied capabilities. A reliance on volunteers, in particular older retired men, could mean that the sustainability of Men's Sheds is precarious. Therefore, with Sheds growing at a fast rate in the UK, evidence on the sustainability challenges faced by sheds and policies supporting their development is needed.

<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> Kelly, D., Steiner, A., Mason, H. and Teasdale, S. (2019) Men's Sheds: a conceptual exploration of the causal pathways for health and wellbeing, *Health & Social Care in the Community*.

<sup>3</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.

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.

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

- The most commonly reported challenge for sheds was the ***acquisition of premises***. This included:
  - *the availability of suitable premises in local areas that fit with their needs*
  - *the ability to acquire land or buildings from local authorities*
  - *the ability to secure low rental costs and long-term lease agreements*

It was felt by participants that a lack of knowledge and experience of Men's Sheds contributed to reluctance from local authorities to support such acquisitions.

- The second most prominent challenge was the ***financial sustainability*** of Men's Sheds. This included:
  - *members being able 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*
  - *a tension between maintaining a flexible and relaxed environment for the men, whilst trying to encourage members to produce sellable items to raise funds*
- Interviews showed a number of further sustainability and development challenges faced by Sheds:
  - **LEADERSHIP/STRUCTURE:** Committee 'burn-out', the need for rules/ regulations/ structure to ensure stability, the capability/ willingness of shed members to take on responsibility- particularly when men are older and retired.
  - **RECRUITMENT:** The need for younger members to take over running of sheds in the future, how to sustain current memberships and attract new members.
  - **ACCESSING HELP/ SUPPORT:** Knowing how to ask for external help and where to access this, the need for regional community support officers.
  - **HEALTH & SAFETY:** Being able to supervise members using machinery effectively, getting members to follow rules and regulations, creating and maintaining a safe environment for all.
  - **TRAINING/ SKILLS SHARING:** Getting funding for training, the willingness/ capability of shed members to share skills or take part in training.

- **DEFINING SHED PURPOSE:** Being clear about what a shed can and can't offer, the inclusion of women in sheds, recognising that all sheds are different and have individual needs.
  - **EXPANDING ACTIVITIES:** Knowing how to diversify activities to fit with needs of men, how to attract new members by offering a varied range of activities.
  - **COMMUNICATION:** Knowing how to manage communication between committee and non-committee members (especially in larger sheds), communication breakdowns, communicating with members without email.
  - **PROMOTION OF SHEDS:** Knowing how to spread the right messages about sheds, how to show evidence of the impact of shed activity, how to market sheds to potential members.
- Overall, findings revealed that Men's Sheds required **core knowledge and skills** within their sheds/ committees to be able to be self-sustaining, including:
    - *Knowledge of health and safety regulations*
    - *The ability to manage financial accounts and source funding*
    - *The ability to train others and share skills*
    - *The ability to communicate effectively with shed members, the general public and authorities*

### 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 demographic of Men's Sheds means that members are often physically unable or unwilling to take on responsibility for administration or leadership tasks. Considering challenges associated with recruiting younger members with relevant skills and capability to run a Shed in an efficient manner, 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 administration 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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