



Sheds for Sustainable Development Project: How Men's Sheds are addressing male social isolation and loneliness

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Summary of key messages:

Men's Sheds in the UK have been highlighted for the impact they can have on men's social wellbeing, but less is known about their ability to address social isolation and loneliness, especially among retired and unemployed men. This briefing outlines findings from in-depth interviews with 62 Men's Shed members from five Sheds across Scotland, exploring the ways in which Shed activities address risk factors for male social isolation and loneliness. Our findings suggest that Men's Sheds offer a range of activities that are conducive to meeting new people and forming social networks where this had been previously lacking. In particular, Sheds were found to be beneficial to those who were socially isolated due to retirement or living alone. Although Sheds are not a formal healthcare service, there is potential for partnership working with policymakers and practitioners through models such as social prescribing or signposting. Our study suggests the role that Men's Sheds could take post COVID-19 to re-connect socially isolated and lonely men.

1. Background

Although more predisposed to illness and injury than women, as well as more susceptible to mental health problems and suicide, men are less likely to access professional help for health and social issues¹. One particular area of concern for men is social isolation and loneliness, especially among retired and unemployed men who may have lost access to social networks, social support and a sense of purpose². Concerns have recently grown due to COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of community meeting spaces, meaning that vulnerable men may have had extended periods in isolation with limited social contact with others.

Men's Sheds are community spaces providing men with opportunities to socialise through a range of practical and social activities, such as woodwork and gardening³. Specifically, Sheds have been found to provide a socially acceptable and male friendly 'safe space' for men to gain social support and share their life experiences with others⁴. Although the impact of Sheds on the general social

¹ Baker, P. (2016). Men's health: An overlooked inequality. *British Journal of Nursing*, 25(19), 1054–1057

² Ormsby, J., Stanley, M., & Jaworski, K. (2010). Older men's participation in community-based men's sheds programmes. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 18(6), 607–613

³ Ballinger, M. L., Talbot, L. A., & Verrinder, G. K. (2009). More than a place to do woodwork: A case study of a community-based Men's Shed. *Journal of Men's Health*, 6(1), 20–27

⁴ Kelly, D., Steiner, A., Mason, H and Teasdale, S. (2021) Men's Sheds as an alternative healthcare route? A qualitative study of the impact of Men's Sheds on user's health improvement behaviours. *BMC Public Health*

wellbeing of their users has been highlighted in other studies, less is known about how Sheds in the UK may address social isolation and loneliness; especially, among men affected by COVID-19. Funded by the National Lottery, the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project sets out to contribute evidence to this important area of men's health.

2. Methods

In-depth interviews took place with 62 Men's Shed members from across five Scottish Sheds. The Sheds that took part in the study were from different demographic and geographical areas, and at different stages of development to represent a variety of Sheds. The findings are based on self-reported impacts of Shed activities on the social isolation and loneliness of Shed users.

3. Findings

The average age of participants was 67 years old and the majority were retired from employment (87%). Findings showed that the activities provided by the Men's Sheds were conducive to meeting new people, forming friendships and increasing men's social networks where such opportunities had been previously lacking. Practical activities such as woodwork and metalwork, gave opportunities for men to converse 'shoulder to shoulder' while completing tasks. Social spaces, such as kitchen and seating areas, provided opportunities for men to share stories, take part in friendly banter, and seek social support. In particular, Sheds were found to be welcoming 'male friendly' spaces that were encouraging of new members and supportive of those seeking opportunities to meaningfully interact with others. In providing both practical and social activities for men within communities, Men's Sheds were found to address risk factors for social isolation and loneliness, including:

Loss of social networks through retirement

Attending a Men's Shed was important for men who had retired and suddenly lost the social networks they had in their workplaces:

'when I worked I would see 20 clients a day and I would interact with many staff across departments...Then all of a sudden a big steel gate came down and there was nobody to talk to. I'd become quite withdrawn because of lack of social contact so my confidence went up because I had support here (at the Shed)' (Men's Shed member).

Participants reported that attending a Shed not only provided vital social contact, but also gave them a sense of routine and purpose that had been lost in retirement:

'my life once again has a purpose... I hit a wall of depression in the transformation of being a busy employed person with people all around me, to being a bored isolated retired man' (Men's Shed member).

Living alone

Shed activities were found to benefit those who lived alone and had a lack of regular social contact with others:

'it's something to do, a place to come to rather than sitting at home alone...If the Shed wasn't here I would have very little contact with the outside world because I don't have that friends network' (Men's Shed member).

Sheds were found to provide a vital community space to regularly interact with others where previously individuals may not have had any meaningful contact at all:

'during the day you can only go to the shop so often and doing the garden, you're not talking to anybody...I get so lonely, I don't know what I would do if the Shed wasn't here, I really don't' (Men's Shed member).

'I have a garden which I work on, but there's only so much you can do...before I joined the Shed I could go a week without actually speaking to someone other than my son on the phone' (Men's Shed member).

Attending a Men's Shed was also found to benefit those who had lost their wife or partner and were now living alone:

'I was a carer for my wife for five years. And when she died it was a big hole, and I discovered I had no friends...so my son said, "You'll need to get out the house" because you're on your own' (Men's Shed member).

As a result of being less socially isolated and lonely, men reported **improvements in their overall health and wellbeing**; this included:

- An increased sense of happiness and contentment in their lives.
- Decreased feelings of depression and anxiety that came from being isolated.
- An increased sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.
- Increased feelings of confidence and self-worth.
- An increased sense of belonging and inclusion.

4. Conclusion

Our finding suggests that the provision of Men's Shed activities within communities offer socially isolated and lonely men opportunities to interact meaningfully with others where previously social contact had been lacking. Unlike other community organisations, Men's Sheds are informal gendered initiatives, created by men for men, that can be tailored to the specific health and social needs of local people. In particular, Sheds have been found to benefit vulnerable and marginalised men who may be viewed as harder to reach by primary health and social care services. Although Sheds are not a formal healthcare service, our findings demonstrate that there is potential for such initiatives to be part of partnership health models such as social prescribing or signposting. However, as grassroots voluntary organisations, partnership working would need to be developed in a way that is appropriate to each individual Shed's capacity.

Although the data collected for this study was pre- COVID 19, our findings demonstrate the role that Men's Sheds could take in re-connecting men who may have been socially isolated and lonely as a result of the pandemic. This most notably applies to those who have been living alone with very little social contact, and those who have been unable to attend their local Men's Sheds due to COVID-19 restrictions.

For more information on the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project please contact Dr Danielle Kelly, Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University E: Danielle.Kelly@gcu.ac.uk