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Authors	Power, Carol;O'Callaghan, Alannah;Kenny, Michelle;O'Connor, Ray
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# Men's Sheds and the Sustainable Development Goals: Local Responses to Global Challenges

Dr Carol Power, Alannah O'Callaghan,  
Michelle Kenny and Dr Ray O'Connor



# Men's Sheds and the Sustainable Development Goals: Local Responses to Global Challenges

Authors:

Dr Carol Power\*

Alannah O'Callaghan\*

Michelle Kenny\*

Dr Ray O'Connor^

\*Centre for Co-operative Studies, University College Cork

^Geography Department, University College Cork

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## Executive Summary

### **Purpose of the report**

In 2019 the Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA) was designated a Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Champion by the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment. This report evaluates the effectiveness of community-based men's sheds on the island of Ireland as agents of social and environmental sustainability and identifies potential to develop this role. Recommendations are offered for consideration by men's sheds across the island.

As an academic study, the key novel contribution is the finding that men's sheds in Ireland in addition to supporting social sustainability, are also already engaged in activities that support environmental sustainability. There is scope to further develop their role as champions of environmental sustainability in their communities. While men's sheds have received significant attention from researchers interested in their role in health, wellbeing and social inclusion, their current and potential role in environmental sustainability has been largely absent from the academic literature on men's sheds.

### **Research methods**

While the SDG Champion designation applied to the Republic of Ireland, as the IMSA is an all-island body, sheds in Northern Ireland were also included in the study. Qualitative research methods were used. An online survey was conducted to ascertain the range of activities in men's sheds in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, sources of knowledge and skills drawn upon, and linkages with other stakeholders in their communities. This survey yielded 159 responses. Online focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to develop deeper insights and to foreground the voices of men's shed members from across the island of Ireland. In their own words, members outline the range of social and environmental activities that sheds pursue in their local communities and explain the benefits that they as members derive, as well as the spill-over benefits to the wider community.

As well as the information generated by the research instruments utilised in this research project, the information presented in this report has been supplemented by multiple sources, including individual men's sheds' websites, IMSA press releases and media reports.

As the research was conducted in a period of lockdown due to Covid-19, all engagement with the sheds and shed members took place online.

### **Literature review**

A review of Irish and international literature highlights the important contribution of men's sheds to the lives of participants and their communities. Literature has highlighted the positive influence of men's sheds on health, wellbeing and the social inclusion of participants. These topics have received considerable attention in the academic literature. The phrase 'health by stealth' (Milligan *et al.*, 2012) characterises the approach to improving health and wellbeing among participants, whether indirectly through the positive effects of social interaction on wellbeing, or directly through health promotion campaigns. Sheds have been noted as important community settings, especially for those who may



be 'hard to reach' in conventional healthcare settings (Kelly & Steiner, 2021; McGrath, *et al.*, 2021). Many men's shed activities involve engaging with nature, including walking, gardening and other outdoor activities. Literature on the positive impact on wellbeing associated with spending time in natural environments is considered.

Previous research tells us that men's sheds also play an important role in enhancing community life and fostering social inclusion, which, of course, can also have a positive impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Activities carried out in sheds often enable participants to make worthwhile and meaningful contributions to their communities (Wilson & Cordier, 2013). Social connections can provide a lifeline for men at risk of isolation. While the majority of participants in men's sheds tend to be older men, their role in integration of marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, has been highlighted in the literature.

We also consider the literature on the contribution of sheds to community life more generally, through shed-led initiatives or collaborative projects with other community organisations. Finally, we consider men's sheds as a unique learning environment with the potential to engage men in the wider sustainability agenda. Sheds provide safe, inclusive and non-judgmental spaces (Golding, 2014) in which peer learning and informal learning can take place. This 'shedagogy' approach sees men mentor rather than teach each other (Carragher & Golding, 2015).

## Findings

The findings of the research are presented in three chapters.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the findings of the survey of 159 men's sheds. Responses were received from 61 sheds in Leinster (38%) and 42 sheds in Munster (27%), 21 in Ulster (13%) and 13 in Connacht (8%); the remainder did not volunteer their locations. The research uncovered a diverse array of activities in men's shed that support both social and environmental sustainability. These are detailed in Chapters Four and Five. When asked to indicate the knowledge and skills resources that their sheds draw upon to develop activities, over half indicated that there was internal expertise within the shed, which facilitates peer learning. The sheds also had excellent links to knowledge and skills in the community. Expert speakers were also included, particularly in relation to health matters.

Men's sheds also reported engaging in collaborative projects with other organisations in their communities. The richness of their networks in the local community enables men's sheds to avail of a range of resources and supports from which their members can benefit. Moreover, it suggests reciprocal relationships, where men's sheds contribute significantly to the enhancement of community life.

Activities that promote environmental sustainability – presented in Chapter Four – were divided into three broad categories. The first, *working in/for nature* focused on activities that promoted biodiversity and gardening initiatives and discovered how men's sheds have become local repositories of knowledge and hubs for undertaking and disseminating research related to environmental initiatives. The second *recycling and upcycling projects* highlighted the popularity of woodwork and metal work projects but also the growing demand for the services of men's shed to repair and restore a vast array of broken or damaged items. The third and final category focused on the contributions made by men's sheds to *local environment initiatives* and explored collaborations with other community groups to promote cleaner, greener and more environmentally sustainable practices at local level.

Chapter Five reports on aspects of social sustainability. The research lends further support to previous studies that emphasise the importance of men's sheds in promoting physical and mental health. While programmes designed and promoted by the IMSA emerged as being very important, this report highlights the equal significance of the informal interactions in men's sheds as catalysts for facilitating and promoting physical and mental wellbeing. The importance of sheds as meeting places, a space to chat and drink tea, emerged as hugely significant. Further activities that promote physical fitness, outdoor activities that link fitness to nature, and classes on cooking and the importance of nutrition all contribute to the promotion and maintenance of physical and mental health in sheds across the country. It is important to state that this report does not aim to measure scientifically the impact of shed participation on men's health. Rather, our aim was to capture the breadth of health-related activities and understand the men's subjective experiences.

## Conclusions

This research has identified a multitude of ways in which men's sheds on the island of Ireland are currently supporting and promoting the SDGs. Although there has been no high-profile campaign under the SDG Champions initiative, men's sheds live out the principles that support the goals in their everyday activities.

The social dynamic that characterises men's sheds contributes to the wellbeing and social inclusion of participants. The sheds also support community wellbeing and have become an integral part of the fabric of community life throughout Ireland in just over a decade since the first shed was established.

Engagement in activities such as upcycling and producing nesting boxes highlights the (albeit sometimes unintended) pro-environmental work that men's sheds are already doing and suggests significant potential to develop men's sheds' contributions to environmental aspects of sustainability.

## Recommendations

1. The informal social dynamic of the men's shed provides a catalyst for men to discuss a range of issues, leading to 'health by stealth'. This is a critical factor underpinning the effectiveness of men's sheds as vehicles to promote health and wellbeing. Any initiatives to diversify or deepen the range of activities must not be allowed to undermine this key strength. Rather, this strength must be optimised by recognising the autonomy of men's sheds and by supporting shedders to learn and engage in the wider sustainability agenda according to their own interests. Working towards achieving '**sustainability by stealth**' is recommended as the best approach.
2. While recognising the primacy of the social role of men's sheds, it is recommended that the IMSA consider developing an awareness campaign and guidelines to support men's sheds that wish to engage in a more focused or targeted manner with the environmental aspects of the SDGs. These guidelines should be developed in open consultation with men's sheds. There is scope to develop inter-shed peer learning and learning from experts within and outside the men's shed movement. The 'shedcast' (or webinar) may provide a useful forum to hear from experts, while the development and publication of case studies on the IMSA website, drawn from existing shed activities, would support sheds to develop aspects of sustainability awareness and practice.

3. The popularity of nesting box production as an activity within men's sheds suggests that the development of biodiversity initiatives would provide a good starting point for broadening the environmental sustainability agenda of men's sheds. It is recommended that the IMSA consider working with relevant organisations, such as those with wildlife expertise, to develop a pilot initiative focused on biodiversity conservation and promotion. This should adopt the same principles as the *Sheds for Life* programme, where men's sheds are invited to express interest in participating. The evidence that working with nature can benefit health and wellbeing also suggests a natural affinity with the core purpose of men's sheds.
4. The success enjoyed by men's sheds in health and wellbeing initiatives must be sustained and care must be taken that diversification into other areas does not lead health and wellbeing to become side-lined. Maintaining the social focus of sheds and their autonomy to decide on the activities and projects that they engage with is key to ensuring that sheds remain spaces that are conducive to social interaction and the promotion of 'health by stealth'.
5. While men's sheds are inclusive spaces that are open to all men, there may be scope in some sheds to expand the reach and extend the benefits more widely, for instance, across different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Although we found examples of younger members and participants from different cultural backgrounds, the membership tends to be dominated by older, white Irish men. There is potential to engage younger men and men from more diverse cultural backgrounds. This would strengthen the role of the men's sheds as agents of social inclusion and integration.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Since the establishment of Ireland's first men's shed in Tipperary in 2009, the movement has spread rapidly; in 2022 there are more than 450 men's sheds in communities across the island of Ireland (Republic and Northern Ireland).<sup>1</sup> Sheds have been developed in both urban and rural areas and, by 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ireland enjoyed the distinction of being the country with the highest density of men's sheds (Golding, 2021).

The transition to retirement has been identified as a period when men are at risk of becoming disconnected from the community due to the erosion of their identity associated with their work (Wilson *et al.*, 2013). In Ireland, men's sheds emerged as a response to the social and economic impact of the rising unemployment and increased levels of social exclusion and disconnection that followed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy after 2008. Many men were approaching the end of their working lives but had not reached retirement age when the economy collapsed.

Men's sheds replicate the 'traditional backyard shed', which for some men represented a key component of their "social, familial, cultural, occupational, and masculine role" (Wilson & Cordier, 2013, p.452). However, while the backyard shed was a solitary environment, men's sheds in communities offer opportunities for men to interact with each other and facilitate social integration of those at risk of exclusion. They are especially supportive in providing a socially acceptable masculine environment where men can maintain or (re)gain a sense of belonging and identity through the relationships they develop with other men (Kelly, *et al.*, 2019).

The Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA) was established in 2011 to support new and existing sheds throughout the island of Ireland. The IMSA defines a men's shed as "*... a community-based project, where men can come together to learn, share skills and make long lasting friendships*" (IMSA, 2019). While the majority of sheds in Ireland are affiliated with the IMSA, all sheds are autonomous. Individual sheds are attuned to the sociocultural needs of those living in their localities and cater to the specific needs of their communities (Cordier & Wilson, 2013). The range of activities carried out in each shed differs depending on the skills, experience, capabilities and preferences of the members and the resources available to them (Carragher & Golding, 2015; IMSA, 2019). Activities range from work traditionally associated with the backyard shed environment, such as woodworking and gardening, to wider social and cultural pursuits, such as music, creative writing, fitness, cooking and healthy eating.

Sheds satisfy a range of needs for older men at risk of isolation that are not available to them in more formal education, health and welfare settings throughout the community (Golding, 2011). They have been recognised as effective learning environments for participants and offer an interesting model for informal, community-based education. In a play on the term pedagogy, Golding (2014) coined the term 'shedagogy' to refer to the informal nature of learning in the shed environment. While men's sheds encompass a diversity of participants, the shed environment

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<sup>1</sup> Men's sheds originated in Australia in the 1990s. Early adopters include New Zealand, the UK and Ireland, while more recently men's sheds have emerged in Denmark, Canada and the United States (Golding, 2021).

can be particularly conducive to learning for men who would otherwise be 'hard to reach' through traditional forms of education. Leveraging these advantages, men's sheds around the world, including Ireland, have been used as a vehicle to promote men's physical and mental health and general wellbeing. This is achieved through activities focused directly on health promotion but also indirectly, through the opportunities that sheds provide for social interaction and engagement in enjoyable or meaningful pursuits.

The IMSA has worked with organisations such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), and a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in health promotion. In recognition of the contribution of men's sheds to Irish society, the IMSA was awarded the European Citizens' Prize in 2019. While the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of participants have been the primary goals, men's sheds benefit their wider communities in multiple and diverse ways; they have demonstrated themselves to be effective channels for community-based responses to societal challenges. The IMSA was one of twelve organisations designated as Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Champions by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment in 2019. The SDG Champions initiative was established to promote awareness of the SDGs (see section 1.3) in partnership with the champion organisations and, drawing on examples of practice in these organisations, to inspire others by demonstrating how individuals and organisations can contribute to Ireland's progress on achieving the SDGs.<sup>2</sup> Each champion organisation focuses on four to five of the seventeen SDGs. Each selects the SDGs most aligned with their organisation's activities where they believe they can have the greatest impact.

## 1.2 Research objectives

This report seeks to identify the range of activities in men's sheds on the island of Ireland and map these against the SDGs. It also explores the potential for men's sheds to engage participants in the wider sustainable development agenda through their activities in their communities. It seeks to understand how men's sheds utilise their internal skills base and how they collaborate with other community stakeholders for mutual benefit. Finally, it identifies opportunities to harness the potential of shed activities to promote learning about environmental and social sustainability among participants and their wider communities.

## 1.3 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the men's sheds

The SDGs are a set of goals agreed by the United Nations in 2015 to provide a framework for governments, public and private sectors, and civil society organisations to achieve progress on societal challenges at local, national and global levels (Figure 1.1). For each of the seventeen goals, several specific targets are defined (ranging between 5 and 19 targets for each SDG).

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<sup>2</sup> The other eleven SDG Champions are An Post, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Carlow County Council, ECO-UNESCO, GAA, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Musgrave Group, National Women's Council of Ireland, Smart Farming, the Union of Students in Ireland, and Vodafone. All twelve champion organisations were appointed initially for one year, but this was extended due to the impact that COVID-19 had on the initiative.  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/40f61-sdg-champions-20192020/>



Figure 1.1 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Source: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org))

At the time of designation as SDG champions, the IMSA identified four goals to which their existing work was already aligned (Figure 1.2). In some cases, the work of the men's sheds can be mapped onto the detailed individual targets, while other work is more appropriately mapped to the overall theme of each goal.



Figure 1.2 SDGs identified by the IMSA as those where men's shed have most impact

**SDG3 Good health and wellbeing:** Internationally and within Ireland, there is a strong evidence base for the positive impact of men's sheds on the physical and mental wellbeing of participants (e.g., Cordier & Wilson, 2013; Kelly, *et al.*, 2019; McGrath, *et al.*, 2021; Wilson & Cordier, 2013). Through its partnerships with the HSE and other health-related organisations and, in particular, through its *Sheds for Life* programme,<sup>3</sup> the IMSA addresses target 3.4 - *By 2030, [to] reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being.*

The *Sheds for Life* programme includes modules on substance abuse, including alcohol and smoking cessation. The men's sheds are alcohol-free and tobacco-free zones. This aligns with target 3.5 - *[to] strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol* and target 3.A - *[to] strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control*. The IMSA has engaged with the Road Safety Authority to offer road safety workshops, which supports target 3.6 - *By 2020, [to] halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents.*

<sup>3</sup> See <https://menssheds.ie/sheds-for-life/>



**SDG10 Reduced inequalities:** Men's sheds provide an open and inclusive environment for men to socialise, to share skills and to participate in community life. This can be particularly important for those at risk of social exclusion due to age, retirement from the workforce or unemployment. This aligns with target 10.2 - *By 2030, [to] empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.*

**SDG11 Sustainable cities and communities:** Men's sheds have become important community organisations, not only because of the direct benefits to their members and their communities but also because they act as catalysts for networking with other community organisations within their wider regions through a range of initiatives and collaborations.

**SDG12 Responsible consumption and production:** Upcycling projects and making repairs to a wide range of items are common among men's sheds. This aligns with target 12.5 – *By 2030, [to] substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse.*

Education for global citizenship and enabling sustainable behaviours is a key factor in the transition to sustainability. Global Citizenship Education (GCE) adopts a lifelong learning perspective. One of its key aims is to involve multiple community stakeholders, including those outside the formal learning environment (UNESCO, 2014). The men's shed environment is conducive to learning and social inclusion of men aged 50+, who typically are under-represented in adult and community education settings (Golding, 2011). In a previous survey of Irish men's sheds, 76% of respondents said they would be interested in availing of learning opportunities if they were offered through the men's shed (Carragher, 2013). This shows an appetite for lifelong learning among a sample of men, of whom only one-third reported a positive experience of school. It highlights the potential of the men's shed network as a vehicle for engaging men in GCE and the SDGs. The men's shed offers a model for informal and non-formal community-based education. This supports the achievement of the SDGs through direct positive impacts on the individual (such as improvements to health) and potential for global citizenship education that is experienced (rather than delivered and received) in an informal, 'shoulder to shoulder' (Golding, 2021) setting in the sheds.

In his seminal volume on the international men's sheds movement, Golding (2021, pp.5-7) chose to focus on the theme of 'broadening' – exploring how the men's shed movement has broadened its scope and reach since it first began. This 'broadening' is reflected in key trends and opportunities that have emerged, including: greater diversity of participants<sup>4</sup>; the emergence of women's sheds and community sheds; the extension of the reach beyond men's shed participants to partners, families, children and communities; the spread of men's sheds into countries outside the English-speaking world and the potential for adaptation to different national and cultural contexts; and expansion of the range of services and initiatives provided by the umbrella bodies to which men's sheds affiliate. It has been said that men's sheds adopt a 'health by stealth' approach (Milligan *et al.* 2012; Wilson and Cordier, 2013). This report will make the case that, by building on what is already happening in men's sheds, there is scope for the movement in Ireland, and indeed internationally, to broaden in scope and achieve *sustainability by stealth*.

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<sup>4</sup> There is scope for men's sheds to broaden beyond the traditional demographic of older, white men and become more diverse in terms of gender, age, race, ethnicity, cultural background and sexual orientation.

## 1.4 Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to collect data and to document and develop insights into the range of activities and initiatives within men's sheds across the island of Ireland. This included a survey of men's sheds, and interviews and focus groups with participants. This was supplemented by internet searches of media content, websites and social media channels highlighting activities and initiatives in men's sheds.<sup>5</sup>

This report documents the existing range of activities in men's sheds and maps these activities onto the SDGs.<sup>6</sup> It explores the potential for men's sheds to further engage communities in the transition to socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable development. This is important for the IMSA as it seeks to optimise its status and role as SDG Champion.

### 1.4.1 Survey design and implementation

An online survey was designed to build a profile of the diverse activities offered in men's sheds on the island of Ireland (see Appendix 1). The survey presented a list of activities and initiatives, and respondents were asked to indicate which of these had been offered in their shed within the past five years. There was also provision to add activities not included in the list. Respondents were also asked to indicate what sources of knowledge and skills they tend to draw upon to develop these activities. They were also asked to indicate various other groups with which they had collaborated.

An invitation to participate in the survey was disseminated through the IMSA's communication channels in June 2021. The survey was completed by 200 respondents. Where more than one person from the same shed completed the survey, these responses were aggregated. In total, valid responses were received from 159 sheds, representing 35% of sheds across the island of Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.4.2 Interviews

Based on information provided in the survey, including expressions of interest in engaging further with the research, individuals (12) were invited to participate in interviews. These interviews (n=9), which were conducted via online meeting platforms during the period September-December 2021, focused on selected activities and initiatives offered in the participants' respective sheds. Where interviews are quoted, these are anonymised and referenced according to random interview numbers (e.g. I01).

### 1.4.3 Focus groups

In total, five focus groups were conducted. Based on the information from the interviews, six sheds were invited to bring together a group of members to participate in focus groups. Ultimately, only two of the sheds engaged with the focus group element of the study in November

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<sup>5</sup> Ethical approval for this research was granted by University College Cork's Social Research Ethics Committee.

<sup>6</sup> Where a particular activity is cited in this report, it is not attributed to a named shed. In a few exceptional cases, sheds are named where activities cited in this report received media coverage and were already in the public domain.

<sup>7</sup> Although the SDG Champions designation is an initiative of the government of the Republic of Ireland, it was considered appropriate to include sheds in Northern Ireland as the IMSA is an all-island body.

and December 2021. Therefore, to achieve a wider reach, it was decided to hold four themed focus groups in January/February 2022. The four focus group themes offered were:

- 1) working in/for nature, including gardening, biodiversity support (e.g. bat boxes, bird boxes, bug hotels, beekeeping);
- 2) making things from recycled materials or repairing broken items;
- 3) fitness, nutrition, cooking and health-related activities; and
- 4) arts, crafts, and music.

The IMSA issued a communication on behalf of the research team inviting shed members to participate. Three focus groups went ahead, averaging four participants per meeting. As only one individual expressed interest in theme 2, this focus group did not go ahead; however, repairing and recycling were covered in the other focus groups. Where participants from focus groups are quoted, these are anonymised and referenced according to random focus group numbers (e.g. FG01).

#### 1.4.4 Limitations

The research was originally designed to include visits to selected men's sheds, where in-person focus groups would be conducted. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, visits to the sheds were not possible and it became necessary to conduct the focus groups online. This presented difficulties in relation to recruitment and engagement of participants. While most of those invited indicated willingness to participate, there were challenges in relation to organising focus groups. Due to the social distancing requirements in the initial phase of focus groups, individual members were asked to join the online meeting from their own homes rather than meeting in the shed. This may have presented a technical barrier to participation for some individuals. Furthermore, many men's sheds face the challenge of rebuilding membership and participation post-COVID. As sheds were effectively closed for over a year, it is possible that some individuals believed they did not have any activities to report. Golding (2021) reports similar experiences while undertaking research on Irish men's sheds during the pandemic.

For the focus groups held in January/February 2022, while a total of 30 individuals registered to attend, only twelve participated, including some who participated in more than one focus group. The low turnout may be attributed to 'Zoom fatigue' and the tendency for people to sign up for online events and subsequently decide not to attend.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

Drawing on Irish and international literature, this chapter explores the contribution of men's sheds to the lives of participants and their communities. First, we focus on the role of men's sheds in fostering health, wellbeing and the social inclusion of participants. Then, we consider the contribution of sheds to community life more generally, through shed-led initiatives or collaborative projects with other community organisations. Finally, we consider men's sheds as unique learning environments with the potential to engage men in the wider sustainability agenda.

### 2.2 Health, wellbeing and social inclusion

Men's sheds are typically tailored to suit the needs of men in particular communities (Kelly & Steiner, 2021). They include men from a variety of backgrounds and are particularly valuable for those who may be socially excluded, those experiencing unemployment or those affected by negative life experiences (Cordier & Wilson, 2013). Studies have indicated that sheds attract 'hard-to-reach' older men who are sometimes difficult to engage in conventional healthcare settings (Kelly & Steiner, 2021; McGrath, *et al.*, 2021). This presents valuable opportunities to generate awareness, knowledge and understanding of common health issues through health promotion campaigns, and to 'normalise' health as a topic of conversation in the sheds. Milligan *et al.* (2012), refer to the health promotion that occurs in sheds as 'health by stealth' due to the way the topic of health is approached. The conversational approach, allied with the internal social dynamic in men's sheds, fosters a sense of belonging and friendship that both normalises and promotes discussions on health and wellbeing (McGrath, 2020).

#### 2.2.1 Indirect health benefits

The provision of community spaces, such as men's sheds, has been identified by older adults as important for fostering social interaction, especially for those living alone or experiencing ill health (Crabtree *et al.*, 2018; Foster *et al.*, 2018; Bild and Pachana 2022). Sheds offer a safe and familiar space in which men can share and develop new skills and work on projects, while being in an environment that fosters wellbeing through developing and perpetuating a sense of belonging and camaraderie (McGrath, 2020). Each of these factors is conducive to enhancing health and wellbeing (Cosgrove, 2018). Golding's (2021, p.4) statement that "men don't talk face to face, they talk shoulder to shoulder" captures a key reason why men may be more willing to engage in conversation with others in the shed environment – particularly in relation to health and other issues that in other social contexts they may deem private, personal or sensitive. Often topics that are normally deemed taboo, or which men are slow to discuss, are openly and safely addressed in conversations with other men in the shed environment (Cosgrove, 2018; McGrath, *et al.*, 2021).

#### 2.2.2 Health promotion

Men's sheds are well-positioned to deliver targeted health promotion initiatives to the men who frequent the space, many of whom may be considered 'hard to reach' (McGrath, *et al.*, 2021). Sheds provide a unique setting to engage with this cohort of men on the general issue of wellbeing as well as to learn how to support men's physical and mental health needs (Foley & Golding, 2021; Kelly, *et al.*, 2019; McGrath, *et al.*, 2021). In Ireland, the *Sheds for Life* programme has been successful in

encouraging shed members, particularly 'hard to reach' men, to participate in structured health and wellbeing initiatives; the initiative has also highlighted the potential of the shed environment for encouraging men to engage with health and wellbeing in a meaningful and effective way (McGrath, *et al.*, 2021). In Denmark, unlike many other countries where sheds are developed at community grassroots level, men's sheds were developed and funded as a national initiative with the specific purpose of improving the health and wellbeing of men of all ages over 18, and to tackle the unmet need for some socially isolated men to be able to reintegrate into society and participate more within their communities (Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). The Danish initiative places significant emphasis on engaging with the natural environment, based on the links between exposure to nature and health and wellbeing (Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). These links are discussed in section 2.2.4.

### 2.2.3 Social prescribing and referral by health practitioners

The Social Determinants of Health model (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991) recognises that the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age have a profound influence on health outcomes. In recent years, the concept of social prescribing has emerged as a route for health professionals to use non-medical interventions to support patients to address health and wellbeing issues, such as loneliness, isolation, lack of physical mobility or lack of mental stimulation. This ranges from formal social prescribing schemes (where GPs work with link workers to identify an appropriate 'social prescription' for a patient) to informal referrals and self-referrals. In an evaluation of the impact of social prescriptions for community engagement on older people's health and wellbeing, Bild and Pachana (2022) highlight several studies (e.g., Crabtree *et al.*, 2018; Foster *et al.*, 2018) that speak to the benefits of men's sheds.

In Ireland, the HSE's Social Prescribing Framework identifies men's sheds as one of a range of relevant organisations and activities; other examples include reading groups, walking groups, arts and creativity, and community gardening. Interestingly many of these activities are frequently encountered within men's sheds.

The recognition of sheds as environments that are beneficial for improving mental health is both an accolade and a challenge to manage. Member hesitancy about sheds becoming labelled as a space for those with mental health issues has been highlighted and, as such care should be taken to avoid viewing sheds as settings that patients should be 'prescribed to' (McGrath *et al.*, 2021, Nurmi *et al.*, 2018).

### 2.2.4 Exposure to nature and its links to health and wellbeing

Many men's sheds offer participants opportunities to engage in outdoor pursuits, such as walking; nature-based activities, such as gardening; and caring for the natural environment through biodiversity projects and conservation of natural amenities. Much research has focused on the positive effects of interacting with nature, and the notion that such engagements can offer positive effects for health and wellbeing is well substantiated (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009; Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). Essentially, it implies that humans have an affinity for nature and other forms of life (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009; Leavell *et al.*, 2019). Literature on the positive effect that nature can have on health and wellbeing frequently cites the 'biophilia hypothesis'. This hypothesis suggests that humans possess an innate tendency or inclination to seek connections with the natural world and respond to it with an emotional intensity.

The benefits of engaging with nature occur for a variety of reasons (Frumkin *et al.*, 2017; Pretty *et al.*, 2007; Ulmer *et al.*, 2016; White *et al.*, 2019). A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates the value of engagement with, or immersion in, nature for better mental health (Bratman, *et al.*, 2019)

and indicates that natural environments and green spaces can also help to improve physical health and overall levels of wellbeing and vitality (Pretty *et al.*, 2007; Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Weinstein *et al.*, 2015). Research suggests that exposure to green spaces and natural environments can reduce stress, encourage restoration and generally improve mental health (Ulmer, *et al.*, 2016) and many actively seek out natural environments when they need to relax (Weinstein, *et al.*, 2015). This research has led policymakers and health experts to propose initiatives which aim to bring nature more into people's everyday lives. Examples include health workers 'prescribing' time and socialising in nature to patients, and city councils and policy makers promoting the introduction of more green spaces in built up environments (Hamlin *et al.*, 2016; Pretty *et al.*, 2007; Ulmer *et al.*, 2016).

Though many studies attribute health and wellbeing benefits to the experience of spending time 'in nature', it has been pointed out that there may be other factors at play. Firstly, outdoor activities often involve socialising; expanding social networks has been documented as a factor that can improve health (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009; Leavell *et al.*, 2019; Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Ulmer *et al.*, 2016). Being 'in nature' also tends to be linked to physical activity, which clearly promotes health (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009; Ulmer, *et al.*, 2016); and finally, being 'in nature' offers a temporary escape from the monotony of everyday routine (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009).

Immersion in, or engagement with, nature in the company of others helps to bring people together and break down social barriers. This in turn increases feelings of connectedness with others, develops communal ties, reduces stress and positively impacts mental health (Ulmer *et al.*, 2016). In social prescribing, nature-based activities are often prescribed for patients (Hamlin *et al.*, 2016; Leavell *et al.*, 2019; Ulmer *et al.*, 2016). Activities such as walking, community gardening and going to a local farmers' markets can help to promote a sense of belonging, autonomy, competence, and 'sense of awe' (Leavell, *et al.*, 2019). There is also a strong link between physical exercise and being outdoors (Grinde & Grindal Patil, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that exercise that takes place in greener environments may have a greater effect than gym-based exercise in reducing blood pressure, an important indicator of physical health, and on measures which are relevant to mental health (Groenewegen, *et al.*, 2006; Pretty, *et al.*, 2005).

Danish men's sheds actively encourage men to cycle and walk, and to choose other active outdoor hobbies. The aim is to encourage them to become more immersed in natural environments to reap the associated benefits to their health and wellbeing (Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). There is also a significant emphasis on socialising outdoors, as the positive benefits of being outdoors and socialising with others are recognised by the Danish Outdoor Council (Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). The relationship between socialising and wellbeing in Irish sheds, and the influence that these activities can have on other health behaviours, such as exercise and physical activity, is also highlighted by McGrath *et al.* (2021). Irish sheds have set up walking groups for the benefits that accrue from outdoor activities and socialising in that context (Golding, 2021).

### 2.3 Social inclusion and contributions of men's sheds to community life

While a significant proportion of scholarly research on men's sheds has focused on health benefits, sheds also play an important role in enhancing community life and fostering social inclusion, which, of course, can also have a positive impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Activities carried out in sheds often enable participants to make worthwhile and meaningful contributions to their communities (Wilson & Cordier, 2013). In some men's sheds, the majority of projects are focused on such contributions; examples include maintaining green or communal open spaces, community buildings and other amenities. In other sheds, activities and projects promote community integration; examples include planning and holding community events, collaborations with other community



groups, and helping to keep community amenities open (Golding, 2021; Roger, *et al.*, 2016). Each of the activities and/or projects carried out gives shedders the opportunity to 'give back to the community'. This contributes to members' sense of achievement and instills a sense of pride, while the meaningful work makes them feel valued (Cosgrove, 2018; Milligan, *et al.*, 2013).

The camaraderie and social connections within the shed often help men through significant life changes, such as bereavement, separation from a partner, retirement or unemployment (Golding, *et al.*, 2007). Men are less likely than women to foster social networks outside of their employment and, when they retire or lose their life partner, this lack of a social network "catches up with them" (Nurmi *et al.*, 2018, p.810). This is compounded by the fact that men generally find it more difficult to make friends than women do later in life, and they are also less likely to join community groups, which tend to be dominated by women (Milligan, *et al.*, 2015). Retired or unemployed men may feel that they are encroaching on another's space – that they are 'in the way' or 'underfoot' at home if they have a partner (Milligan, *et al.*, 2013). Sheds, however, provide them with a familiar space that they can go and be supported by other men (Golding, *et al.*, 2007); a place to go, people to meet and something to do (Milligan, *et al.*, 2013).

Involving minority groups including indigenous people, people living with disabilities, and people with criminal histories, is another way which sheds contribute to social inclusion (Foley & Golding, 2021; Roger *et al.*, 2016). Sheds have been identified as enabling community spaces for those with disabilities where the barriers between those with disabilities and others are broken down (Hansji *et al.*, 2015). Other sheds provide services or carry out specific activities with the aim of integrating men with lifelong disabilities into their local sheds (Wilson & Cordier, 2013). In Ireland, there are examples of sheds which were set up to tackle particular social issues: the *New Community Men's Shed* (NCMS) in Waterford was established to address the challenges faced by those in Direct-Provision (DP)<sup>8</sup> centres; *Shelton Abbey Prison Men's Shed* (SAPMS) was founded for those in a low-security Irish men's prison. Both provide men with new opportunities. In SAPMS the shed helps to create a more stable environment for the inmates, while NCMS helps to tackle the social isolation that men in DP often struggle with and facilitates their integration into the local community (Golding, 2021).

Traditionally, the membership profile of men's sheds has been dominated by older white men, although, more recently, in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and France, where sheds are integrated into social centres or community spaces, participants tend to be younger and more culturally diverse (Golding, 2021). In Australia, intergenerational mentorship programmes, organized in partnership with men's sheds, had many benefits for communities. These included helping younger boys and teens develop a more positive view of older adults and of education, while also giving teens the opportunity to develop practical skills, such as using tools and making repairs (Roger, *et al.*, 2016). Intergenerational mentoring programmes undertaken by various sheds have had benefits for those being mentored, but it also has positive health and wellbeing effects on the mentors from the sheds (Foley & Golding, 2021). This suggests scope to broaden the reach of sheds to attract a greater diversity of members and extend the benefits of men's sheds to a wider range of men.

## 2.4 The men's shed as a learning environment

Sharing skills and learning through the activities offered in sheds is a fundamental aspect of men's sheds (Carragher & Golding, 2015; Golding, 2011; Golding, *et al.*, 2007; IMSA, 2019; Roger, *et al.*, 2016). Learning activities in sheds are dictated by the resources available, experience, skills and

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<sup>8</sup> Direct provision centres are the locations where temporary accommodation is provided by the Irish State to asylum seekers while they are waiting for their international protection applications to be processed.

capabilities of the members involved in the shed (Carragher & Golding, 2015). The activities offered in sheds are often led by members but if there is demand for an activity and the skills are not available 'in-house', a tutor can be sourced externally (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Generally, the activities offered include woodwork, repair and maintenance, and other practical activities; however, some sheds offer a wide variety of other activities, such as computing, cookery, foraging, bird watching and beekeeping courses (Golding, *et al.*, 2007; Hedegaard, *et al.*, 2021). The learning activities offered are not usually linked to formal qualifications; however, when the men engage in the activities there is significant incidental learning (Carragher & Golding, 2015; Golding, *et al.*, 2007; Milligan, *et al.*, 2016).

The practical, hands-on learning style generally suits the older shed members compared to the learning styles in mainstream and formal education settings (Golding, *et al.*, 2007). This type of learning can be defined as 'non-formal' or 'informal' learning (Golding, 2011). 'Informal learning' is often regarded as unintentional; it occurs through various activities and within a range of social contexts, such as within families, communities and workplaces. 'Non-formal' learning can occur through organised activities that involve significant learning, but the learning is not accredited with formal qualifications (Golding, *et al.*, 2009). The importance of non-formal and informal learning is often overlooked despite its potential to make learning more inclusive and accessible and to help a wide range of learners to improve their circumstances (Carr, *et al.*, 2018; Golding, *et al.*, 2009).

Research has shown that men are best able to learn and share skills when they are at ease in a comfortable social context. For older men, informal and non-formal places of learning, such as men's sheds, provide effective learning environments. They can support learning about contemporary issues, such as climate change and sustainability (Golding *et al.*, 2009). Golding (2014) coined the term 'shedagogy' to describe the way in which learning takes place in a shed. It is the absence of teachers, training and assessment that allows participants to learn informally 'shoulder to shoulder' without experiencing the 'shame' associated with failure or not knowing something. Sheds are safe, inclusive and non-judgmental spaces (Golding, 2014). The stimulating, meaningful and voluntary nature of the work, while being in the company of other men, is part of the reason that the men are eager to carry on learning in the shed setting, and the range of activities in which they can participate encourages them to continue learning (Ehrichand & Delahaye, 2009; Carragher & Golding, 2015).

For the majority of men, learning in a community setting is not about teaching, it is about the informal mentoring they can give and receive and the friendships they develop (Golding, 2011). The variety of activities, along with the fact that sheds provide a good balance between active learning and socialising, motivates men to participate in learning without feeling forced into it. Trust and respect between learners, along with acceptance and helpfulness, are important conditions for effective learning environments (Ehrichand & Delahaye, 2009). This makes the shed environment an exemplary model.

The importance of meaningful learning activities cannot be overstated, as this is an important part of keeping older men engaged in learning (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Like the 'health by stealth' (Milligan, *et al.*, 2012) approach to healthcare in sheds, learning and education is not forced upon the men. Instead, they voluntarily want to learn; the 'shoulder-to-shoulder' approach to projects, along with their own intrinsic goals (Ehrichand & Delahaye, 2009) is what makes the projects appealing. It also makes them want to learn more. Men mentor each other rather than teach (Carragher & Golding, 2015). As those involved in the sheds are also often at similar stages of life, they have a connection to each other, and this enables them to feel a sense of belonging with peers within the space of the shed. This sense of belonging also motivates participation and persistence in learning (Ehrichand & Delahaye, 2009; Milligan, *et al.*, 2015; Milligan, *et al.*, 2016; Roger, *et al.*, 2016). The practices are familiar to men (many of whom are former tradesmen) as they are closely aligned to their lifetime of

hands-on experiences and practices (Golding, 2011). A need for peer support and stimulation is the reason many men are motivated to participate in learning in the sheds (Ehrichand & Delahaye, 2009; Carragher & Golding, 2015). Research conducted by Golding *et al.* (2007, p.40) in Australia confirmed that one of the main reasons men joined a shed was because they had “... *a desire to informally learn hobby and leisure skills with other men . . .*” and that the informality, flexibility, and voluntary opt-in to learning, combined with the opportunity to mentor others, were fundamental to their enjoyment of being part of the shed. According to Ehrichand & Delahaye (2009), older learners often prefer opportunities to learn skills in an environment where the pace is slower and there is a gradual transfer of learning; and, for men who initially are slow to actively engage in a learning activity, the encouragement and support from peers is vital in encouraging some men to take their first steps into pursuing an activity.

The effectiveness of community run mentorship programmes (Roger, *et al.*, 2016), as well as the informal approach to education between peers in the shed setting, suggests the potential for men to learn about issues related to the SDGs and share their learnings with the community.

## Chapter Three: An Overview of Activities and Initiatives in Men's Sheds

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of the survey of 159 men's sheds. It reports on the geographical distribution of survey participants and then summarises the range of activities offered, and the source of knowledge and skills drawn upon to provide these activities. It also reports on the wide range of community organisations with which men's sheds have collaborated. As well as the information generated by the research instruments utilised in this research project, the information presented in this section has been supplemented by multiple sources, including individual men's sheds' websites, IMSA press releases and media reports.

### 3.2 Overview of Participating Sheds by Province

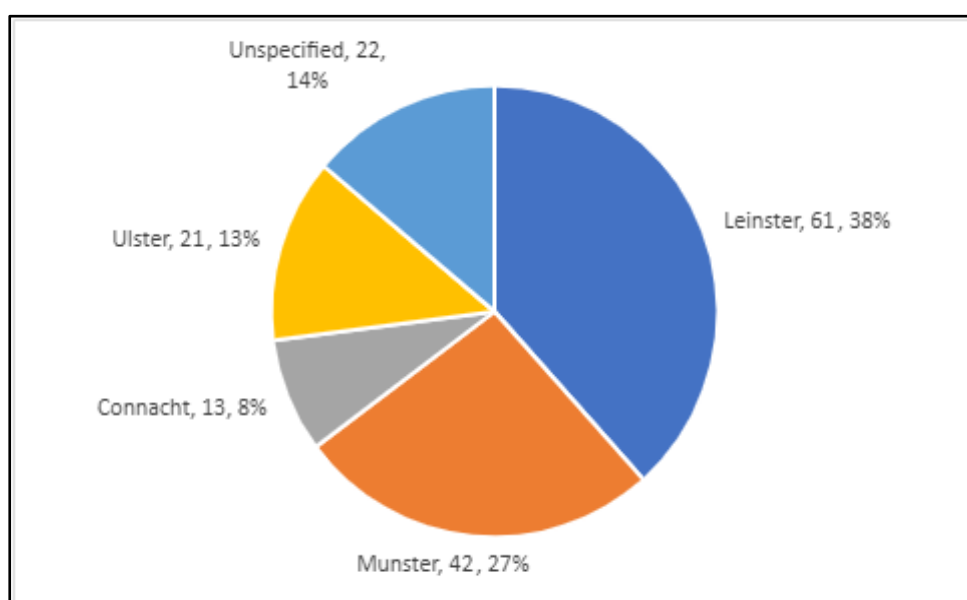


Figure 3.1 Geographical distribution of survey respondents (by province)

A total of 159 sheds participated in the survey. Figure 3.1 illustrates both the absolute number of participating sheds from each province and the percentage of total responses accounted for by each province. Responses were received from 61 sheds in Leinster (38%) and 42 sheds in Munster (27%), 21 from Ulster (13%) and 13 from Connacht (8%). Within Ulster, just over one-half of respondents were from the three counties in the Republic of Ireland. The remainder came from the six counties of Northern Ireland. In Leinster, Dublin (city and county) accounted for one-third of respondents. Representatives from 22 sheds (14%) did not state the sheds to which they belonged and therefore could not be categorised geographically.

When participation in the survey is analysed in terms of the provincial distribution of men's sheds, Munster was the best represented (responses were received from almost 40% of sheds in the province), followed by Leinster (34% of sheds responded). Men's Sheds in Connacht and Ulster were under-represented in the survey with only 21% of sheds responding from each of these provinces. In the subsequent nine interviews and five focus groups, the majority of respondents came from Leinster, Munster and Ulster, while Connacht was less well-represented.

### 3.3 Activities undertaken in men's sheds

In the survey, participants were presented with a list of fourteen activities and were asked to indicate which of these their respective sheds had engaged in within the previous five years. This list was based on an analysis of activities listed on men's sheds websites and social media channels, media reports and academic publications. A free text field was also provided to enable respondents to specify activities not included in the list.

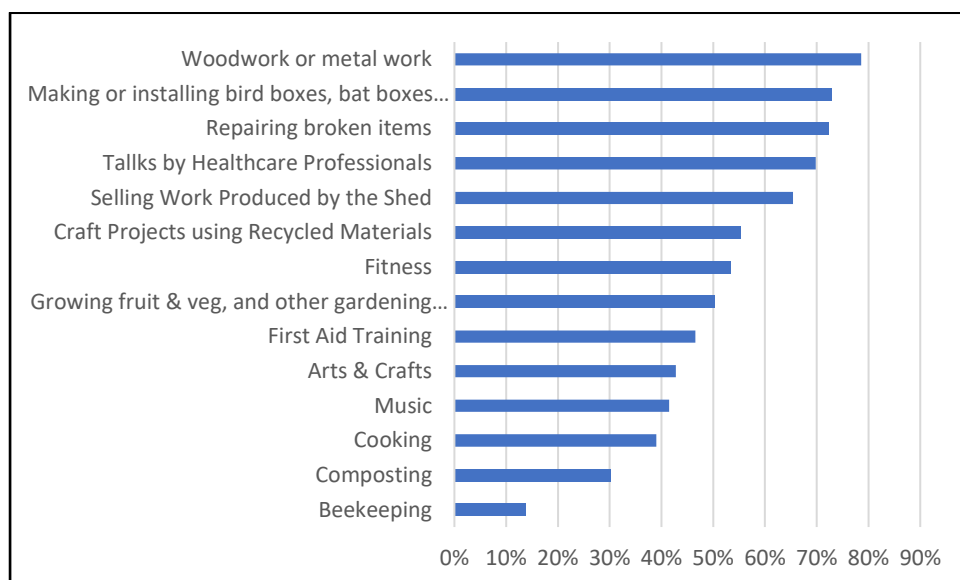


Figure 3.2 Activities reported by men's sheds

Woodwork or metal work emerged as the most commonly reported activity (79%), followed closely by making/installing bird boxes/bat boxes/bug hotels (73%). There is clearly some overlap here as making these nesting boxes involves woodwork; however, it was included as a separate category as we wanted to gauge involvement in biodiversity initiatives. The prevalence of 'hands-on', manual activities was also reflected in the high percentage of sheds reporting that they repair broken items, engage in craft projects, and sell work produced by the shed. Given the emphasis on health and wellbeing in Irish men's sheds, it is unsurprising that 70% indicated they had hosted talks by healthcare professionals, while over half provided activities related to physical fitness. Activities that fell outside the categories listed in the survey were numerous and varied. These included: local heritage talks, visits to museums and heritage sites, and heritage projects; building and restoration projects, from chapels and large community buildings to boatbuilding; arts and culture, including film festivals, photography and multi-media projects; sports such as boules, bowling, pitch and putt, boating, and fishing; games-based pastimes, including darts and card playing; computer and IT skills courses; mentoring; and health and wellbeing, which included mindfulness, memory training and participation in cancer screening.

The reported activities and initiatives were classified into four broad categories, which formed the themes for subsequent focus groups:

- working in/for nature;
- recycling and upcycling projects;
- health-related activities; and
- arts, crafts, music and cultural activities.

The findings from interviews and focus groups are reported under two headings: activities that support environmental sustainability (Chapter Four) and health and social inclusion (Chapter Five). However, there is some overlap between the different categories. For example, because the men work in groups, participation in environmentally sustainable activities (such as using recycled materials for craft projects or making nesting boxes) may also have a positive impact on the men's mental health, as group activities promote higher levels of socialisation and social interaction. An array of activities related to arts, music and culture are offered by many sheds. These are not reported on separately but are incorporated into Chapters Four and Five.

### 3.4 Sources of knowledge and skills to support activities

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the knowledge/skills resources that their sheds have drawn upon to develop activities. They were instructed to tick as many of the six sources as they had utilised and were also able to mention additional resources.

All but eleven (7%) of the 159 respondents indicated that some members of the shed had particular knowledge or skillsets that they were able to share with others. This supports the 'shoulder-to-shoulder' learning environment that is characteristic of men's sheds. This is further evidenced by the finding that over half (55%) of respondents indicated that they had done their own research and learned from each other. Expert guest speakers, such as healthcare professionals, were identified by 65% of respondents as supporting activities, while 55% of respondents indicated that their shed had drawn on the expertise of someone in the local community with relevant knowledge/skills. The wider men's shed movement was also a source of knowledge for some sheds. Just over one-third (36%) indicated that they had linked with other men's sheds who had relevant knowledge or skills. Furthermore, resources provided by the IMSA were utilised by 43% of respondents. It should be noted that this relates to IMSA supports for particular activities. All sheds that are affiliated to the IMSA receive supports in relation to issues such as insurance and health and safety.

### 3.5 Collaboration with other organisations in the community

Respondents were asked to indicate if they had collaborated with other community groups or development organisations. Over half of the responding sheds were involved with the local Tidy Towns group (58%), the community association/parish council (57%) and churches or schools (55%). More details on these links emerged during the interviews and focus groups. Activities included producing and supplying planters to enhance the appearance of the locality, engaging in local clean-up initiatives, stewarding community events, and making buddy benches for schools.

Just over half (51%) had engaged with their local authority (county/city council). Examples included securing access to small spaces for community gardening and biodiversity projects, commissioning of street furniture such as planters and benches, participating in community fora, and securing local authority grants. Almost half were involved with local development organisations (48%) and organisations dedicated to cultural or natural heritage (48%), while 23% had relationships with bird and wildlife organisations. One-fifth (21%) indicated collaborations with the GAA, including use of space and facilities.

In addition to the organisations listed above, respondents indicated a wide variety of other organisations with whom they collaborate. Respondents reported securing sponsorship for their sheds from local businesses, and collaborating locally with sports clubs, charities, active retirement groups, festival committees, scouting groups and youth clubs, nursing homes, special needs and intellectual disabilities groups, primary care centres, mental health services, pharmacies, family



resource centres, networks of asylum seekers, traveller groups, local care agencies, and the local Education and Training Board (ETB). The richness of their networks in the local community enables men's sheds to avail of a range of resources and supports from which their members can benefit. Moreover, it suggests reciprocal relationships, where men's sheds contribute significantly to the enhancement of community life. In a very short number of years, they have woven themselves into the tapestry of community life. One of the survey respondents highlighted that the men's shed is supported by the Community Development Programme, which ensures that the men's shed is "an integral part of the community structure as . . . only by working together can we build better communities."

## Chapter Four: Activities that support environmental sustainability

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on a range of activities identified in the survey that are relevant to fostering positive environmental attitudes and behaviours and improving environmental knowledge and awareness. These include activities classified as:

- **working in/for nature**, (including gardening and food growing, composting, and biodiversity projects)
- **recycling and upcycling projects**, and
- **contributions to local environment initiatives** (such as litter picking, river clean-ups, and landscaping).

### 4.2 Working in/for nature

For the purposes of analysis and presentation, four of the activities listed in the survey were categorised as working in, or for, nature. The emphasis on 'working' excludes other activities, such as walking or birdwatching, which may occur in nature but are not undertaken with a pro-environmental purpose. Activities that promote biodiversity emerged as the most common activity in the working in/for nature category. In particular, making and/or installing bird boxes, bat boxes or bug hotels was carried out by 73% of sheds, while 14% of sheds engaged in beekeeping. Growing fruit and vegetables and other gardening projects were offered by 50% of sheds, while composting waste was undertaken by 30%. Although food growing and other gardening activities in sheds are not usually intentionally linked to environmental sustainability, they can make a positive contribution, for example, by reducing food miles – the distance that food has to travel to reach the consumer.

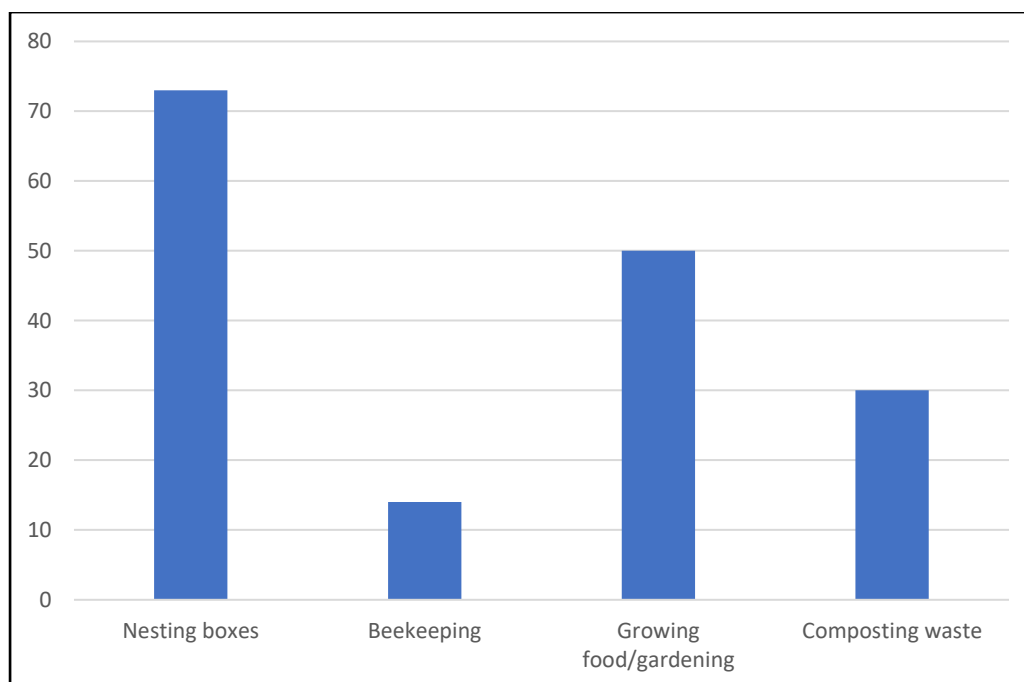


Figure 4.1 Working in/for nature

#### 4.2.1 Biodiversity-related activities

Making and/or installing bird boxes, bat boxes or bug hotels was one of the most common activities reported in the survey (73%). For many sheds, these initiatives originated as woodwork projects rather than biodiversity projects. The woodwork projects were sometimes instigated simply because sheds had been given unwanted wood, such as pallets from local companies or wood discarded during local home renovations. The sheds then identified a demand within their communities for nature/biodiversity enhancing products.

For some sheds, bird boxes were produced and sold to people in the community to install in their gardens. These were described by one shed representative as “a little bit of a fundraiser to both show off the men's work and also to make a few bob” [FG01]. Men's sheds tend to become a ‘go-to’ resource in communities where individuals or other community and voluntary organisations seek the help of the men's shed for projects involving woodwork. A number of sheds began producing these types of items on a significant scale at the request of local community members and businesses. For example, Naas Men's Shed in County Kildare was approached by Dawn Farm Foods to make bird boxes and bee hotels, which they planned to install around their nearby campus, and also offer to staff for their gardens as part of the company's biodiversity policy.<sup>9</sup> In return for this work, the company donated a defibrillator to the men's shed, which will be available to the wider community. Another shed reported how they supplied local farmers with bird boxes. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is committed to safeguarding farmland ecosystems.<sup>10</sup> The CAP works with other EU wildlife directives that promote biodiversity such as the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030<sup>11</sup> and broader EU initiatives such as the Green Deal.<sup>12</sup> Farmers linked with the men's shed and used these nesting boxes to partially fulfil cross-compliance obligations and to achieve biodiversity targets set by different environmental CAP schemes for which they were registered. This demonstrates how the local activities of SDG Champions like men's sheds contribute to the implementation of international and supranational environmental policies which are also aligned with the SDGs. The men's shed were the vital link and catalyst that enabled local and global sustainability initiatives to coalesce.

While in many cases, making bird boxes, bat boxes and bug hotels was simply a focus for a woodwork project or a way of raising funds for the shed, the activity has stimulated greater interest in biodiversity, not only among the men's shed members but in their wider communities. For a smaller number of sheds in the study, the stimulus for making these nesting boxes was specifically to foster biodiversity conservation. For example, in one suburb close to a major city centre, the impetus came from an awareness among the men that large tracts of land were being developed and this was negatively impacting wildlife habitats.

“In the city wildlife has just been decimated at an alarming rate. [In the area, there were] two small fields, which for generations would have had huge amounts of nesting birds in them and they've all been taken away . . . I suppose that was the impetus . . . we started looking at the bird boxes . . . we were putting them into gardens in the local area and we were trying to encourage people to feed birds and encourage more wildlife habitation, and that's where it really stemmed from. . . [they] became sort of a fashion thing in the area. A lot of people wanted them for the garden.” (FG01)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dawnfarms.ie/dawn-farms-partner-with-naas-community-mens-shed/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/sustainability/environmental-sustainability/cap-and-environment\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/sustainability/environmental-sustainability/cap-and-environment_en)

<sup>11</sup> [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en)

<sup>12</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

The manufacture of the bird boxes was led by a member of the shed who is a skilled woodworker. The men embraced the project, and it gave them an opportunity to showcase their skills.

As people locally became interested in the bird boxes, the men's shed took the opportunity to produce educational leaflets. These leaflets provided information on wildflowers, bird habitats and bird species. The research and production of these leaflets involved the development of entirely new skillsets and demonstrates how one activity in men's sheds can act as a catalyst for many others.

"When the men are out there doing [biodiversity-related activities] in the community, there's a knock-on effect where they're passing the information on, and it's being gobbled up and we started the conversation with various people." (FG01)

The men in the shed became the 'go to' people in their community for information and advice on promoting biodiversity. In addition to nesting boxes, they focused on encouraging people to grow shrubs to compensate for the trend of cutting out shrubs to make way for paved driveways. Initiatives such as this led to co-operation with other community organisations, such as Tidy Towns Committees, community development organisations and local authorities. It demonstrates how environmental sustainability initiatives can promote social sustainability by helping to (re)connect and (re)integrate retired and unemployed men, not only with other men but with their wider communities. Men's sheds provide an opportunity for otherwise isolated men to make valuable contributions to their community. In the process they get a sense of being valued and held in high regard by their communities for the skills and information they contribute

One shed in the midlands engaged in a 'bird box build' project with Youthwork Ireland (I01). They made up kits for the twelve participating young people. The shed leader explained to the young people why they were building the boxes and showed them how to assemble them. They received excellent feedback on this project. The young people enjoyed using the tools and installing the boxes on trees in their locality where they and others in their community could see the work that they had done and subsequently monitor use of the bird boxes by wildlife.

Several men's sheds have worked in partnership with Birdwatch Ireland on its *Birds Connect* initiative, which seeks to connect people and biodiversity by "exploring innovative ways to improve access and participation in bird projects for people with disabilities, new communities and minority groups".<sup>13</sup> This project sees men's sheds and Tidy Towns groups collaborating to produce bird boxes, which are installed in institutional settings, such as nursing homes and direct provision centres and again highlights how easily the links between environmental and social sustainability can happen once a catalyst like the men's shed movement is in place.

When asked about the importance of men's sheds in promoting biodiversity awareness in the community, the response was mixed, ranging from those who believed they were merely tapping into an existing local interest, to those who believed they were making a positive contribution and stimulating awareness. For some, climate action and biodiversity projects simply provide a work-based activity within the shed around which greater social interaction and integration can occur (I01). However, there is significant potential for developing men's sheds as agents of pro-environmental endeavours within communities. Some participants expressed interest in setting more ambitious goals with more structured biodiversity projects. One contributor enthused:

"We're at the fringe of it. We want to go forward with that. We need a certain amount of education and then we're working with the [local] Education & Training board and getting

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<sup>13</sup> <https://birdwatchireland.ie/our-work/birds-connect/>

somebody in to progress that and one of our lads is doing the course . . . so that's something that's certainly a target . . . We'd be very conscious that we have to contribute to this whole biodiversity thing and improving the planet and everything and it's the next phase for us; it's a target and we'll certainly tackle it head on and do what we can" (FG02).

It is important that sheds have access to appropriate knowledge and expertise. For instance, one interviewee reported how their shed had been using pressure treated wood to make bird boxes. When they diversified into producing bat boxes, they did some research and found that this wood was not suitable for bat boxes. They now use Irish larch wood, which contains a lot of resin and lasts a long time. They source the larch from a sawmill 20 kilometers from the shed; this builds on the sustainability of the project as they are using local instead of imported timber. (I01)

Often, biodiversity projects develop as a result of particular expertise within the shed. **Beekeeping** is an emerging area of interest for men's sheds. In March 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the IMSA organised a webinar or 'shedcast', where the Education Officer of the Irish Beekeepers' Association provided advice on beekeeping, such as starting up a hive. While just 14% of survey respondents indicated that their sheds were involved in beekeeping, several focus group participants and interviewees spoke about current initiatives and future plans around a greater involvement in developing apiaries.

Sometimes beekeeping activities start in a shed as a result of one of the members sharing their own expertise and experience. In one shed, one of the members started telling the others about his own bees. The men were interested so he brought in some of the materials and equipment to show them how to put a hive together and what was involved. The men decided they would like to get a hive. The biggest challenge was finding a place to keep the bees. That particular shed now has four hives, and the interviewee also mentors another member who has two hives of his own. He distributes beekeeping manuals to anyone interested to support their learning. In the interviewee's experience, the beekeeping is a gateway for the men to talk about and engage with wider issues of biodiversity. They are planning to work with a local school to provide bee suits for the children and introduce them to the importance of bees to our ecosystem (I02). This again demonstrates the social integration and connections across age groups that can develop from projects that begin quite narrowly focused on one aspect of environmental sustainability.

One of the beekeeping experts explained that, through conversing about beekeeping, the men become aware that "all through the seasons, every month has something for the bees . . . from the dandelions, then crocuses, then the laurel, then other flowers, then trees". He also advises which shrubs to plant to provide food for bees, even in small spaces. Finding the space to do this in more highly urbanised areas, where land is so developed and the shed has limited space, presents significant challenges. One urban shed highlighted some nearby industries that have beehives on their roofs; they seek to work with other companies to engage in similar practices, or other organisations in the community that have access to land, such as local GAA and sports clubs (FG01).

Also, in this men's shed, the men were particularly interested in promoting biodiversity and had worked with the local authority to secure very small spaces where gardens were designed, planted and maintained. The men planted wildflowers and watch the bees that come to feed on them (FG01).

Participating in biodiversity-related woodwork projects can provide a catalyst to stimulate more awareness and a greater interest in biodiversity itself and also wider environmental and sustainability issues and challenges:

The men “do appreciate the environment a wee bit more, and then there's a knock-on [effect] . . . talk of recycling . . . Today is the last day we're using paper cups; we had them purchased and so [are using the last of them] . . . [The men] are starting to look at the environment and they're listening to the discussions on the radio and the media” (FG01).

#### 4.2.2 Gardening

Gardening was undertaken by 50% of the surveyed sheds. This includes activities such as growing fruit and vegetables, creating floral displays in the local community, and wildflower projects to promote biodiversity.

Many sheds reported having polytunnels. The men take home the produce and some sheds also give away produce to people in the community. One shed told us how, at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, they got a grant from a community group to buy seeds, put together grow-packs – a bag of compost, seeds, plants and pots – and delivered them to people in the community. One participant told them: “My daughter's watching the peas grow. . . getting them used to where their food comes from” (FG03).

In another shed, two of the men – a landscaper and a gardener – spend an hour at the local school every Monday explaining to school children about growing their own food, showing them how to do this, and teaching the importance of growing food the ‘natural way’, at an early age. The children are curious and like to learn (FG04). In all these activities there is an importance attached to ‘learning by doing’ – providing the materials and the expertise and showing how to engage with specific activities – learning by trial and error. Members of another shed reported that nature walks and birdwatching organised by the men's shed also attract people from the wider community, including children (FG03). These activities demonstrate the impact that the men's sheds have as SDG Champions; the stimulation of interest in ideas related to environmental sustainability can ripple out beyond an individual men's shed into the wider community. In all these activities, there is a strong intergenerational connection being made between the older shedders and younger people in schools and in the wider community. The sheds have become centres of education and expertise for the wider community. They link with schools and youth clubs to provide practical examples of material on the school curriculum or provide information on issues and challenges linked to environmental sustainability.

#### 4.3 Recycling/upcycling projects

In our survey, 79% of respondents indicated that woodwork and/or metalwork were activities undertaken in their shed. Over half (55%) of all respondents indicated that they used recycled materials for various craft projects. There are numerous examples of sheds being given donations of offcuts of timber, pallets and wood stripped out of homes and other buildings during refurbishments. These materials, which might otherwise have gone to landfill, are used for a range of purposes, depending on the quality. The timber is repurposed for the construction of items such as nesting boxes, planters, picnic tables and benches, and scraps are used for smaller items, such as stakes to support plants in gardens. Items produced range from one-off commissioned pieces to production on a larger scale, at the request of individuals or groups within the community.

“We try as much as possible to be sustainable. . . we don't dump stuff, we try to recycle as much as possible . . . we built a boat out of completely recycled material (old floor boards and bookshelves)” (FG03).

In Ratoath, the men's shed worked with a local knitting and crochet group to make a Christmas tree for the community centre, using repurposed materials. The knitting group had been given a donation



of wool. The men's shed built a timber frame in the shape of a Christmas tree, upon which the crochet could be hung.<sup>14</sup> A participant highlighted that:

"The guys can do anything . . . you couldn't believe what they can do with recycled pallets. Some were joiners in their profession; they really do work for fun and do amazing work."

Another shed (FG04) highlighted the range of items made by recycling timber, including window boxes, planters and buddy benches. The concept of the buddy bench is to provide a space in school playgrounds for children to sit, which signals to other children that they would like to be included in play or chat. The County Council asked the shed to make buddy benches for ten schools in the area, and they agreed. They had seven completed when COVID-19 struck, and they were planning to begin again when the shed reopened. About 60% of the materials used in the buddy benches is recycled, made from pallets. According to the shed representative, the children know the materials are recycled. This helps to foster awareness among children of the need to recycle. The buddy bench also functioned as an agent of social integration for children feeling excluded or for those who had issues making friends. This again highlights how what began in the men's shed as an environmentally sustainable woodwork project also made an equally important contribution towards tackling social exclusion.

Facilities and space within the shed can be an important determinant of what can be produced. For example, one shed operating in a very small space in a built-up area reported:

"We didn't have a workshop, so we are working in, you know, a small hall and we had to cart tools in and out of an office. So, the bird box . . . I think [the men] just took it on board . . . because it's something we could make, store and utilise in a relatively small space that we were operating in" (FG01).

Another shed representative highlighted the problems of space as a constraint for some sheds: "it's a bit of a problem dismantling the pallets but it is possible to do it. At least [unlike the experience reported above by another shed] we have a bit of space" (FG02).

**Repairing broken items** was an activity reported by 72% of sheds participating in the survey. Through word-of-mouth and reputation, the sheds are often regarded as a resource within the community that has the skills and equipment required to provide repair services. Sometimes, people go to the shed when they have

"jobs [they] cannot get somebody to do and . . . that are within our capabilities . . . that's what it's all about. It's about helping people as well as helping all the members of the shed as well. And if we can help the Tidy Towns or the community [with] jobs within our own capabilities, we do it and . . . that's the way and we get great publicity from those organisations through the media . . . we have those high-visibility jackets with our logo on it. So, it means that if we're working in the community garden or whatever . . . everybody looks in and they'll see [name] men's shed on it. It's just part and parcel of being out there and letting the community know where they are and we're there to help everybody" (FG05).

In fact, sometimes there is a challenge in balancing the purpose of the sheds – to provide an opportunity for men to socialise through collaboration in meaningful activities – with the possibilities for upscaling work. Sheds may have to limit the work they agree to take on.

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<sup>14</sup> "Volunteer Meath knitters create 6ft2 Christmas tree for community", *Irish Examiner*, 5 December 2019, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-30968739.html>

"We have a lot of respect within the community . . . they always come to the shed to see can we help.....We repair a small bit of furniture. Now we've only light furniture . . . [it used to be] like being in a factory. So, we had to call a halt" (FG05).

"It's important not to turn the shed into a production facility. Some men are retired and just want to come in for a cup of tea and a chat" (I01).

#### 4.4 Men's Sheds as key contributors to local environmental initiatives

In the survey, over half (58%) of sheds reported being involved in Tidy Towns projects, while others reported that the men's sheds took the initiative to clean up the local environment.

During interviews and focus groups, several participants mentioned how they collaborate with other groups in the community to improve the local environment and the quality of life in the locality.

"Men do have awareness of how the activities in the shed have an input into community initiatives and community awareness . . . The shed has such an involvement with other community groups, such as scouts, sporting and women's groups and Tidy Towns; they are well integrated. They are involved in the likes of litter picks with the community and are seen to do these things and are known for it. The groups support one another, there is a holistic way the groups work within the community. The shed gets great support from other groups" (I03).

Another participant (FG01) reported that their shed was working with the Tidy Towns group to secure funding to engage the men in a community project where they can build some planters and plant trees.

In one village (FG03), the men's shed embarked on a clean-up of the river. The village, which is a very picturesque and popular tourist destination, has a public footpath running along the bank of the river. The river had not been cleaned for several years and so the men decided to tackle the task. In terms of health and safety, they "had all the right gear – waders, pickers". On the first clean, they recovered "half a lorry load of stuff" from the river, including items such as bicycles and computers. "The biggest thing of the lot was plastic . . . there was so much plastic in it". These efforts were appreciated by the community. One focus group participant provided an example of this gratitude:

"I was walking down the next morning and a lady that I met - a good friend of my wife's - pulled the car over . . . to congratulate me on what had been done and I really thought then, this is good, this is a good thing to be involved in, and it really hit me that the shed could do a lot of good for the community".

Since that initial cleaning of the river, the wider community has become involved and "it has become an almost annual event". This illustrates how men's sheds, due to their standing in the community and through their actions, can mobilise others in the community to take an interest in the protection of their local environment. It also shows the success of men's sheds as agents of social integration. They not only provide safe places for men to socialise with each other but, through their various projects, they provide mechanisms for the men, and the sheds they are members of, to become leaders within their communities. The shed and its members become key actors within the community with many of their activities aligning with local and global social and environmental sustainability agendas.

#### 4.5 Other initiatives that support environmental sustainability

Securing an appropriate space in the community is a challenge for many sheds. For those fortunate enough to have a purpose-built shed, there were examples of incorporating sustainability into the design of the building, while others explored opportunities for retrofitting. One shed, which had secured funds to construct a purpose-built men's shed, reported on its green design, including high levels of insulation and water harvesting with big tanks to supply water for the polytunnels. This shed is also considering the installation of solar PV panels; some of the members are involved in the local Sustainable Energy Community and it is hoped that, in time, the shed will become a micro-generator of energy. It must be emphasised that such initiatives were feasible for only a small minority of sheds and many struggle with inadequate premises and insecurity of tenure. This lack of an appropriate and permanent base sometimes threatens the very existence of sheds and, at very least, limits the range of activities provided. Addressing this issue is fundamental to the long-term success of the men's shed movement in Ireland.

## Chapter Five: Health and wellbeing

### 5.1 Introduction

As outlined in the literature review, the positive impact of men's sheds on participants' health is well documented. Our study does not seek to measure or verify the health impact of participation. Our aim is to present information on the broad spectrum of activities that are oriented towards supporting participants' physical and mental health and wellbeing. These range from formal, structured health promotion programmes to one-off health talks and health checks, through to activities and learning that support a healthy lifestyle, such as fitness, nutrition, and cooking. Figure 5.1 summarises the responses to the survey in relation to health-related activities.

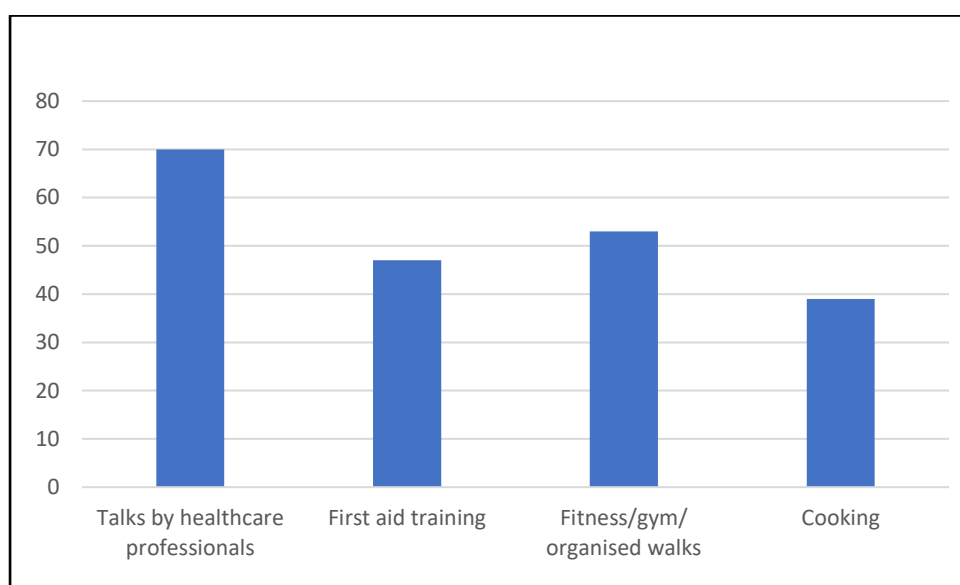


Figure 5.1 Health-related activities offered in men's sheds

### 5.2 Health promotion activities

Under this heading, we discuss initiatives directly targeted at improving health outcomes, through education and awareness campaigns, talks by healthcare professionals and basic health checks provided in the shed environment by organisations focused on specific health issues.

Health promotion is defined by the World Health Organization as “the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. It moves beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions.”<sup>15</sup>

Health promotion has been a core focus of the men's shed movement in Ireland since its inception. An early programme was the *Spanner in the Works* initiative.<sup>16</sup> Adapted from a programme of the same name developed by the Australian Men's Sheds Association, this scheme uses an image of 'Machine Man' to draw an analogy between monitoring and maintaining a motor vehicle to roadworthy standards and maintaining physical and mental health, including appropriate health checks (Golding, 2021). It provides health information using terminology that is accessible and

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-promotion>

<sup>16</sup> <https://malehealth.ie/spannermen/>

identifiable for men. The *Spanner in the Works* initiative has a dedicated website – [malehealth.ie](http://malehealth.ie) – which is developed and maintained by the IMSA. The website provides useful online pamphlets for men to highlight common health problems experienced by men in each age group and the health checks that need to be considered. The website also includes links to resources from reputable partner organisations, such as the HSE, the Irish Heart Foundation, the Irish Cancer Society, Diabetes Ireland, Mental Health Ireland, Age and Opportunity, and many other organisations. Information is delivered through a variety of media, including videos, illustrated advice, pamphlets and blogs. Information is provided on a range of health issues, including specific types of cancer, stroke prevention, dementia awareness, sexually transmitted infections, and alcohol and health.

Due to increasing calls for gender specific strategies that engage men with health in Ireland, an initiative called *Sheds for Life* was developed by the IMSA in 2016.<sup>17</sup> This initiative offers a series of modules on selected health topics. Recognising the ethos and culture of men's sheds as learning environments, it is important to approach any health promotion endeavour as a partnership where the men in each shed decide whether, or how, to participate. *Sheds for Life*, therefore, is based on a partnership approach, where partner organisations provide health talks and health checks to individual sheds that opt in and decide on the topics that interest them. The 10-week programme includes a health check, core modules on physical activity, healthy eating and mental health, and a range of other topics (McGrath *et al.*, 2021). For the purposes of our study, we did not ask specific questions on *Sheds for Life* as a full evaluation of this initiative was being undertaken by McGrath *et al.* (2021) at this time. Our aim was to capture the breadth of health-related activities and understand the men's subjective experiences.

According to the survey, 70% of sheds have hosted talks by healthcare professionals. These talks can provide a catalyst for men to seek medical advice or simply to talk about their health with other men in the shed. Health checks by qualified practitioners in partner organisations were also cited as providing important opportunities for men to identify potential health issues and seek appropriate advice. This can be critical for men who may be reluctant to visit a doctor or downplay health issues. For example,

“The Heart Foundation have come here two years and they did a full medical check and they did send some of the fellows to doctors, in kind of an urgent way - that they should go to the doctor very quickly and that was a very positive thing you know, because again, we kind of wait for something to go wrong before we go to the doctor, . . . in these cases, the Heart Foundation picked it up and sent them to their doctors and it probably saved them from a more serious situation, you know” (FG02).

Almost half (47%) of men's sheds that participated in the survey reported that they had offered a first-aid course in the past five years. While this does not fall strictly within the realm of health promotion, first-aid skills are important in equipping people to respond in an emergency, whether in the home or in the shed, or even in the wider community. An example was given of a person who had collapsed in the street and bystanders came to the shed for help. In that community, “people know if you go to the shed you can get help” (FG03). Some sheds have fundraised to acquire a defibrillator, which is located in the shed or in a central place in the community and they have undertaken training in using this equipment.

A key contribution is that men's sheds have normalised conversations around health and wellbeing within the sheds and this spills over into the men's interactions in the wider community. This

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<sup>17</sup> <https://menssheds.ie/sheds-for-life/>

normalisation of conversations that would not materialise organically is very important. It speaks to the way that sheds have become a catalyst for changing men's attitudes and behaviours around engaging in conversations about health and wellbeing. One participant pointed out the transformative effect of the shed, particularly through men's involvement in initiatives such as the *Sheds for Life* programme and engagement with other health-related organisations:

"I think they have been [reluctant] . . . but I think since being in the shed here it has totally changed. The Irish Men's Shed ran [*Sheds for Life*] . . . It was invaluable. And since that time . . . we support each other in terms of health, and we know when fellows have to go up for appointments, go to hospital, and we brought a number of speakers in from Alzheimers Ireland, cancer and that type of thing, and there is now no difficulty [talking about health issues]. I have to credit the shed movement for the fact that this has proved a massive success in terms of mental health for men because they're now talking about it. . . It's just a transformation. . . . It's just fellows getting to know each other and one fellow opening up about his health, or about his prostate, or about his cancer, or about something like that. Then the others open up. It was this group – the men's shed shoulder to shoulder environment that the shed has created. This is what it has done. It has brought trust in each other, loyalty to each other, support for each other. It brings everything in terms of the friendship and everything that comes with the . . . men's shed movement" (FG02).

Others in the focus group agreed with this, citing examples of men who were encouraged to seek medical advice by other men who noticed they seemed unwell. For example, one man was diagnosed with cancer: "it took a long time to get him to go to the doctor . . . he's a new man now . . . we were all conscious that there was something weighing on his mind, you know, and then he's back now and he's in great form . . . he still has to get himself sorted physically but his mind is right. You know . . . It affected him big time" (FG05).

This supportive environment can also have a positive impact on **mental health and wellbeing**. One man who joined the online focus group from the shed building said:

"They're out there now having a cup of tea at the moment, about ten of them, and you can see how good that is in terms of mental health . . . they're chatting away about anything from football to politics to their health. . . you can see clearly how beneficial that is. . . 'cause there's laughter out there. There's the cup of tea. There's the slagging, there's everything. You couldn't create a better environment for mental health than that type of activity" (FG02).

Some focus groups participants told us that there are a small number of shed members who may have significant mental health issues and, while the men are aware of the limits to how they can help those who need professional help, they watch out for each other:

"We do have a few fellows with mental health problems. We are always on the lookout for them because they have had to be hospitalised and you know ... when they come back then we look after them, you know . . . and it isn't a secret like. We are very conscious of it and . . . between ourselves like keep an eye out for them . . . We have a couple of lads, they're the best in the world but they get down. We try and work with them and work with the family as well; we know their wives. . . We're very conscious of our mental health. . . ." (FG05).

"We have a number of people who we know have mental health problems and they will tell us that they're down at the moment and they they're not coming in. And we encourage them to come in. We talk to them on the phone . . . and they say they're in a bad place. Now that goes on with the minority of members, but we do everything we can for them, . . . we try and

get them to get help from outside the shed because there's only so much we can do in terms of talking to them and having a cup of tea with them and all that" (FG02).

When asked if the shed environment makes it easier for men to talk about mental health, one participant illustrated the levels of social isolation that some men feel when he stated that if they did not have the companionship of the men in the shed, "who would they be talking to? Talking to the wall?" (FG05).

### 5.3 Activities and knowledge that support a healthy lifestyle

A critical contribution of men's sheds is that they have provided opportunities for members to transition from what may have been sedentary retirements to more physically active and socially engaged lifestyles. In the supportive and comfortable environment within each shed, men engage in activities and pursuits that would not have been available to them had the shed not existed.

#### 5.3.1 Pursuits that encourage physical activity and fitness

Over half (53%) of responding sheds indicated that they provide activities classified under fitness, gym activities and organised walks. These range from walking, including Nordic/activator pole walking to walking football, boules, and pitch and putt. For many, the motivation for taking part in these activities is more social than health-related but participation has the potential to bring significant health and wellbeing benefits. As such, there are many examples of these activities falling within the 'health by stealth' approach.

Some of these pursuits encourage physical activity in men who normally would not be active:

"We're very active in terms of activities. We had pole walking this morning at 10 o'clock . . . activator pole walking . . . We have walking soccer on Friday; we have 30 players who play walking soccer which was introduced to us by Age and Opportunity through Sports Ireland. We play every Friday morning 6 or 7 a side" (FG02).

One of the sheds organises walks on a designated day every week. The walks are offered at different levels of effort/difficulty. Some men prefer a shorter walk (under one hour) while others like a longer walk (up to three hours). One of the men (I04) told us how, due to his experience of mountaineering and knowledge of local walking routes, he adopted the role of walking leader, taking the men out on the hills, beaches and wooded areas. He encourages the group to suggest areas where they would like to walk, and then he plans routes according to the abilities of the walkers. For the early part of the walk, they all walk together and then they split as some people prefer a shorter, gentle walk while others seek a longer or more challenging route. This makes walking an inclusive activity that is accessible to most people. The men are also joined by people in the wider community, including partners and family members.

For some, group walking was an activity that drew them to the shed. One man (I05) told us how he used to walk his dog a mile or two in the evening. He decided to look for walking groups and found the local men's shed walking group through the parish bulletin board. He followed up and was invited to come along on one of the weekly walks. He discovered a purpose for that particular day every week and, through the group, he discovered different walking trails. "There is a great community aspect in walking with the group, you have somewhere you should be on a Tuesday morning. It gives a sense of belonging and being a part of something. The group is a unit, and they look out for each other" (I05).

Bearing in mind the generally older age profile of men's shed members, this is an example of an activity that encourages mobility and fitness. However, the potential benefits are not just physical. The companionship and camaraderie that can be developed through participation in activities was highlighted:

"Just the companionship, certainly from my point of view, . . . the fitness thing is a bonus, but to just get out and meeting other people and having a chat and sharing the problems . . . That made life a lot more bearable during lockdown. [Lockdown was] grim . . . not seeing anybody for a full week. Getting out and about in the fresh air was good and the chat was always good" (FG06).

The importance of walks during the COVID-19 lockdown was also emphasised by another shed with a walking group (I05). Although the shed was closed, most of the walkers lived within the 5 km distance that people were allowed to travel, and so the walks in the local area continued for those who were comfortable doing so.

A man from another shed also emphasised the social focus of walking as an activity, particularly for those who retire and need to develop a new network of friends:

"While working you have a community; once you retire you need to develop a new community. The shed gives a great way of meeting a new network of friends. When you walk alongside people even for a short time you discover people in a way you wouldn't find in another setting. You also discover a lot about yourself as well. Especially on a long walk (several hours) you learn about your own tolerance and patience and also a lot about others" (I05).

Walking also provides men with the opportunity to spend time in nature. In a study on the relationship between time spent in nature and self-reported health and subjective wellbeing, White *et al.* (2019) reported that people who engaged in activities that allowed them to spend a minimum of 120 minutes every week in nature reported physical and mental benefits. These benefits peaked at between 200 and 300 minutes per week. As this is a research area that is relatively new, further research is needed to quantify all the benefits and why they appear to peak at 300 minutes. However, engaging in activities that bring people into the outdoors is known to positively impact "cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, asthma hospitalisation, mental distress, and ultimately mortality, among adults; and lower risks of obesity and myopia in children" (White *et al.*, 2019, p.1).

### 5.3.2 Cooking and nutrition:

Being able to cook fresh, nutritious meals is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. In the survey, 39% of sheds reported that they engage in cooking. This is a skill that many older men had never developed. One participant explained that when they started the shed,

"it seemed like a lot of our older gentlemen. . . would not cook or they wouldn't be able to cook . . . A lot of [them] have been married for long periods of time and they've lost their wives [who would have done the cooking] . . . and they just don't know how to cook . . . What we decided to do was try and teach someone just the basics, like soups and stocks and eggs and flatbreads . . . we got funding to try and help do this . . . Yeah, it's working out quite well. For some of the guys it's the very first time they've been able to cook anything and they're going away home with large pots of soup . . . It's been quite good for the mental health of everybody that's getting involved . . . it's good craic really. Uhm with what we're all having a laugh and a giggle and taking the proverbial, it's good craic (FG06)."



Another participant highlighted how a cookery course enabled men to cook for themselves and, in fact, the cookery courses were the main activity that attracted them to the shed and motivated them to stay involved (FG04).

#### 5.4 Sheds as catalysts for wellbeing

From the perspective of shed members, the activities discussed above would seem to be important factors contributing to overall health and wellbeing. However, despite their clear value, the wellbeing of participants cannot be attributed exclusively to structured health programmes and health-supporting activities, such as walking and cooking. The men who shared their experience and insights with the researchers during interviews and focus groups were keen to emphasise the importance of social interaction as a contributor to wellbeing. In this context, several contributors spoke about the kettle as 'the most important tool in the shed', meaning that having a cup of tea with fellow shedders presents opportunities to talk about all sorts of issues, from the trivial to the more serious.

"Our biggest and most popular machine in the shed is still the kettle" (FG07).

"It's not so much the doing of all the stuff. The most important thing is the meeting of the men in the shed . . . we all meet and some of us do things and more of us just have the cup of tea and chat, but that I find is more important to the men's shed . . . especially for the mental side of it. And bird boxes and all that . . . they're only by the way, the most important thing I feel is the chat" (FG05).

"The 'cup of tea' is crucial, I mean it starts there and that's how you create the morale factor and the support for each other and the awareness of each other. You'll find fellows breaking up into one or two groups, and they'll start talking about something very personal between say, two of them or three of them. And then another three in another part of the shed having another conversation about a totally different thing. So, this is what it brings out. There's no doubt about what it does, and this is what it has achieved for men's health. . . It's fantastic and the laughter of it . . . it's just brilliant . . . I mean when you get up in the morning, . . . when you know you're going down to the shed and you know you're going to meet people that you're going to have a cup of coffee and a bit of social interaction . . ." (FG02).

"You find yourself talking about things you wouldn't have talked about before you joined the shed – both mental health and physical health. That's been a real bonus" (FG03).

These insights illustrate the importance of conversation. Within men's sheds, there are two key catalysts that trigger 'chat' – the projects/activities and the kettle. The kettle emerges as a focal point within men's sheds - the point at which all the men gather and the individual 'smaller' project- and activity-based chats merge into larger group discussions. Both catalysts are equally important – the deep and personal conversations that may materialise as men spend hours working together on projects or engaged in activities; and the livelier group dynamic with all the banter, slugging and craic that occurs once the kettle boils. Within sheds there is a place for serious conversations and for more frivolous interactions. A risk that is taken in a hushed conversation that begins with confiding something deeply personal to someone 'shoulder to shoulder' is rewarded with understanding and acceptance, while everyone is still included in the larger group. "That's the package, it's perfect" (FG02).

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and recommendations

### 6.1 The role of men's sheds as champions of sustainable development

This research has identified a multitude of ways in which men's sheds on the island of Ireland are supporting and promoting the SDGs. Although there has been no high-profile campaign under the SDG Champions initiative, men's sheds live out the principles that support the goals in their everyday activities. In many respects, before the types of activities and initiatives are even considered, the very existence of men's sheds supports sustainable communities. In particular, the social dynamic that characterises men's sheds contributes to the wellbeing and social inclusion of participants. This unique environment has been harnessed as an effective channel for health promotion campaigns and encouraging men to engage with the health services. Initiatives such as *Spanner in the Works* and *Sheds for Life* specifically target their approach to reach men's shed participants and can engage men more effectively than generic health promotion campaigns.

Men's sheds benefit not only participants but also the wider community. This was apparent from the numerous stories relayed to the researchers through the surveys, interviews and focus groups, including: local clean-ups and landscaping; being seen as a 'go-to' resource for various services, ranging from production of street furniture or repairing items to marshalling community events; biodiversity projects; and health and wellbeing. These diverse initiatives reach beyond the walls of each shed. Collaboration with other local organisations was common among participating sheds and it is clear that men's sheds have become an integral part of the fabric of community life throughout Ireland in just over a decade since the first shed was established.

While the men's sheds in our survey draw upon a range of expertise from outside of the shed, particularly in relation to health issues, members in the shed were the most common source of knowledge and skills, testifying to the 'shoulder to shoulder' approach to learning that has, by now, become widely recognised as a key characteristic of men's sheds. For many of the traditional activities, such as woodwork, a 'Look and Do' (LaD) approach to learning is common: men look at what others in the shed are doing and learn the skills they need by practising them, repeating them and ultimately mastering them. Yet this 'LaD' acronym oversimplifies the pedagogies or 'shedagogies' at play. The sheds encapsulate all that is regarded as best practice in the evolving academic learning and teaching literature. In sheds, learning is inclusive; there is active learning, peer to peer learning, group learning, and research-based learning. Sheds have become centres of community-based informal learning. Furthermore, this has spread beyond individual sheds. The spirit of co-operation between men's sheds was evident, not only from the survey results, but also from the enthusiasm of participants in focus groups to exchange knowledge and insights that could help them find solutions to problems. This ranged from information on where to source materials or grant funding to offers to host mutual shed visits. It also spread into other community groups looking to acquire the expertise developed in sheds – many sheds have transformed into local micro-learning hubs without losing any of their original *raison d'être*, i.e. to provide a social space for men to engage in meaningful activities.

The research revealed that men's sheds are engaged in a range of activities that support pro-environmental behaviour. In general, these are not intended as environmental sustainability initiatives, but they increase the potential for promoting environmental awareness and behaviour. Initiatives such as locality clean-up operations and landscaping help to improve appreciation of

the environment at local level. Repairing items and reusing/recycling materials to give them a new lease of life reduces waste and fosters sustainable production and consumption. This links to the desired transition from a linear economy, where items are bought, used and disposed of, to a circular economy that promotes more sustainable consumption and production through the recycling and upcycling of materials to give them a new lease of life. This relies on traditional skillsets, such as woodwork and metalwork, that are at risk of being lost as society relies more on mass-produced, machine-based manufacturing. Men's sheds can provide an important role in preserving and passing on these artisan crafts and skills.

The popularity of woodwork projects that involve production of nesting boxes shows the potential for men's sheds to make a significant contribution to biodiversity conservation. For some, there is no objective beyond the woodwork project itself, but the high number of sheds producing these nesting boxes can be seen both as a response to biodiversity loss and a tool to generate more awareness and enable people in the community to play a role in conservation. The example reported in Chapter Four of a shed that has developed an educational component to the project by production of leaflets shows the potential for men's sheds to promote and facilitate environmental sustainability. Co-operating with other stakeholders, such as wildlife experts, would be key to optimising this latent capacity of men's sheds to be advocates for aspects of environmental sustainability within their localities. The potential of sheds to become focal organisations for citizen science projects as yet remains untapped. However, in any endeavours to achieve this, it is essential that men's sheds are not commandeered as part of a sustainability or any other agenda. The 'health by stealth' approach has been successful because it recognises the primacy of the social function of men's sheds and their right to remain autonomous and participant driven. Any initiatives to engage with wider sustainability issues must learn from this approach to achieve ***'sustainability by stealth'***.

Across all sections of society, including government, public services, education and research, businesses, civil society and community groups, organisations are being asked to engage with the SDGs. The IMSA became a designated SDG Champion in recognition of the positive impact that men's sheds in Ireland already have in their communities and their capacity to lead by example. It is generally the practice that organisations concentrate on selected SDGs where they can have the most significant impact. As outlined in Chapter One, the four SDGs identified by the IMSA focused on health and wellbeing (SDG3), reducing inequalities (SDG10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG11) and responsible consumption and production (SDG12). However, it is important to recognise how men's sheds contribute towards the achievement of other SDGs and identify where there is potential to play an even greater role by optimising latent interests and capacities. Figure 6.1 maps the activities and impacts of men's sheds onto relevant SDGs.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	4 QUALITY EDUCATION	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	13 CLIMATE ACTION	14 LIFE BELOW WATER	15 LIFE ON LAND
Social Interaction	Lifelong learning in an inclusive, supportive environment	Social & community integration	Care of public spaces – landscaping, clean-up projects	Craft projects using recycled materials	Craft projects using recycled materials	Local river clean-up projects	Producing and/or installing bird boxes, bat boxes & bug hotels
Fitness activities & sports	Peer learning & informal learning	Open to men of all backgrounds	Working with and inspiring others to care for the community	Repairing broken items	Repairing broken items		Beekeeping
Engaging with nature	Access to specialist expertise			Selling work produced by the shed	Composting		Gardening; growing fruit & veg.
Cooking & nutrition							Composting
Talks by healthcare professionals							
First-aid training							

Figure 6.1 Mapping men's sheds activities to the Sustainable Development Goals

## 6.2 Recommendations

As this research progressed, the ways in which men's sheds already contribute towards the achievement of the SDGs within their communities, as well as the challenges and opportunities for further championing the SDGs, became clearer. Below are some recommendations about deepening engagement with the SDGs.

6.2.1 The informal social dynamic of the men's shed provides a catalyst for men to discuss a range of issues, leading to 'health by stealth'. This is a critical factor underpinning the effectiveness of men's sheds as vehicles to promote health and wellbeing. Any initiatives to diversify or deepen the range of activities must not be allowed to undermine this key strength. Rather, this strength must be optimised by recognising the autonomy of men's sheds and by supporting shedders to learn and engage in the wider sustainability agenda according to their own interests. Working towards achieving **'sustainability by stealth'** is recommended as the best approach.

6.2.2 While recognising the primacy of the social role of men's sheds, it is recommended that the IMSA consider developing an awareness campaign and guidelines to support men's sheds that wish to engage in a more focused or targeted manner with the environmental aspects of the SDGs. These guidelines should be developed in open consultation with men's sheds. There is scope to develop inter-shed peer learning and learning from experts within and outside the men's shed movement. The 'shedcast' (webinar) may provide a useful forum to hear from experts, while the development and publication of case studies on the IMSA website, drawn from existing shed activities, would support sheds to develop aspects of sustainability awareness and practice.

6.2.3 The popularity of nesting box production as an activity within men's sheds suggests that the development of biodiversity initiatives would provide a good starting point for broadening the environmental sustainability agenda of men's sheds. It is recommended that the IMSA consider working with relevant organisations, such as those with wildlife expertise, to develop a pilot initiative focused on biodiversity conservation. This should adopt the same principles as the *Sheds for Life* programme, where men's sheds are invited to express interest in participating. The evidence that working with nature can benefit health and wellbeing also suggests a natural affinity with the core purpose of men's sheds.

6.2.4 The success enjoyed by men's sheds in health and wellbeing initiatives must be sustained and care must be taken that diversification into other areas does not lead health and wellbeing to become side-lined. Maintaining the social focus of sheds and their autonomy to decide on the activities and projects that they engage with is key to ensuring that sheds remain spaces that are conducive to social interaction and the promotion of 'health by stealth'.

6.2.5 While men's sheds are inclusive spaces that are open to all men, there may be scope in some sheds to expand the reach and extend the benefits more widely, for instance, across different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Although we found examples of younger members and participants from different cultural backgrounds, the membership tends to be dominated by older, white Irish men. There is potential to engage younger men and men from more diverse cultural backgrounds. This would strengthen the role of the men's sheds as agents of social inclusion and integration.

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## Appendix One

### Questionnaire Survey

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No

#### Activities in your men's shed

2. Please state the name/location (i.e. town/parish) of your men's shed.

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3. In the past 5 years, has your men's shed been involved in any of the activities listed below? (Please tick all that apply.)

*Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Making or installing bird boxes, bat boxes or bug hotels
- ☐ Composting
- ☐ Beekeeping
- ☐ Growing fruit & veg, and other gardening projects
- ☐ Woodwork or metal work
- ☐ Repairing broken items
- ☐ Craft projects using recycled materials
- ☐ Music (playing instruments, singing, listening to music)
- ☐ Arts (drawing, painting etc.) and crafts (e.g. basket-weaving, pottery etc.)
- ☐ Fitness classes/gym/organised walks
- ☐ Cooking
- ☐ Selling work produced by the shed (e.g. furniture, bird boxes)
- ☐ Talks by healthcare professionals on various health matters
- ☐ First aid training

4. Please specify any other activities not listed above.

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5. In relation to the activities you have ticked or mentioned above, what sources of knowledge/skills did your shed draw on? (Please tick all that apply.)

*Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Some members of the shed had particular knowledge/skills that they were able to share with others
- ☐ We brought in someone from the local community with relevant knowledge/skills
- ☐ Expert guest speakers (e.g. healthcare professionals)
- ☐ We linked up with other men's sheds who had relevant knowledge/skills
- ☐ We did our own research and learned from each other as we went along
- ☐ Resources provided by IMSA

6. Other sources of knowledge/expertise not listed above.

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7. Has your men's shed collaborated with other groups in your community?

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

8. If yes, which groups have you collaborated with?

*Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Cultural/natural heritage organisations
- ☐ Tidy towns
- ☐ Local development organisations
- ☐ Office of Public Works (OPW)
- ☐ Bird and wildlife organisations
- ☐ Local authority (county/city council)
- ☐ GAA
- ☐ Churches or schools
- ☐ Community association/parish council

9. Other groups not listed above

Follow-up

We would like to learn more about some activities/projects that respondents mention in this survey. We will be selecting approximately 10 respondents to participate in Stage 2 of the project. Your participation in Stage 2 is completely voluntary and you will be asked to indicate below whether you are interested. If you indicate that you are interested in Stage 2, you may be invited to participate in an interview (30-45 minutes) with a member of the UCC research team, to be held [in your shed or online - depending on Covid-19 situation] at a time convenient to you. This interview will be an opportunity to tell the researcher(s) more about a selected activity/project in your shed, and to explore how the activity has promoted learning, awareness and understanding of related issues among members of the shed and its wider community. This information will be used to develop case studies and academic research publications. Some of these case studies may be featured on the IMSA's website and social media, in which your shed will be named. If you are invited to participate in Stage 2, you will be asked to consult with other members of your shed to ensure that they agree to the shed being featured. At this stage, we are asking you if you would be willing to be interviewed, if selected. Even if you indicate agreement now, you are under no obligation to proceed if invited.

10. At this point in time, would you be willing to be interviewed for Stage 2 of the project, if selected? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No *Skip to section 5 (Thank you for participating in the survey.)*

11. Your name

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12. Telephone number (preferably mobile)

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13. Email address

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14. Are there any particular activities/projects in your shed that you would like to share with us in Stage 2? (please specify)

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Thank you for participating in the survey.