

Men's Sheds in Ireland

Learning through community contexts

February 2013

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Foreword from Professor Barry Golding



I sincerely congratulate Dr Carragher (Lucia) and her team on an excellent, extremely timely and very valuable research report. I predict, based on our experience with our Australian research report in 2007 when our shed sector was at a similar early stage, that this report will be downloaded, read and used very widely. We thought the growth in Australia would tail off in the hundreds. By the time this report is published in early 2013 the number of sheds in the world will be around 1,100 including well over 900 across Australia.

While the sheer numeric growth of men's sheds across Ireland (from nought to 100+ sheds in 3 years) is phenomenal and itself a measure of their rapid take up and success, the men's shed sector, communities, governments and community organisations involved in men's learning and wellbeing need evidence about who is participating and with what outcomes. This research is of a very high quality and will no doubt be written up later in many different ways for different audiences. I acknowledge here the vision, commitment and sacrifice made by John Evoy since he first recognized the potential of men's sheds and has committed himself selflessly to the cause in Ireland ever since. This is all on the back of the heroic work shedders and community workers in Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, who have dared, very successfully, to try something different.

Some of you know Irish side of the story: John emailed me while I was working in Belfast in 2008 from New Ross and said, "I've heard you are in Ireland somewhere. Can we meet up and talk about men's sheds?" This sector grew on the back of a subsequent three-hour conversation with John and colleagues at Dublin airport. Sheds have transferred so well to Ireland largely because of John's efforts to make sure the original 'cultivars', to use a botanical analogy, were grafted from good Australia shed stock. John's two visits to Australia to our national conferences were also important here.

Similarly, Lucia and her team enthusiastically picked up and ran with our idea for a men's shed research project in Ireland with the relatively small number of sheds then open in 2011 at the time of the first IMSA meeting at Moynalty Shed and the memorable launch of the Dundalk Men's Shed. By the time Lucia's team started fieldwork, there were 55 sheds across Ireland. By the time they finished in early 2013 it had doubled and only three of 32 counties did not have one. By late 2013 it will likely have quadrupled. In some small Irish counties the number of sheds per head of population has already reached similar densities as in Australia.

So why are men's sheds so successful? Why do men participate and what do they get out of them? What implications has this got for men beyond the workplace? What can governments and communities do to positively engage men in their lives beyond paid work and home? How can men from diverse (and often difficult) lives be engaged in a way that contributes to the community, helps themselves, their friends, partners, children or grandchildren and families, without being treated and patronised as customers, clients, patients or students? If this has tempted you to read on, many of the answers are in this excellent report.

Given Dr Carragher's team used many comparable research methods, we will be able to start learning from each other from sheds developed with a similar, grassroots ethos on opposite sides of the globe. Lucia and John are contributing an Irish chapter in our international book *Men learning through life* to be published by NIACE in Leicester in 2014, that this research will be invaluable for. As leading edge international researchers in learning by men in community settings, my colleagues at University of Ballarat are delighted to strongly recommend this excellent piece of very accessible and groundbreaking Irish men's shed research. You have very good reason to be proud (as we are in Australia) of what has been achieved in Ireland, and it is only very early days.

Professor Barry Golding

Associate Dean Research, School of Education and Arts, University of Ballarat, Australia
Patron, Australian Men's Sheds Association; President, Adult Learning Australia

Foreword from John Evoy



On behalf of the “Shedders” of this Island, I welcome the publication of this report and the information that it contains. The first Men’s Shed on this Island opened in Tipperary town in August 2009 and since then the concept expanded faster than we could have ever expected. During this time an enormous amount of very valuable learning has taken place and it is fantastic to now have a lot of that learning contained in this concise report.

I want to whole heartedly congratulate Dr. Lucia Carragher of the Netwell Centre at Dundalk Institute of Technology who has done a tremendous job in carrying out this research in the most professional and appropriate manner possible. In line with the ethos of the Men’s Sheds Movement the safety and the respect for the participating men was the number one yardstick throughout the entire project. It must also be recognised that Dr. Carragher was supported in her work by the team at the Netwell Centre, who I would also like to thank on behalf of the members of the Irish Men’s Sheds Association.

This research would not have been possible without the influence and guidance of Professor Barry Golding of the University of Ballarat in Victoria, Australia. He is an international leading researcher in the area of Men’s Learning and Wellbeing. He visited Ireland in 2011, and initiated this research project and he has continued to give his full support ever since. He is a model professional and a great man who it has been a pleasure to befriend over the past few years. This research would not have been possible without his earlier pioneering work.

Obviously this project could not have happened if it were not for the willingness of the men of the Men’s Sheds Movement to offer their knowledge and experience as the foundation research.

Finally, I trust that the efforts of all of those involved in the research will be rewarded by the manner in which the information contained within this report will be used to inform policy and decision making in the near future. In Men’s Sheds we have discovered a way to enhance the lives of men which is effective, sustainable and enjoyable. May this report

become the cornerstone on which the Men's Sheds Movement goes from strength to strength.

John Evoy

CEO Irish Men's Sheds Association

Acknowledgements

There are many people who contributed to the making of this report and to whom we wish to express our sincere gratitude. First of all, our thanks to the contact persons in each shed who, in addition to being an important source of knowledge of sheds in Ireland, provided invaluable practical support in assisting with the distribution, completion and return of our questionnaires.

We would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Barry Golding from the University of Ballarat in Australia for his advice and support and for permission to use the survey instruments in this research. To the Irish Men's Shed Association, and especially to John Evoy, the CEO, we extend our thanks for your co-operation and continued support throughout the research process.

Many thanks also go to Larry Torris, who carried out an internship with the Netwell Centre during an important period of this research, for his help in the recruitment process and data collection.

Finally, and most of all, we want to express our sincere gratitude to the men who participated in this research, for taking time to complete our questionnaire and/or for sharing their experiences, hopes and ideas with us in the focus groups. Their carefully considered input added so much to this final report. Ultimately, it is the men who participate in community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland who are the most important beneficiary of this research and it is our hope that this report will be accessible to and of direct benefit to them.

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Executive Summary

The growth of Men's Sheds in Ireland has been extraordinary. From the first shed in 2009 there are now over 100 sheds spread across the country and the number is growing all the time. Rich in real-world environments, community Men's Sheds offer unique learning experiences for men, especially for men who are retired and for those not in paid work. For such men, the shed is a place of belonging, a place where they can develop skills, pursue interests, engage in learning and reflect on their experiences through sense-making conversations with other men.

Within the shed, men have a sense of control over their learning which is absent in traditional settings and crucially, it is a social space. Tellingly, while just one third of men reported having a positive educational experience in school, over three-quarters are keen to access more learning opportunities in the Men's Sheds. For most, the preferred way to learn is *hands on learning* in practical situations in a group with largely, but not exclusively, other men. Other learning preferences expressed by men included, special interest courses, observational field days, in a small group, in a course to get a qualification, learning over the internet, individual tuition, in a class, by taking on a mentoring responsibility and as preparation for further study. This wide range of learning preferences expressed by participants reflected a hunger for learning which was common across all sheds.

The findings provide evidence of recent, major and difficult changes experienced by participants with regard to health, relationships and employment. Within the past five years, a third had experienced retirement, over a quarter had experienced a major health crisis and 41% had experienced unemployment. So men come to the shed for different reasons and from different starting points, but primarily they come to be with other men and to be doing things with their hands, mending, fixing building and repairing. Most are retired and a significant minority have lost their jobs, so collectively, they are all experiencing life transitions of one sort or another. For the majority, the shed provides a place to get out of the house, for some it offers the prospect of future employment, but for the vast majority it is a place of belonging. Men said they felt happier at home and a majority said their wellbeing had improved since coming to the shed.

For most men the shed is also a place where they access male health information, but our findings confirm this is not necessarily through the usual form of leaflets or classes but through the informal conversations and camaraderie that develops between the men themselves as they explore and enlarge their personal experiences. Within the shed, men are opening up to each other, they are exchanging experiences and sharing concerns and in doing so they appear to be moving beyond traditional notions of masculinity. Our findings suggest that lives are being transformed in important ways by the learning that is taking place in sheds and there are important lessons for policymakers in terms of the components

of the education system which must be supported in order to enable men's needs to take place and the wider system needs to be met.

Context and Background

Community Men's Sheds are defined by Irish Men's Shed Association (IMSA) as '*... any community-based, non-commercial organisation which is open to all men where the primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and inclusive environment where the men are able to gather and/or work on meaningful projects at their own pace, in their own time and in the company of other men and where the primary objective is to advance the health and wellbeing of the participating men*'. The development of Men's Sheds is a recent grassroots phenomenon which started in Australia and spread rapidly and very recently to other countries, including New Zealand, Canada, England and Ireland, with several other parts of Europe also showing a strong interest in such organisations. Community Men's Sheds depart in significant ways from the typical venues in which men have traditionally gathered to socialise in Ireland. Men in Ireland have typically socialised outside the home in pubs and clubs, leaving most men with less well developed social networks in later life than most women (Layte et al., 1999), and more likely to experience difficulties in accessing practical every-day services (White & Witty, 2009). While there is an extensive body of literature regarding the wellbeing of younger men, older men have received much less attention, largely because of their relative invisibility (Thompson, 1994). This study, therefore, seeks to offer an insight into the lives of older men and their learning experiences in community sheds across the island of Ireland. We explore the attitudes, behaviours and learning experiences of men participating in community-based sheds, how they make meaning out of their learning experiences, what they gain from their participation and the wider implications for communities and policymakers.

We worked in co-operation with the IMSA and with colleagues in Australia (Golding et al., 2007a), using the same instruments that were used to collect information from men participating in shed-type organisations in Australia, but with a few minor amendments to make questions appropriate for Ireland. For example, levels of education were changed. The IMSA also inserted into the questionnaire a number of additional questions in areas where it is specifically interested, mostly related to men's self perceptions of their health and wellbeing. Our study has an all-Ireland focus, with all sheds across the island of Ireland being invited to take part. It was implemented against a backdrop of a global recession and a deep financial crisis in Ireland that was preceded by nearly two decades of unparalleled growth during the 'Celtic Tiger' years in which Ireland's annual gross domestic product (GDP) was, on average, 6%. By contrast, Ireland's GDP fell by 5.2% in 2008, 9.8% in 2009 and 3% in 2010 before increasing by 1.6% in 2011 (CSO, 2012a). In 2010, under pressure from international bond markets, sharply reduced revenues and a growing budget deficit,

Ireland agreed to an €85 billion aid package from the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The terms of the EU/IMF package endorsed the Irish government's budgetary adjustment plan of €15 billion (comprised of €10 billion in expenditure savings and €5 billion in taxes) over four years, with €6 billion of this budget to be implemented in 2011, making it the toughest budget in the nation's history. And, although Ireland is currently (in 2013) meeting the targets of the EU/IMF bailout package, the pain of the austerity measures will be felt for considerable time to come. In 2012, the general government deficit stood at €13.5 billion or 8.3% of GDP and the IMF's seventh report on Ireland's performance warned that, while Ireland returned to growth in 2011, it relied exclusively on exports, with domestic demand contracting by 3.7% and public debt is still growing (IMF, 2012). Against this background, our study set out to explore the development of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland and their significance as a site of informal learning and wellbeing for older men. As such, we examine the rationales for creating informal, masculine spaces for groups of men and present a profile of sheds and the nature of the learning activities pursued in sheds as well as the experiences, benefits and outcomes for participants to facilitate our discussion.

Rationale for the Study

Despite an increasing focus within public debate on the issues surrounding men and boys, the specific needs of older men have largely been ignored (Ruxton, 2007) and, consequently, men are experiencing a range of dilemmas as they age—particularly after retirement (Golding et al., 2007). While life expectancy is rising for both men and women, the average life expectancy at birth for men in Ireland remains almost five years less than for women (CSO, 2011). Men on average also fare worse than women with regards to major diseases including cardiovascular disease and cancer (Department of Health and Children, 2008). Marked gender differences also exist in deaths due to road traffic injuries (Department of Health and Children, 2008), accidents, suicides or other external causes, with the vast majority of such deaths (73%) occurring among males (CSO, 2011b).

On a more positive note, Ireland is the first and one of very few countries (along with Australia) to have developed a national health strategy for male health (Department of Health and Children, 2008). This strategy recognises traditional masculine values such as stoicism, suppression of emotion and self-reliance and the role they play in shaping the health behaviours of men and makes a number of recommendations for the wider adoption of a gender perspective in the design and delivery of services affecting men's health, including services that address the education and learning needs of men (ibid). The findings from this research will contribute to debates regarding appropriate pedagogical methods and the best approaches to encourage and facilitate men's learning.

How well we deal with ageing is associated with the quality of life we enjoy. Some obvious events that can have a negative impact on a person's quality of life include the loss of a spouse, the onset of a disability or ill-health, or the loss of income stemming from the withdrawal from the labour market. However contextual factors such as social capital, social networks, and social participation also impact the ageing experience in important ways (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2006). For many older men, particularly those who have retired or withdrawn from paid employment, their experience is likely to be characterised by a lack of social contacts, making them more vulnerable to social isolation and less likely to receive the support they need. Golding's research in Australia found Men's Sheds to be particularly successful in attracting older men that have traditionally proved difficult to engage through conventional health, employment, and education and training initiatives (Golding et al., 2007). Participants reported that they preferred the hands-on, practical learning styles offered in shed-type organisations as opposed to other more formal educational environments, with the positive and therapeutic male context of sheds found to satisfy a wide range of needs.

This is supported by Rob Mark's research into men's learning through informal community contexts in Northern Ireland (Mark et al., 2010). Participants were unemployed, older men experiencing challenges linked to poor health, a significant loss of a loved one and dissatisfaction with life. The authors found unemployed, older people appreciated a learner-centred approach which recognised and valued previous experience and acknowledged their diverse, individual needs. Participants were, therefore, found to be more likely to engage in a programme that was confidence-building, enhanced community skills and related closely to their everyday lives (Mark et al., 2010, p.48).

This type of non-formal learning style is similar to community education in Ireland and elsewhere in that it promotes personalised learning and flexibility but, as Golding notes, what is different about shed-type organisations is that they deliberately create an area for socialisation in a men's workshop rather than providing a learning centre *per se* that is designed primarily for, and by, women (Golding et al., 2007 p.9). Lifelong learning crosses formal, informal and non-formal learning, recognising that individuals learn throughout their life and that education opportunities have traditionally been dominated by the focus on formal education. Lifelong learning is an important priority for European policymakers and is something which is strongly promoted by the EU Member States. It offers people a 'second chance' to participate in learning, especially older adults who may have had limited opportunities in this respect. In the main, lifelong learning is linked to concerns for economic competitiveness and the need to ensure high levels of labour market participation, with education and up-skilling closely linked to the needs of the labour market. It does, however, also support policy challenges associated with population ageing, social exclusion, public health and active ageing. In recognition of the wider benefits of learning, this research is deliberately directed to older men's learning in community-based Men's Sheds.

Field (2008) argues that in increasingly ageing societies as across Europe, successful participation in adult learning plays a particularly critical role, not solely in supporting individuals to adapt to the rapidly-changing requirements of the labour market, but also in helping adults lead an active and satisfying lives and maintain health, civic engagement, community resilience and a sense of or control over life. In 2060, the share of the population aged 65 years or more is projected to be 22% in Ireland (Eurostat, 2011). Debates on the economic consequences of population ageing have tended to be unduly alarmist, presenting this major achievement as a 'demographic time bomb' that will deplete available public resources. In practice, all countries in Europe will experience similar demographic trends, albeit with considerable differences, for example the over 65 year old population will reach 25% and 36% in the UK and Denmark respectively during the same period (ibid). The concern about meeting future demands on care services and pensions is linked to corresponding changes in the age dependency ratio. At present, there are four workers for every one pensioner but this is projected to decline to 1.5 workers per pensioner in 2060 (Eurostat, 2011). In the UK, the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, set up to examine the challenges the UK will face over the next 20 years and beyond, identifies the importance of encouraging older people to engage more in learning and refers to '*unlocking the mental capital of older people*', with particular emphasis being placed on learning that takes place in social settings (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008 p.34). This research into older men's learning is therefore timely, even more so given the challenges of maintaining and improving wellbeing in the face of ongoing difficulties linked to Ireland's financial crisis, something which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Older men will remember the spectre of mass emigration that haunted Ireland in the recession in the 1980s and the subsequent decline in traditional male work areas that occurred as Ireland experienced a painful period of adjustment to international competition. This, coupled with the growth of service sector jobs, changed the nature of work and many found their skills no longer matched the requirements of the labour market (Cleary et al., 2004; Golding et al., 2007a). Added to this, the changes to the family, including a rise in divorce and separation, cohabitation and the trend towards people living by themselves, have all increased the stressors for mid-life and older men. Some authors argue that men in mid-life are part of the 'buffer' generation, caught between the traditional generation of their fathers, characterised by silent, strong, austere masculinity and the more progressive, open and individualistic generation of their sons, not knowing which of these ways of life and masculine cultures to follow (Wyllie et al., 2012).

Though many men cope with the challenges associated with life transitions, many others do not. A report commissioned by the Samaritans notes that approximately 3,000 middle-aged men across the UK and Ireland take their own lives each year, with men from deprived areas being ten times more likely to do so than men from high socio-economic backgrounds living in the most affluent areas (Wyllie et al., 2012). The authors point to the challenges faced by

mid-life men, resulting from the decline of traditional male industries and argue that this has led not only to the loss of employment, but also to the feeling of masculine pride and identity. McGivney (1999) also argued that working-class masculinities are rooted in manual labour and that this, in turn, increases the challenges faced by men whose skills are no longer required and who lack the economic and wider social benefits of education to help themselves better adjust to a change in their circumstances.

Study Objectives & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the learning by older men aged 45+ years participating in community Men's Sheds in Ireland. This is important for a number of reasons not least because it supports a better understanding of the challenges and the positives experienced by male older learners. In addition, if men can learn effectively in informal shed-type organisations, this can help improve the quality of life of older men and support the development of a greater responsiveness of education policies and services aimed at the needs of older men.

The primary objectives of the study were:

- to find out about older men's experiences of, and preferences for, learning;
- to identify the reasons why older men make certain decisions about participating in learning;
- to examine the factors that motivate and obstruct older men's participation in learning; and
- to influence policy discussion and policy making on issues which concern older men's learning in Ireland.

Specific questions that the study addressed included:

- Who are the participants of men's sheds, what are the reasons for participation and what are the outcomes?
- What shapes the attitudes of older men towards learning beyond the workplace?
- What is the relationship between participation in informal learning in sheds and wellbeing outcomes among older men?
- What can be done to positively re-engage older men in learning through community engagement?

What are Community-Based Men's Sheds?

'A men's shed is any community-based, non-commercial organisation which is open to all men where the primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and inclusive environment where the men are able to gather and/or work on meaningful projects at their own pace, in their own time and in the company of other men and where the primary objective is to advance the health and wellbeing of the participating men'

(Irish Men's Shed Association).

As the above description implies, Men's Sheds are informal learning spaces where men are encouraged to come together and undertake meaningful leisure activities. As a concept, there is nothing remarkable about men meeting informally. In Ireland, men have long gathered together in clubs and pubs as well as after church on a Sunday and at football matches to talk and to share ideas and discuss life in general. But combining this social chat with 'men's work'—manual work that involves fixing, building and repairing—is a new idea. The strength and speed with which diverse men and communities have embraced this idea in each of the countries where it has been introduced is reflected in the growing number of sheds.

The Origins and Spread of Community Men's Sheds

As a movement, Men's Sheds started in Australia when the first such organisation opened its doors in the mid-1990s. Since then, nearly 1,000 community-based Men's Sheds have sprung up in urban and rural settings across Australia. The findings from Professor Barry Golding's research suggests Australian sheds are located in workshop-type spaces, varying in size and funding sources, reflecting the organisation that runs them, the community in which they are embedded and the programmes they pursue (Golding et al., 2007a). Following a similar pattern, the Men's Sheds movement continues to grow in New Zealand, Canada, the UK but nowhere as rapidly as in Ireland. The first community Men's Shed in Ireland was set up in Tipperary in 2009 and, as at 31 January 2013, there were 101 sheds registered with the IMSA, each with its own identity and purpose. Some of the Irish sheds have developed with support from local Family Resource Centres (FRCs). These are state funded organisations designed to 'combat disadvantaged communities and improve the functioning of the family' through a bottom-up approach that involves local communities tackling the problems they face, thus creating partnerships between voluntary and statutory agencies.¹ In all, there are 107 FRCs located in disadvantaged communities throughout the Republic of Ireland and, during 2011, a total of 11 Men's Sheds were established by FRCs (FSA, 2011). In addition, a high proportion (40%) of enquires to the IMSA regarding setting up sheds come from FRCs (IMSA, 2011).

Other sheds are developing with the support of Local Development Companies (LDCs), sometimes referred to as Local Area Partnerships, LEADER Partnerships or Integrated Development Companies.² Like FRCs, LDCs are state funded organisations and they are designed to work with community groups in identifying their needs and developing local solutions but they are more broadly focussed, supporting employment creation, and access

¹ Further details can be obtained from the Family Resource Centre National Forum, a support network that represents the views of all FRCs in Ireland, see <http://www.familyresource.ie/>.

² Further information on LDCs in Ireland can be obtained from the Irish Local Development Network, the representative body of LDCs, see <http://www.ildn.ie/>.

to education, training and lifelong learning. There are 51 such organisations located in disadvantaged communities throughout the Republic of Ireland, delivering a range of programmes on behalf of the state. A number of LDCs have included Men's Sheds in their development plans and about 30% of enquiries to the IMSA regarding setting up sheds come from LDCs (IMSA, 2011). While many sheds have clearly received support to help them get started, many others have not and have been set up by groups of men who do not have any agency connections.

The present study marks the first attempt to systematically gather data on Men's Sheds in Ireland. Such data are important and timely for a number of reasons. Firstly, it can be used to build a profile of the men who participate in sheds so that those who manage or support them can plan on the basis of participants' needs and preferences, and also, more generally, inform men of the diverse backgrounds and interests of those who frequent sheds. Secondly, data can provide potential funders of sheds with evidence to support funding of an early intervention approach and, equally, to provide a basis for further research about men's learning and men's wellbeing. Finally, data can inform health and social care professionals as well as adult and community education about potential learning opportunities for men, particularly for disengaged men through the Men's Sheds. Golding's research involving participants of shed-type organisations in Australia suggests that learning informally is important to men's networking and is particularly attractive to working class men, tradesmen, farmers and men who have retired (Golding et al., 2007a; Golding et al., 2009). In a more general sense, given what we now know about the social determinants of health, and given that gender is a social construct which varies according to the roles, norms and values of any given society, educationalists agree that it is increasingly important to articulate clearly the benefits and outcomes of adult learning (Field, 2011; Golding et al., 2009).

Definition of Learning; Formal, Informal and Non-Formal

Before reviewing the literature, it may be helpful to define what we mean by formal, informal and non-formal learning. 'Formal learning' is structured in terms of its content, scheduling, organisation and financing; 'informal learning' is not structured and any learning that takes place is incidental and non-formal learning is organised, but is outside the formal education sector and does not lead to a qualification (Werqun, 2007). Informal learning comes from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is neither organised nor structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support and, consequently, from the learner's perspective, the learning which occurs is largely unintentional. Non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities and, while not always explicitly designated as learning in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support, nonetheless

usually contains an important learning element meaning, from the learner's point of view, learning is usually explicit (Cedefop, 2009, pp.73-75).

Literature Review: Context for Older Men's Learning in Ireland

Population Ageing

Ireland has an ageing population and similar demographic changes are happening throughout the world, albeit with clear differences across countries. Globally, life expectancy increased from 48 years in 1950 to 68 years in 2005, and it is expected to rise to 75 years by 2050 (Beard et al., 2011). In 2010, there were 1.5 million (1,578,272) people over 45 years of age living in Ireland, an increase of nearly half a million (460,590) on figures for 1996. The shift in age structure will see the ratio of working-age people to pensioners decrease significantly in the years ahead, thereby increasing the demand for public services, including pensions and wider health and social services. The ageing populations pose many challenges for governments and the situation has been exacerbated by the 2008 global economic crisis which has severely impacted labour markets. Older (and younger) workers and those with low skills have been particularly badly affected, with these groups now making up a large proportion of the unemployed. Across the EU, concerted efforts are being made to re-engage disengaged individuals with the labour so that they can contribute to future growth and social cohesion.

'Europe 2020', the EU's growth strategy for employment, productivity and social cohesion, aims to achieve a 75% employment rate across the EU for those aged 20-64 years old (European Commission, 2010). Ireland's national target for employment in the 20-64 year old age group is 69-71%, including through the greater participation of older workers and low-skilled workers (Government of Ireland, 2011). But, as an indication of the severity of the economic crisis in Ireland, unemployment rates have been rising rather than falling, with the number of people unemployed in April 2011 standing at 424,843, an increase of 136.7% on April 2006 (CSO, 2012b). Moreover, employment rates vary considerably across groups, education levels and gender, with older and younger men fairing much worse than women. In April 2011, the unemployment rate for men aged between 45-54 years old was 18.8%, compared to 12.1% for women of the same age group and for young men aged between 20-24 years old, the unemployment rate was 41.1% compared to 27.9% for women of that age.

A central part of Europe's strategy for growth is focused on the development of people's skills across the lifecycle with a view to increasing labour participation and to better match labour supply and demand. Research, however, shows that older men are less likely to have access to training and development opportunities than younger workers, and they are also less likely to take part in learning even when presented with the opportunity to do so. At 8.1%, the share of 25-34 year olds participating in education and training in Ireland in late 2010 was almost double that of 35-44 year olds (4.2%), just under 3% of 45-54 year olds and a negligible share of those aged over 55 years old (1%) (Condon & McNaboe, 2011). While no single theory can satisfactorily explain men's participation and non-participation in

learning (McGivney, 1990), previous research has identified strong negative views about school experiences, issues linked to masculinity, changing gender roles and the perception of a gradual feminisation of adult education, as some of the main reasons for male disengagement (Owens, 2000; Golding et al., 2007a; AONTAS, 2009; Lalor et al., 2009). This research considers the learning needs and outcomes for older men participating in Men's Sheds in Ireland. Insofar as Men's Sheds are community spaces for hands-on activities and, given the demographic trajectory towards an older population, studying the lived experiences of men, how they make choices to engage in learning, the factors they consider and a recognition and appreciation of their experiences, will help inform our understanding not only of the benefits of learning but also the most effective places and pedagogies and ways to reach out to men across the life course.

Older Men and Work

The Irish labour market remained predominantly male-based up until the 1970s, after which time the nature of work changed considerably and the male breadwinner model gave way to the one-and-a-half or dual earner household model (Ikeda, 2007). At the time of Ireland's entry to the EU in 1973, industries that relied on domestic markets, such as agriculture, furniture, clothing, footwear, and tobacco were performing well, reflecting buoyant domestic demand, but these indigenous industries suffered severe contraction in the 1980s when the Irish economy entered a period of prolonged recession as it adjusted to international competition, particularly European integration. Between 1980 and 1987, employment in the furniture market declined by 25%, in metal articles by 33%, and in dairy products by 25% (O'Donnell, 1998). Within the agriculture sector, there were an estimated 230,000 full-time farmers in Ireland in the 1970s. By 2015, it is predicted that this figure will drop to 40,000 (CSO, 2011d). The average family farm is currently just 32.7 hectares (CSO, 2011d). It is, perhaps, quite telling that only 13% of Irish farmers are under 35 years of age (Williams, 2009).

Since 2008, Ireland has experienced a deep financial crisis linked to a global economic downturn, resulting in widespread job losses. The national unemployment rate in Ireland soared from approximately 4% in 2006 to 14.6% in December 2012 (CSO, 2013). Against this backdrop of rising unemployment, increasing levels of personal debt, a collapsed housing market and a return to emigration, long-term (and by implication older workers, particularly men) may represent the hidden crisis of the ongoing recession. There is a danger that, even when employment starts to pick up again, many older men may find their skills are not suited to available jobs, such was the case in the 1980s when employment among older men fell by approximately 30%. Although employment among older men grew during the 'Celtic Tiger' years, it has been on a much smaller scale compared with the substantial loss of older workers from the workforce in the preceding decades (Basten et al.,

2002). For example, in 2011, the employment rate for men aged between 50-60 years old was 64.1%, but this represented a decrease on the figure for 1995 which was 66%.

With the growing number of people losing their jobs, older workers currently account for a relatively small proportion of the unemployed and, therefore, appear to be doing better than younger workers. In 2012, 57% of long-term unemployed persons were aged between 25-44 years old, with older workers accounting for just 28% (Sexton, 2012). On closer inspection, however, the gender differences are clear with men – both older and younger – fairsing worse on average than women. For example in 2011, unemployment amongst men stood at 17.5% while for women the rate was 10.4%; long-term unemployment stood at 10.4% for men while for women it was 4.5% (CSO, 2011b). The question of whether or not some of these changes reflect permanent changes in work patterns rather than the recession remain to be seen, but available evidence suggests that this may very well be the case. Older workers face additional challenges because their skills may have become devalued or they find it more difficult to retrain or receive help in finding new jobs (OECD, 2011) and, once out of work, it is much harder for older workers, particularly men, to find a job again.

Basten et al., (2002) discuss the changes in Ireland's labour market during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and note how many European countries, faced with economic recession and labour market challenges, devised policies to encourage older workers to retire early from employment, frequently with the explicit aim of creating job opportunities for the younger unemployed. They point out that this effectively led to a large-scale exit of over 55 year olds from the labour market. Parallel to this, Ireland's entry to the EU in 1973 prompted the removal of restrictive legislation, including the removal of the marriage bar for women in public service jobs (1993) and the introduction of stronger equality legislation. These changes coincided with changes in economic activity towards the service sector, characterised by 'flexible' working conditions which proved more attractive to women than men through the opportunity of more part-time and short-term work that, in turn, allowed women, particularly those with caring responsibilities, to juggle paid work with caring responsibilities in the home. The combined effect of these changes had a significant increase in women's participation in paid work, which increased from just over one third in 1970s (Pissarides et al., 2005) to 56% in 2011 (CSO, 2011b).

A number of other interrelated factors combined to accelerate the pace of change to families and gender relations in recent decades. These include declining rates of marriage, more children born outside marriage, rising divorce rates, a growing number of lone parents and a shift towards a more individualised family life. Such changes have been compounded by free market and neo-liberalist policies which have created a greater role for private enterprise and market competition in public services, fostering a culture of consumerism that impacted negatively on levels of income, inequality and social cohesion. As Eckersley (2005) points out, individualism was intended to enable us to live our lives the way we want,

to loosen the chains of religious dogma, class oppression, and gender and ethnic discrimination, but *'just as the reality of commitment differs from the ideal, so the reality of freedom differs from its ideal, especially when it is taken too far or is misinterpreted'* (2005, 254). The fall-out from the financial crisis that has seen the number of families living in negative equity in Ireland increase sharply in the face of growing unemployment and relentless austerity measures by government as they struggle to repay Ireland's growing debt, is an example of freedom (i.e. lax regulation) taken too far.

The neo-liberalist stance evident in varying degrees in countries across the EU seeks to create a workforce that is *'more adaptable to business needs'* (Robertson, 1986). In Ireland, this includes a combination of targeted interventions to up-skill low-skilled workers in the workforce alongside a major institutional reconfiguration of employment and benefit services designed to promote access to education and training for the unemployed through activation policies that reduce or cease benefit payments of claimants who fail to engage in skills-training/employment plan. However, such an approach underestimates the nature of the learning needs of disengaged individuals and of older men in particular and, more importantly, it offers no insight into what caused the learning breakdown or why disengaged older learners have been excluded from the system.

Government Policy on Adult Education in Ireland

Government policy on adult education in Ireland is set out in the White Paper, Learning for Life published in 2000 (Department of Education and Science, 2000,). This paper recognises the importance of learning across the life span, defining adult education as *'systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training'* (p.12) and identifies six priority areas for development: Consciousness Raising; Citizenship; Cohesion; Competitiveness; Cultural Development; and Community Building.

A newly established body SOLAS (Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna) now undertakes the functions carried out by (the now defunct training agency), FÁS, together the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills. Within this new structure, responsibility for programmes such as the community employment schemes previously managed by FÁS will now largely be delivered by Vocational Education Committees (VECs)³ under the overall management of the Department of Social Protection while further education and training areas are the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills. VECs will continue to provide a range of adult and community education courses which cater for the literacy, numeracy and ICT needs of adults.

³ VECs are statutory local education providers of some secondary education, most adult education and a very small amount of primary education in the state.

The new structure is heavily focussed on meeting the needs of the labour market. Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn said SOLAS will train far fewer construction workers than its predecessor and will instead provide courses that relate to new industries where jobs will be created. The minister added, unemployed people would be entitled to their benefits providing they take up a training course with SOLAS.

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation across Ireland, has highlighted that, at a time when sweeping cuts are being made across the board to adult education, demand for adult education in Ireland is, in fact, rising in line with the increase in unemployment following the collapse of the Irish economy. While those in higher education undertaking first degree level do not currently pay fees, part-time and distance learning courses must be financed by learners who are usually adults of mature age. Although unemployed individuals can claim a 'Back to Education Allowance', the maintenance grant attached to this allowance has been withdrawn by the government, leading to further hardship for adult learners. Thus while the education system contains many provisions to encourage adult learning, the reality is that resources are not sufficient enough to achieve this goal and make learning widely accessible for all adults. AONTAS points out that access to part-time educational opportunities continues to be limited particularly for those on low incomes and for whom grants are unavailable for part-time education. In addition, at 23%, participation in non-formal education in Ireland remains well below the EU average of 33%, meaning Ireland ranks 20th among the twenty seven EU Member States. Participation rates are highest for people aged 25-34 years old (11%), decreasing with age to a rate of 1% for those aged 65-74 years old.

The on-going issues linked to participation in learning suggest that there is not enough attention paid to the nature of the barriers older men face in accessing learning opportunities, the causes of these barriers and how they present themselves. Golding's research with adults in community contexts in Australia confirms older men's desire to learn, but not through "off-the-rack' training courses' (Golding et al., 2007 p.17). Golding found Men's Sheds to be particularly successful in attracting older men who have proved difficult to engage and he adds that sheds produce non-vocational benefits such as positive health, happiness and wellbeing for participants, their partners, families and communities, rather than direct vocational pathways to work.

Gender Differences and Inequalities in Education

Both developed and developing countries experience gender differences and inequalities in education, including in terms of subject preferences and performance, attendance behaviour and experiences of learning and training. A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012 p.4) points out that girls are less likely than boys to start secondary education in Western, Eastern and Middle Africa and

Southern Asia. On the other hand, enrolment is generally not an issue of OECD countries because of compulsory education up to the age of 15-16 years old, but boys are more likely to leave secondary education early, particularly in the high-income countries. As a result, young women are increasingly better educated than young men in many OECD countries (ibid).

A report in the series *Women and Men in Ireland*, produced by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2011b), notes that the percentage of both men and women aged 25-34 with a third-level qualification in Ireland increased over the period 2002-2011. For men, the percentage with a third-level qualification increased from 31.2% in 2002 to 39.1% in 2011, a rise of 7.9% since 2002. For women, the increase was considerably larger, rising from 37.5% in 2002 to 53.1% in 2011, an increase of 15.6%. In addition, while 26.6% of women aged 35-64 had at most lower secondary education in 2011, the percentage of men in this age group having at most lower secondary education in 2011 was 32.6%. Beyond this, just over a third of women (34.4%) aged 35-64 had third-level education compared with 31.2% of men (ibid).

Older men tend not to avail of opportunities to engage in learning (McGivney, 1990; Owens, 2000; Golding et al., 2009) and, in fact, evidence confirms that their participation in education and training actually diminishes rapidly over the life cycle (O'Connor, 2007, p.9). Well over half (60.3%) of all men aged over 45 in Ireland left school after completing just primary or secondary level; 12.7% left school having attained a technical or vocational qualification or completed an apprenticeship; and 2.2% have no formal education (CSO, 2012c). It is, perhaps, telling, that only 19.5% of men in Ireland over the age of 45 have a higher education qualification.⁴ Looking across the diverse range of lifelong learning⁵ (which includes figures for formal education only), women outnumber men across all further and adult education courses provided through the Department of Education and Science and VECs. In late 2010, men accounted for 48% of lifelong learners in Ireland and women accounted for 52% (Condon & McNaboe, 2011).

Social class remains one of the strongest predictors of educational achievement with people from lower socio-economic backgrounds being less likely to enter higher education and more likely to have a less positive experience of the education system in general (Maxwell & Dorrity, 2009). Hirsch (2007) argues educational achievement is strongly influenced by the attitudes to learning, and these attitudes start developing from an early age. He provides supporting evidence from a number of studies, including one in Northern Ireland (Horan, 2007) which found that boys as young as nine or ten years old became very disenchanted from school and started to disengage. This process was seen to be prompted by the

4 Higher education is defined as holding any of the following: a higher certificate; ordinary bachelor degree or national diploma; honours bachelor degree, professional qualification or both; postgraduate diploma or degree; doctorate (PhD) or higher.

5 Lifelong Learning has been defined by the European Commission as: "all learning activity undertaken through-out life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (CEC, 2001, p.9).

interactions between the educational disadvantages faced by children growing up in poverty, the difficulties for teachers working in disadvantaged schools, and differences in the ways boys and girls are socialised, with the result being that the education system is seen to fail boys in particular. Teachers' behaviour was also shown to vary depending on the type of school, with children in disadvantaged schools complaining they were shouted at by their teachers, whereas those in more advantaged schools did not mention this. Hirsch argues disadvantaged children are less likely to do well at school and that this feeds into disadvantages they experience in later life which, in turn, affects their children. He concludes that an over-arching aim of the education system should be to create a learning atmosphere with better adult-student relationships.

The implications of social inequalities in educational attainment pervade all spheres of life *'and most notably to life itself'* (Millar, 2008, p.101). Evidence from the Institute for Public Health of Ireland points to the strong positive relationship between education and health outcomes whether measured by death rates (mortality), illness (morbidity), health behaviours or health knowledge (Higgins et al., 2008). The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA, 2011) confirms that older men who have received higher education tend to live longer, to experience better health outcomes and to practice health-promoting behaviours such as exercising regularly, refraining from smoking, and going for screening for prostate cancer. Education is also a powerful predictor of earnings, with evidence across OECD countries highlighting that men with university-level degrees are 18% more likely to find jobs than those with only a secondary school diploma, and women are 32% more likely (OECD, 2013). There are also important spill-over benefits beyond the individual to society, with those who have higher levels of education more likely to volunteer, more likely to take a greater interest in politics and more likely to vote (Higgins et al., 2008; TILDA, 2011).

Gender and Masculinity

Gender is *'the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men'* (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 3c). This definition by the Council of Europe recognises gender as a social construct, rather than as a distinction grounded in biology. In other words, gender identify is something we learn, and we do so from an early age through the gender messages and expectations that surround us via family, community, religion, media etc: *'by age five, most children have learned to be boys or girls: to play with trucks or dolls; to wear blue or pink; to strike out or to cry'* (PAHO, 1997). Masculinity is thus culturally and historically constructed on the norms that regulate male identity and behaviour, providing the basis for gender role assignment (Ikeda, 2007). In Ireland, this was exemplified in the strong male breadwinner *'traditional family – of father as breadwinner and mother at home looking after house and children'* (Daly & Clavero, 2002, p.14). Such gender role assignment prescribe cultural norms regarding what it means to be a 'man' and how men should behave, such as being

tough and strong, both physically and emotionally (Ikeda, 2007). Harland (2009) notes gender role assignment encourages men to reject, as feminine, a wide range of characteristics that are simply part of normal human behaviour. In turn, men's internalised interpretation of masculinity makes it difficult for them to acknowledge their emotional needs and perpetuates the stereotypical myth that it is only acceptable for women to possess and express emotions (ibid).

The past decade has seen many significant changes which have compounded the stressors for mid-life and older men, including changes in the nature of work carried out by men and women, a rise in divorce and separation, cohabitation and the trend towards people living by themselves. Some authors argue men in mid-life are part of the 'buffer' generation, caught between the traditional generation of their fathers, characterised by silent, strong, austere masculinity and the more progressive, open and individualistic generation of their sons, not knowing which of these ways of life and masculine cultures to follow (Wyllie et al., 2012). Though many men cope with the challenges associated with life transitions, many others do not. This can be seen in the growing body of evidence pointing to poor health outcomes of men relative to women. Men also fare worse than women in relation to major diseases, road traffic injuries (Department of Health and Children, 2008) and suicides (CSO, 2011b).

Men's attitudes towards and perceptions of masculinity and its impact on their health, social and learning is complex and diverse. Owens' (2003) study of barriers to male participation in education and training found that male identity in today's world emerged as a central concern in the lives of participants. The findings point towards a contradiction between a narrowly defined stereotypical perception of masculinity and the reality of older men's everyday experiences which for many leads to increased isolation as they age. Wilson and Cordier (2013) are concerned that the health and wellbeing benefits of Men's Sheds as supportive and socially inclusive environments for health will not be incorporated into future male health policy and practice. They call for more research on the health and wellbeing benefits of Men's Sheds and note that this needs to incorporate social determinants of health and wellbeing within the study designs to enable comparison against other health promotion research.

Methods

The aim of this research was to explore the learning that takes place by older men in community Men's Sheds in Ireland, identify the initiatives undertaken in sheds, by whom, for what reasons and with what outcomes. In addition, as this is the first such study of Men's Sheds in Ireland, our research also sought to yield information on the community sheds: where they are located?; how they are funded?; how long have they have been in operation?; how many days a week they are open?; and what criteria (if any) are used for membership? The majority of the fieldwork was carried out between May 2012 and November 2012, but returned questionnaires were accepted until 15 January 2013.

The Sample

All sheds registered with the IMSA were invited to take part. On commencement of the fieldwork in May 2012, this amounted to 55 sheds but, over the course of data collection, the number of sheds increased over time and, as it did, we amended our sample size accordingly. By September 2012, there were 73 registered sheds and by November 2012 it was closer to 100. An initial telephone call and/or email was made to sheds, but this did not always yield results. Any shed where four attempts to make contact were unsuccessful was disregarded from the sample. In all, we successfully contacted the representatives for 66 sheds. Of these, 52 sheds agreed to take part, with the actual number of surveys distributed to sheds determined by the representative for each shed, depending on membership. A total of 445 questionnaires were distributed to 52 sheds.

Recruitment

To inform the sheds about our study, we posted details of the research on the website of the IMSA. The effects of the poster on the IMSA website were to develop widespread community awareness and interest in the research, and this continued throughout the period of study. Several enquires were made about the research from other countries, including enquires about participation. It is quite unlikely that this level of ongoing interest would have continued without the attention directed to the research by the IMSA website. The IMSA Shed Representatives' Meeting in June 2012 was also a valuable opportunity to publicise the research. Several of the participants mentioned that that was how they became aware of the study. However, shed representatives were by far the most effective means of 'getting the word out' and also as a means of facilitating the fieldwork. Each shed representative was contacted by telephone in order to provide them with details of this study. In our request for co-operation, we explained who we were, what the study was about, its purpose and timeframe, what would be expected of participants, how their

identity and responses would be protected, and what the shed representative was being asked to do i.e. to ask permission to recruit study participants and to facilitate the fieldwork. Table 1, below, presents a summary of *all* sheds registered with the IMSA as at 24 January 2013, organised by county and province.

Table 1: Sheds registered with IMSA, 24 January 2013

Provinces/Counties	Population		Number of sheds
ULSTER			
Antrim	607,852		3
Armagh	112,410		2
Cavan	73,183		1
Derry	200,480		0
Down	389,413		1
Donegal	161,137		5
Fermanagh	91,199		0
Monaghan	60,483		2
Tyrone	201,708		0
		1,955,234	14 (13.8%)
CONNACHT			
Galway	250,653		4
Leitrim	31,796		0
Mayo	130,638		4
Roscommon	64,065		1
Sligo	65,393		4
		542,547	13 (12.8%)
LEINSTER			
Carlow	54,612		4
Dublin	1,273,069		6
Kildare	210,312		4
Kilkenny	95,419		1
Laois	80,559		2
Longford	39,000		0
Louth	122,897		4
Meath	184,135		5
Offaly	76,687		1
Westmeath	86,164		1
Wexford	145,320		10
Wicklow	136,640		4
		2,504,814	42 (41.5%)
MUNSTER			
Clare	117,196		1
Cork	519,032		16
Kerry	145,502		7
Limerick	191,809		4
Tipperary	158,754		2
Waterford	113,795		2
		1,246,088	32 (31.6%)
TOTAL	6,399,115*		101

*This figure includes the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 4,588,252 in 2011 (CSO, 2012), and Northern Ireland, with a population 1,810,863 in 2011 (NISRA, 2012).

As can be seen from Table 1, only three counties do not have a community men's shed—Leitrim, Longford and Tyrone. Most counties have one or more sheds but the largest concentration of sheds is in the south and the east in Leinster and Munster (Appendix 4 for location of *all* sheds in Ireland). This reflects the birth place of sheds in Ireland, in Tipperary town, Munster and growth outwards, with County Cork having the highest number of registered sheds (n=16). The founding member of the IMSA, John Evoy, is from County Wexford in the neighbouring province of Leinster, which has 10 sheds, the second highest number of sheds in any county in Ireland. As noted earlier, some sheds are linked to FRCs or LDCs, designed to support the development of strong communities and address economic and social disadvantage but many have no agency connections and have been set up by groups of men acting alone. In general, sheds in Ireland are directed at men living in the community; men of all ages, with and without skills, employed, unemployed and retired.

The Surveys/Focus Groups

Our methodological approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods based on instruments developed by Professor Barry Golding and his colleagues to facilitate a study of men's learning in sheds type organisations in Australia (Golding et al., 2007a; Golding et al., 2009). Two quantitative survey data instruments were adapted from Golding et al. (2007a & 2009). One survey was designed to collect data on sheds—this was completed by the shed representative/person in charge in each shed—and the other was designed to collect data from the men participating in the sheds (Appendix 1). Both instruments were customised to include the name of the shed on the survey. The participants' survey included questions which were designed to profile men participating in sheds, in particular to determine their perceptions about their experiences and the anticipated outcomes, reasons for being involved, demographic and educational profile, recent life and employment transitions as well as current learning opportunities, preferences and experiences. Minor amendments were made to the participants' questionnaire to fit the experience of men in Ireland – e.g., Golding et al. (2007) contained a question enquiring whether the respondent was 'an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander'.

Questions were structured, including some multiple-choice questions for which respondents were either invited to select *one* or more responses only. Other questions were presented as a set of statements, with participants asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with individual statements on a likert type scale. Instead of the usual 5-point scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' on one end to 'strongly disagree' on the other with 'neither agree nor disagree' in the middle, a 4-point scale was used to produce an ipsative

measure where no indifferent option was available. Ipsative measures are also known as ‘forced choice’ measures because they force participants to select a response (e.g., for learning preferences) and all other options are ranked accordingly. Critics argue this constrains choice and that responses are not independent preferences but relative to the other ranked variables in the set, which means data generated cannot be compared across participants (Coffield et al., 2004). However, proponents would argue that forced-choice instruments eliminate social desirability response bias and is the most direct way to provide information on learning and they point out that that it is the way people actually make choices in life; choosing one thing means you cannot have another (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

We added a number of health related questions over and above that which were included in the original instrument by Golding et al.(2007). Self-rated physical health was assessed using a standard question: *Would you say your health is - very good; good; fair; bad; very bad?* To eliminate the influence of physical health factors on social functioning (Stewart et al., 1988), we asked participants to assess the extent to which their health in the past 4 weeks had limited their social activities: *During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time have any physical health issues interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends, relatives, etc.)?* Responses included: *all the time; most of the time; some of the time; a little of the time; none of the time.* We also asked questions about participants’ mental health in order to allow for a more precise approximation of participants’ emotional state: *During the past 4 weeks, how much has your emotional health problems interfered with your normal social activities?* *All the time; most of the time; some of the time; a little of the time; none of the time.* We also used a short three-item, reliable and valid, loneliness scale to measure overall loneliness (Hughes et al., 2004): (1) *How often do you feel that you lack companionship? Hardly ever; some of the time; often.* (2) *How often do you feel left out? Hardly ever; some of the time; often.* (3) *How often do you feel isolated from others? Hardly ever; some of the time; often.* Socio-demographic questions included: age group, highest level education, marital status, and highest level of education (Appendix 2).

The qualitative component of the study included participant observation—with all visits to sheds presenting opportunities for the research to observe what happens in sheds—and in-depth focus group interviews to allow older men to talk about their lives, their particular circumstances and learning experiences, and their interpretation of these experiences within the context and culture of community Men’s Sheds (Appendix 3 for details of focus group questions). As noted earlier, learning is taken to encompass the non-formal and informal activities and interactions in sheds - the social, educational, psychological, practical and physical aspects of participation, as interpreted by the men themselves. We visited sheds to conduct in-depth focus group interviews and to observe what happens in sheds, in line with an ‘*interpretive and naturalistic approach*’ which holds that researchers need to study things in their natural settings in order to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000 p. 3).

Over the course of the fieldwork, we conducted five different focus groups, involving 40 fully informed and consenting men, with discussions lasting approximately 90 minutes. The focus groups were designed to give participants the opportunity to speak at length about what they do in the sheds and what they get out of participation. The focus groups proved to be particularly beneficial for observing how participants engaged in dialogue with their peers and how they shared ideas, opinions and experiences.

Analysis

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim (permission was granted by all respondents), with field notes used to aid the recording process. The field notes were an important aid for transcription of audio tapes, particularly where more than one person spoke at a time, helping to verify the transcribed texts and preserve the meaning of what was said. The transcribed texts were then analysed according to the parameters of the research objectives and influenced by Grounded Theory techniques and procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcribed texts were examined for prominent themes and given a code according to a wider phenomenon evident in the data. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive frequencies generated in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing this research, a detailed proposal was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee, School of Health and Science, Dundalk Institute of Technology. All participants were informed of aims and objectives of this research and what was being asked of them. In addition, contact details of the researcher and the Ethics Committee in Dundalk Institute were included on the questionnaires should further clarification be required by participants at any stage during the fieldwork.

Limitations of Study

The possibility of self-selection bias among sheds cannot be ruled out. Since community-based Men's Sheds is a recent phenomenon in Ireland, those sheds which have been open longest may have been more motivated to respond to the survey than sheds that have opened more recently.

This is the first study of its kind in Ireland, with participants drawn from across the island of Ireland. The results will, therefore, provide much needed information on older men's learning in Ireland and will also lay the foundation for further investigations to come. It is

however, a one-time snapshot of the learning experiences and outcomes for men participating in community-based Men's Sheds. A longitudinal study that follows a cohort of men year-to-year could provide a unique insight into how the learning needs and experiences of older men change over time as they adjust to their new informal/non-formal learning space and what factors affect outcomes. This would build upon the existing literature (e.g., Golding et al., 2007; Golding et al., 2009; Owens, 2000; McGivney, 2003) that suggests older men face key challenges that impede access to learning.

The in-depth focus groups carried out as part of this study generated a large volume of qualitative data. The themes that emerged from the conversations were enlightening, but also raised more questions about adjusting to changes. Thus, a promising avenue for future research would involve undertaking a case-study approach to explore the experiences of older men. This could include observations of, and interviews with, men in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of how different factors interact in the men's learning experiences and to discuss elements of successful learning.

Results

A total of 52 community-based Men's Sheds participated in this study and were administered the survey instruments. This included an organisation questionnaire and a participant questionnaire for the men participating in the sheds. A total of 455 participant questionnaires were distributed to 52 sheds. Of the 52 invited sheds, 30 sheds (57.6%) returned their organisation questionnaires (n=30). In terms of participant questionnaires, 347 participant questionnaires were returned (n=347), of which 50 were incomplete and therefore excluded from analysis, giving a response rate of 65.2%. This is a very good response rate, with aggregate response rates of between 60 to 62 per cent considered acceptable in most statistical surveys undertaken in Ireland (Watson & Williams, 2003).

Responses by Region, Location and Shed Size Configuration

Of the 297 respondents included in this study, most (42%) were from Leinster where a majority share of the State's population resides (encompassing County Carlow, Dublin, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois, Longford, Louth, Meath, Offaly, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow).⁶ Just under a third (32%) were from Munster, the major dairy farming region of the Ireland, encompassing County Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford, and includes three of the five largest cities in Ireland: Cork, Limerick and Waterford. Fourteen per cent of respondents were from Ulster, which includes counties in Northern Ireland (Fermanagh, Tyrone, Derry, Antrim, Down and Armagh) and the Republic of Ireland (Donegal, Cavan, Monaghan). The remainder of respondents (13%) were from Connacht which is in the west of Ireland and is the most remote of Ireland's provinces, encompassing the counties of Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Galway and Roscommon. The majority of sheds were located in an 'out-of-the-way area' (72%), with less than a third (28%) located on main street frontages.

The majority of sheds (90%) engaged in diverse activities, especially trades and crafts (67%) for which 93% had a workshop area and 63% had an outside area for those who enjoyed gardening. Over half of all respondents (63%) were from smaller sheds with 20 or fewer average participants per week: 20% were members of sheds that had between 28 and 48 participants per week and the remaining (17%) were members of sheds that had 60 participants per week. The average weekly shed participation was 25 men per week (range 4 - 60, SD = 20.03). The large range in attendance is likely to reflect factors such as urban or rural locations, length of time sheds have been established, and the capacity and resources available to sheds.

⁶ Leinster accounted for over 60% of 2006-2011 population growth in Ireland (CSO, 2012c).

Responses by Shed Origins, Management and Funding

Fifty per cent of respondents belonged to sheds managed by paid staff, either on a full or part-time basis, and 27% were members of sheds managed by unpaid volunteer staff. Reflecting the relatively recent development of Men's Sheds in Ireland, the majority (70%) of respondents were members of sheds which opened in the last year and 30% were members of sheds which have been open for two to five years. Eighty per cent of sheds did not own their facilities and 60% shared their facilities with another organisation. Not surprisingly therefore, 17% of sheds were 'stand alone' buildings, 17% were 'purpose built' and 33% were 'for members use only'.

The opening hours of sheds were spread across the full week, but many sheds opened on one or more days a week, which is not surprising given that the first Irish Men's Shed only opened in 2009. Most men attended the shed one day a week (40%), followed by those who attended five days a week (20%). In a separate question, we asked men how often they took part in the activities in their shed, 29% responded that they participated in activities a few times a week, 50% said weekly, 11% indicated a daily basis, with smaller numbers participating once a fortnight (3%), monthly (3%) or occasionally (3%). More broadly, the majority of respondents (63.3%) attended sheds that opened all year around, 33% attended sheds that opened all year around except for holiday periods, and just 3.3% attended a shed that opened frequently for specific activities. The most popular days for attending sheds were Tuesday (60%), Friday (60%), and Wednesday (57%), with poor attendance at the weekend—only 13% of men attended on Saturdays and 7% on Sundays. In terms of eligibility to participate in the sheds, just over half (53%) were available for men only, with the remainder available mainly for men (40%) and only a small portion catered for men or women (7%).

Seventy-one per cent of sheds were part financed through grant funding from various funding bodies. Less than half (41%) of respondents belonged to sheds that were fully funded, nearly a quarter (24%) were members of sheds that were partially funded and over a third (35%) attended sheds that were underfunded. Despite this, the majority (89%) of respondents felt reasonably (70%) or very secure (17%) about the future of their shed. Shed managers and co-ordinators were mainly men, but nearly a quarter (23%) of all sheds were managed by a female co-ordinator.

Responses by Shed Membership and Rules

The majority (66%) of men began participating in the sheds during the past two years. In the main, activities undertaken in sheds were decided by the men (87%), except in two sheds where activities were decided by managers and one shed where activities were decided by an affiliated organisation. Most (80%) of the activities undertaken in sheds were

guided by some rules but in some sheds they are undertaken without any rules for participation. In a small number of sheds (7%), activities were strictly controlled.

Though activities were largely decided by the men, participants clearly liked the security of knowing someone was in charge, with 95% strongly agreeing or agreeing that the role of the leader was important. Most could also identify who had leadership roles, with 94% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement that someone is responsible at all times. Most men (80%) indicated that it suited them best to participate on set days and times. Whilst over half (57%) felt their opportunities to learn were restricted because of the limited opening times of the sheds, most enjoyed the freedom of being able to participate when they wanted to, with 74% strongly agreeing and 25% agreeing with this. In theory, there was not any eligibility criteria tied to membership, with 100% of respondents belonging to sheds where eligibility to become a member was not assessed, however in practice some form of criteria were used. For example, over half (53%) of sheds were available only to men, and a small number were also available for a specific interest group. In addition, 47% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that their shed was equally welcoming of male and female members, and 59% strongly agreed or agreed that their shed only welcomes men.

Views on the Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA)

As the national body representing the collective issues of Men's Sheds in Ireland, the IMSA is a member-based organisation established to share information between sheds and to support communities and organisations wishing to establish a Men's Shed. Given that the IMSA has been in existence for just four years, we asked respondents a number of questions designed to elicit views that could help inform the future direction of the IMSA in terms of the support needed or anticipated by members. The first question relating to the IMSA enquired: *What should the immediate objective be for the IMSA?* Responses were overwhelmingly positive and constructive and were fairly evenly split. Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents provided suggestions concerning the development of stronger links between sheds and the IMSA. One respondent said this was important even where a coordinator was in place. Another suggested organised regional workshops could provide opportunities for members to share ideas and for sheds to learn from each other. Communicating through the website was also seen as important by a quarter (25%) of respondents, with suggestions made relating to the provision of information and guidance to sheds on a range of issues such as health and safety, insurance, and assist with following queries through. Lobbying and liaising with the government and/or local partnerships for funding for projects/equipment was identified by 30% of respondents as a priority for the IMSA. The remainder of participants (19%) identified the need to improve the perception of Men's Sheds; one respondent was concerned that there was a misperception that the Men's Sheds was for unemployed or men with 'problems'.

A second question asked: *Where do you currently get information for your shed?* The responses highlight that the IMSA is, by far, the most popular source of information for sheds, with 86% of respondents indicating that they retrieve information through this medium. This was followed by the media (28%) and to a lesser extent, government departments (7%), NGOs (7%) and websites of affiliated organisations. A third question asked: *What subjects do you need information about and would you like to see contained on the website for the IMSA?* Nearly one third of respondents (30%) indicated that they would like increased access to sample documents such as a constitution and completed applications for funding. They also wanted guidance on how to gain charitable status, how to set up shed committees and house rules for sheds e.g. health and safety and first aid training. Over one quarter (28%) wanted information on where to source affordable tools/tutors, how to purchase such tools/equipment as a group and information on funding, including information on when funding is available and who to contact. One quarter would like to see increased contact with other Men's Sheds, videos from other groups, and a forum to share ideas. Some respondents indicated that they would like help with ideas for projects and social events (8%) and the provision of health information, but only if provided in a subtle manner (9%). A final question asked: *What services should the IMSA provide?* Respondents provided a range of answers. There was unanimous agreement that the IMSA should provide advice and support (100%), but the provision of advice on useful resources was also considered important (90%) as was networking (86%), policy development and training (76%), campaigning (69%), lobbying (69%), consultancy (59%), the development of standards (59%) and dispute resolution (31%).

Age, Marital and Employment Status

Seventy per cent of respondents were married or had previously been married, with 58% indicating that they currently live with a wife or a partner. Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents were fathers and nearly half (45%) were also grandfathers. While there was a high level (95%) of agreement among respondents that the sheds attract a range of people of different ages, descriptive statistics indicate that the sheds are largely comprised of older men: 70% of men attending the sheds were over 50 years of age, 18% were aged between 30 and 49 years, and just 10% were under 30 years of age and over half (53%) were retired from paid work, with just 15% employed in the workforce. Just over a third (34%) of respondents expected to get more paid work as a result of participating in the Men's Sheds, but the vast majority did not and just over half (53%) were already in receipt of some type of pension.

In terms of respondents' highest level of education, 21% had attained a primary level of education and a similar number (20%) attained secondary level or a technical or vocational qualification (20%), 15% had a diploma, and just 15% were educated to degree level or above. When broken down by age, the picture is similar for older respondents: of those

aged 50 and over (n=207), 20% had attained a technical or vocational qualification. This is higher than the general population, where the census of the population records 12.7% of older men with a technical or vocational qualification. The higher proportion reflects the higher concentration of tradesmen in sheds, with 45% of respondents identifying themselves as a current or former qualified tradesman. Over one half (51%) of the older respondents were educated to primary or secondary level and just 13% had attained a primary degree or above.

Role of Women in Men's Sheds

Men's Sheds were largely perceived as a space for men, with 97% agreeing that their members were mainly men and, while a small number (7%) of respondents were from sheds that catered for either men or women, the majority (62%) of sheds only welcomed men. However, most men had a positive attitude towards women participating in sheds: nearly three-quarters (72%) felt comfortable with women participating, including over one quarter (26%) who strongly agreed and nearly one half (46%) who agreed with this statement. Seventy per cent said they generally enjoy learning in a mixed group including women. At the same time, there remains a significant minority (28%) of men who are clearly not comfortable with women participating in their shed, including 17% who disagree and 11% who strongly disagree to female participation in the sheds.

Health and Wellbeing of Participants

The findings provide evidence of recent, significant and difficult changes experienced by older men with regards to health, relationships and employment. Within the past five years, 33% of respondents had experienced retirement, over a quarter (26%) had experienced a major health crisis, 14% had experienced a new impairment or disability, 41% had experienced unemployment and a further 13% had experienced difficulties with their business or job. Additionally, almost a quarter (24%) had experienced a significant loss in their life, 23% experienced separation from a partner, the family home or children, and nearly a quarter (23%) experienced a financial crisis. Nearly one quarter (23%) of respondents indicated that they had experienced depression in the past five years.

In terms of physical health, 25% of respondents assessed their health as fair and a small proportion (6%) rated their physical health as bad or very bad. More than one third of the respondents (38%) reported that their physical health currently interfered to some extent with social activities, like visiting friends and relatives. More than half of respondents (62%) said that their physical health currently interfered with their social activities *none of the time*. Forty-two per cent of respondents reported that they lacked companionship *some or all of the time* and just over one third (34%) felt left out *some or all of the time*. Thirty-seven

per cent of respondents reported that their emotional health currently interferes to some extent with social activities and nearly two thirds of respondents (63%) indicated that their emotional health currently interferes with their social activities *none of the time*.

A small number of men (8%) were referred to the Men's Sheds by a health or welfare worker, but by far the most common way men found out about the shed was through friends. The majority of respondents (77%) held a current driving licence and drove their own cars, but a small number (11%) depended on others to get to the Men's Shed. For the vast majority of respondents (99%), the Men's Shed was seen as a place to meet new friends, and 94% considered the Men's Shed as a place to be with other men.

Men's Perceptions of the Sheds

The questions relating to men's experiences of the sheds were overwhelmingly positive, pointing to important spill-over effects from participation in sheds to learning and male health. All respondents without exception (100%) reported that they enjoyed the social aspect of the sheds and most (99%) also enjoyed the freedom of being able to participate when they wanted, with 99% of respondents reporting that they felt at home in the sheds and that they had made good friends (99%). For a significant number of men (83%), the shed is also a place where they can access male health information, suggesting that shed-type organisations enter the private sphere of men's lives, reaching areas of personal relationships as well as their sense of self-identity as the men's comments below suggest.

"... you'll get a man who'll say I'm taking a tablet, and you say I'm taking the same. And he'll say what are you taking. Once one starts...."

I got diagnosed with a health condition.... so I told [the men] individually and I found people very helpful and without being intrusive they look out for me, but at the same time they don't go overboard or aren't overbearing. I found it easy [to tell the men], but I found it hard to reach the stage where I could tell them and I hope I didn't over-tell it".

Rich in real-world environments, Men's Sheds provide important opportunities for men to learn and to mentor other men (84%), and participation appears to have important spill-over effects for wellbeing. For 95% of men the shed is considered a place to 'help me keep healthy' and a similar number (95%) indicated that belonging to the shed helped them to learn. Over three quarters (76%) were more engaged and eager to access further learning opportunities in the shed, with many (67%) indicating that opportunities for learning elsewhere in their community were limited. Over half (51%) of respondents strongly agreed and 44% agreed that the Men's Shed has provided a place to get out of the house as the comments of this man suggest. *"Well I must say I look forward to it for a very social reason. For me it's great to come over, talk to people, discuss about nothing or something important. Number two, my wife is glad to see me out of the house but she's interested in*

what I'm doing too, but it's conversation and she loves to see me in it. Number three, I love the joinery and all that". Most men (94%) also enjoyed the trips and outings organised by the sheds.

Outcomes from Participating in the Sheds

The findings highlight important social outcomes for a majority of men participating in the Men's Sheds: 89% reported that they felt better about themselves and 97% were more confident as a result of attending. One man commented, *"I'd say the most benefit is social. And the second is the development of skills. I always had the interest in woodwork but I didn't have the machinery to do much and the opportunity is here and I want to develop that".* For many men, the shed is an opportunity to get out of the house.

"The biggest reason I came here is to annoy everybody, I love annoying them! I'm a bit of a fun person, but the benefits I get from this shed is health. I think it's health. Meaning I'm not down in the house vegetating, I'm here vegetating. But at least when you're here vegetating you can talk to somebody. But primarily that's it, it's the company. If they've got bad hearts, bad ingestion systems, etc when they come here they seem to forget that. They don't get too much of a sympathetic ear either, maybe they say to somebody 'I've got a sore stomach, aye okay'. You know what I mean but that helps instead of having your poor, lamented wife and you're laying into her ear from morning to night about how unwell you are, with your moaning face. Up here, it's different. No-one want to hear your moans or groans, you get what I mean. It's an open forum, you can talk, you can say what you want as long as you don't insult somebody".

The majority said they had developed new skills, including improved communication or literacy skills (77%), and social (90%) as well as organisation skills (88%). The findings also highlight that community-based Men's Sheds may serve to foster social cohesion in a number of important ways: 98% of respondents reported that they made new friends. As one man said, *"It's a totally different sort of meeting of men then you would normally have. You would normally meet your men friends in a pub situation so there would be alcohol more than likely. This is all sober. Everybody is as they are, it's totally real".* The age groups of respondents indicate that sheds attract men of varying ages, with 29% aged 49 or younger, and the data on education levels highlight shed participation among people of different socio-economic status, 30% are educated to diploma level or above.

Similarly, the results highlight the potentially important role sheds may play in promoting community involvement and self-determination: 97% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that as a result of participating in Men's Sheds they can give back to the community, 86% said they felt more accepted in the community, and 98% were doing what they really enjoyed. Over two-thirds (79%) of sheds surveyed were involved in other charity or

voluntary activities beyond its main purpose or activity. In terms of health and wellbeing, as a result of participating in Men's Sheds, 88% said they have access to male health information, 97% felt better about themselves, 74% felt happier at home and 91% felt their wellbeing had improved. The results also highlight the fundamental human need to belong, indicating that for 95% of participants the shed is a place of belonging. The findings do not indicate that men are largely motivated to engage in learning for economic reasons with just over one third (34%) reporting that they expected to get more paid work and two-thirds disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with such an assertion.

Connections to the Community

The findings reveal the different perceptions respondents have about how sheds connect to local communities: there was almost unanimous (99%) agreement that sheds warmly welcome new members. In the majority of cases (81%), respondents reported that shed resources were available for wider community use. A similar number (82%) also indicated that their shed had strong links outside of the town.

The latter response may reflect the existence of the national body for sheds in Ireland, the IMSA, and respondents' links to it. The IMSA was set up by John Evoy in 2009 and since then has held a number of networking events to bring participants of sheds across the island of Ireland together. The IMSA website also acts as an information portal, providing details of all registered sheds across Ireland and information on how to set up a shed as well as information on insurance and financial issues. More recently, the IMSA has organised regional advocates across the country to support local developments and strengthen links between sheds. Taken together therefore, it is not surprising that respondents show a relatively well developed appreciation of the value of wider networks.

Learning-Related Attitudes and Experiences

Learning Interests, Opportunities and Experiences in the Sheds

A small number (19%) of respondents indicated that they had attended a formal learning programme sometime in the past year, though few (33%) reported positive educational experiences in school. One man commented *"...so far as school is concerned it never taught me very much at all"*. Another said, *"I left school at 14 and what I know now I learnt it along the road"*. For some, school teaches the basics but life teaches the rest. As one man put it *"I think school teaches you basics. We can all say that we left school early...but when we were there we got the basics, as I say the reading, writing and arithmetic"*. Another added, *"you have so many knocks in life as you come along that you were taught by your knocks,*

you were taught by experience. If you walked along and you fell down that road you won't do it again".

In terms of the learning opportunities available to participants in the Men's Sheds, respondents identified a range of areas, including the opportunity to develop hobbies and leisure skills (75%), technical trades and craft skills (68%), computers and internet learning (67%), health and safety skills (49%), team and leadership skills (37%), as well as horticultural skills (37%). Over a quarter (28%) of sheds offer participants opportunities to advance their communication or literacy skills and a small number (12%) provide opportunities to develop customer service skills.

To identify respondents' preferred ways of learning, we enquired: *If more learning opportunities were available in the Men's Sheds, would you be interested in taking part?* Just over three-quarters (76%) said yes, 20% said maybe, and just 4% said no. Of those who answered affirmatively, the most popular medium for future learning was through hands-on-learning (71%). However, more than half (57%) also expressed a preference for learning through special interest courses or where they could meet other people (56%). Fifty per cent of respondents said they would prefer to learn through observations on field days or demonstrations. Just under half (46%) expressed a preference to learn in a small group, 42% said they would be interested in enrolling in a course in order to get a qualification, just over a third (34%) said they would like to learn via the internet, a quarter (25%) would prefer individual tuition, over a quarter (29%) 'in a class' (29%), a similar number (29%) by 'taking on responsibility' and 20% as 'preparation for further study' (20%).

Those who expressed a preference for more learning opportunities were also asked: *How and where would you prefer these learning opportunities be provided?* Nearly half (47%) of the respondents indicated their preferred learning opportunities would be for another member of the Men's Shed with the appropriate skills to teach them, the next most popular choice was to bring in a local tutor/trainer from outside of the shed (40%), and a smaller number opted to bring in a tutor/trainer from outside their town or county (9%) via the internet (1%) or 'a organisation elsewhere in a larger centre' (1%).

In terms of respondents' preferences for *where* learning opportunities should be provided, the most popular choice was to *keep it in the shed* (88%) with very small numbers indicating a preference to go to another local community organisation (3%), a local community learning centre or neighbourhood house (3%), an adult or vocational education provider (3%), some other venue outside the local area (2%) or at home (1%). In summary, the results indicate that community-based Men's Sheds are recognised by participants as an effective and strongly preferred site for learning informally, both currently and into the future.

Opinions About Learning In and Through the Men's Sheds

The results highlight eagerness among respondents to engage in further learning; with 97% indicating that they are keen to learn more, 94% indicating that they would like to improve their skills, and 89% reporting that shed members needed more opportunities to learn. For 95% of respondents, belonging to the Men's Shed helps them to learn, with the shed's small size considered by many (92%) to facilitate learning and 91% reported that they actively took part in the learning opportunities that are offered by the sheds. For most respondents (82%), they considered that their skills were already good enough to enable them to take on an active role in the sheds. The comments of one man reflect the sentiments of many:

"I could take an engine out, pull it apart and throw it over there and come back next week and someone had dumped it over in this corner and get the whole lot of it together and put it back together again. And I learnt all of that myself. I never went to school to learn any of that. I never read a book about it or anything".

Participants disagreed with the following statements: *there is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do* (79%); *there is too much importance placed on formal learning* (77%) and *there is not enough recognition of what I already know* (79%). Though the majority of respondents (81%) clearly disagreed that learning in the Men's Sheds is made more difficult by geographical isolation, this remained the case for a significant minority of participants (19%). Similarly, whilst the majority (80%) indicated that any personal skill difficulties they had did not make it harder for them to learn, a significant minority (20%) reported that they found it more difficult to learn because of a mismatch with their skills. Also, while 78% agreed or strongly agreed that the Men's Sheds should offer more opportunities for learning, nearly a quarter (22%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. Just over two-thirds (67%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that opportunities for learning elsewhere in the community are limited, while just under a third (32%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case.

Desired Learning Preferences and Barriers to Learning

Finally, a number of learning-related questions explored the ways in which the men generally enjoyed learning and things which were considered barriers to further learning. The majority of respondents enjoyed learning in practical situations (96%), learning by doing (92%), in a group with men (86%), in outdoor settings (72%), and 70% said they generally enjoyed learning in a mixed group including women. Just over half (54%) generally enjoyed learning via the computer or internet or in a class room (51%), while less than half (43%) reporting that they enjoyed learning on their own from books and other written materials. In summary, while the men generally enjoyed practical learning and group learning involving men and/or women mainly in outdoor settings, a significant minority were also willing to

learn through other means such as via the internet, in a class room and from their own from books and other written materials.

Respondents indicated that they would be more likely to be involved in learning if there was something they really wanted to learn (91%), if there was somewhere locally they considered a good place to learn (79%), if there were more opportunities locally (78%) and with sufficient learning resources (76%), including programmes or courses available at times that suited (72%). Just over two-thirds (68%) felt they would be more likely to be involved in learning if there were more situations where men were given encouragement (68%) and if there were more male tutors or teachers available locally (57%). Over half the respondents (62%) were restricted by lack of free time and by the restricted opening times of the sheds (57%). Fewer respondents agreed that they would be more likely to be involved in learning if they were younger (46%), or more confident (46%), if family or partners were more supportive (34%), programmes were shorter (30%), or if they lived closer to the organisation (41%). Less than half (39%) of respondents agreed that they would be more likely to be involved in learning if their health allowed it.

Conclusions

Community-based Men's Sheds are informal learning spaces where men are encouraged to come together and undertake meaningful leisure activities. As a concept, there is nothing remarkable about men meeting informally. In Ireland, men have long gathered together in clubs and pubs as well as after church on a Sunday and at football matches to talk and to share ideas and discuss life in general. But combining this social chat with 'men's work'—manual work that involves fixing, building and repairing—is a new idea and the strength with which the concept has developed in Ireland is quite remarkable. The first Men's Shed opened in Ireland in 2009 and by the time we commenced the fieldwork for this research in May 2012 there were already over 50 sheds. By September that same year it had grown to 73 and at the time of writing (February 2013) there were 105 sheds registered with the IMSA. How much of this growth has been spurred on by the recession is difficult to say but is undoubtedly a factor particularly so given the collapse in the housing sector which left thousands of manual workers unemployed. The number of people unemployed in Ireland in April 2011 was 424,843, representing an increase of 136.7% on April 2006 (CSO, 2012b). On closer inspection, it is also clear that men of all ages make up the largest share of the unemployed. The unemployment level for men aged between 45-54 years old is 18.8%, compared to 12.1% for women of the same age group and 41.1% for young men aged between 20-24 years old, compared to 27.9% for women of that same age group.

Ireland's deep financial crisis has prompted an increased focus on efforts towards skills development and lifelong learning as a means of placing Ireland back on the road to recovery and of ensuring a better match between available skills and the needs of the labour market. Previous research has however shown that for the majority of older men, their relationship with formal education largely ended on completion of primary or secondary school (Condon & McNaboe, 2011). Thereafter, their learning opportunities tended to be confined to vocational or job-related training. In sum, older men have not been part of the expansion of learning opportunities in Ireland or elsewhere that has occurred in recent years. In addition, research has consistently demonstrated the strong positive relationship between education and health outcomes whether measured by death rates, illness, health behaviours or health knowledge (Higgins et al., 2008). As the evidence based on inequalities in health has grown, so too has the recognition of the need for a gendered focus on men's lives and male issues.

This research is therefore timely for the insight it provides into the lives of older men in Ireland, their experiences of learning, preferences about how they like to learn and the outcomes of participating and learning in Men's Sheds. Having empirical evidence on the outcomes of the informal learning which take place in community-based Men's Sheds will provide much needed information to inform the development of greater responsiveness of education policies and services aimed at the needs of older men. Given the changing

demographics towards a growing older population, the importance of finding effective ways to promote wellbeing in old age has never been greater.

Nearly one half (42%) of all sheds in Ireland are located in Leinster, just under a third of sheds are located in Munster, 14% are in Ulster, and a similar number are in Connacht. In general, sheds are located in 'out-of-the-way' areas, with less than a third located on main street frontages. The majority of sheds engage in diverse activities, but woodwork and crafts are the most popular, for which most sheds also have a workshop area. Our findings confirm that Men's Sheds are largely for men; over half (53%) are available only to men, and 40% are available mainly to men, but a small number cater for both men and women. The average number of different participants who access the facilities in the Men's Sheds each week is 25. Nearly three-quarters of sheds are part financed through grant funding from a range of different sources, but over one third are underfunded. Despite this, the majority of participants felt reasonably secure about the future of their shed. Shed managers and coordinators are mainly men, but nearly a quarter of all sheds are managed by women.

Participants of the Men's Sheds are largely men over 50 years but nearly one third are under 50 years, highlighting the intergenerational learning that takes place in many sheds and the potential opportunities for further developments in this area. While the majority of men participating in the Men's Sheds are retired and already in receipt of some type of pension, over a third are hopeful that they will get more paid work as a result of their participation in the sheds.

Seventy per cent of participants are married or have previously been married and just over half currently live with a wife or a partner. Nearly three quarters are fathers and nearly one half are grandfathers. In terms of education, the majority (41%) have a primary or secondary level education, but 20% have a technical or vocational qualification. This is higher than the general population, reflecting the higher concentration of tradesmen in the sheds; 45% identified themselves as a current or former qualified tradesman. Just 13% attained a primary degree or above.

Tellingly, while just one third of respondents reported having a positive educational experience in school, over three-quarters of those participating in the sheds are keen to access more learning opportunities. For most, the preferred way to learn centres around practical situations and working with their hands—mending, fixing, building, repairing—in a group with largely, but not exclusively, other men. Other learning preferences expressed by the men included, in descending order, special interest courses, observational field days, in a small group, in a course in order to achieve a qualification, learning over the internet, individual tuition, in a class and by taking on a mentoring responsibility as preparation for further study. This wide range of learning preferences expressed by participants reflected a hunger for learning which was common across all sheds. While some of the preferences appear to suggest an inclination towards formal education, when asked how and where they would prefer to avail of these learning opportunities, the majority said that they would

prefer to learn from another member of the Men's Shed with the appropriate skills. Failing this, the next most popular choice was to bring in a local tutor/trainer from outside of the shed (40%), but the vast majority reported that they would prefer learning to take place in the shed, with 95% indicating that belonging to the Men's Shed helps them to learn.

Men come to the shed for different reasons, but primarily to be with other men and to work with their hands, mending, fixing building and repairing, and while most men do not come for economic reasons and are already retired from paid work, a significant minority come because they expect to get more paid work as a result of participation. For the majority however, the shed provides a place to get out of the house; participants felt happier at home, the majority said that their wellbeing had improved and 95% said that the shed was a place of belonging for men, highlighting a fundamental human need to belong. For many (88%), the sheds play an important role in facilitating access to male health information and from our conversation with men it was clear that this was not always in the form of leaflets or classes but through the informal conversations and camaraderie that developed between the men themselves as they explored and enlarged their personal experiences. Our findings suggest that while the shed is predominately a man's space and looks and feels very much like a man's space, the conversations that take place in the shed are not dominated by traditional gender norms. Within the sheds, men are opening up to each other, they are exchanging experiences and sharing concerns, and in doing so they are moving beyond traditional notions of masculinity.

Finally, we conclude that the IMSA plays a significant role in supporting the development of sheds in Ireland. This research confirms that the vast majority of sheds in Ireland rely on IMSA for information. Having a national representative body to ensure that sheds are listened to is vital and the IMSA must continue to speak on the sheds' behalf in public debates and on policy that will affect men's lives. This is important for all sheds, regardless of their size, but it is particularly important for the countless small sheds spread across Ireland, many of whom are underfunded and whose future is uncertain. By sharing ideas and identifying opportunities to work together or paying for services jointly, the IMSA can help support the sustainability of sheds, especially smaller sheds. There would appear to be a strong case here for some government support for the IMSA without breaking the essential grassroots connections to and between sheds.

The findings from this research point to a wide range of support needs of sheds and to a wide range of benefits to the men who participate in these sheds, their families and the wider community. As our findings highlight, participants of Men's Sheds engaged in learning acquire many new skills through their involvement. It is of the utmost importance that this is not just seen in relation to employment prospects, but for its contribution to the development of mental capital and wellbeing to help individuals deal with difficult life transitions and for society and communities to address the challenges of inevitable changes in the years ahead.

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Appendix 1: Organisation Survey



Organisation Survey

FOR THE CONTACT PERSON TO COMPLETE & RETURN

These questions help us to categorise and compare the many different types of organisations we are studying across Ireland.

Organisation Name: [name] Men's Sheds

Prevalence rates are presented; the most frequently endorsed responses are indicated in **bold**.

ORGANISATION & PARTICIPATION DETAILS

1. **This organisation has been operating for:**

≤ one year	70%
2-5 years	30%
>5 years	-

2. **This organisation has the following affiliations with similar organisations:**
Tick ANY that apply

Locally	43%
In this county	40%
Regionally	30%
Nationally	93%
Internationally	10%

3. **This organisation relies on:**
Tick ANY that apply

Financial members	97%
Part-time paid staff	27%
Full-time paid staff	23%
Volunteer staff	27%
An Elected Committee	33%
Government funding	37%
Management Committee or Board	20%

4.	This organisation, its facilities, programmes or services are available to participants on: <i>Tick ANY that apply</i>	
	Monday	43%
	Tuesday	60%
	Wednesday	57%
	Thursday	53%
	Friday	60%
	Saturday	13%
	Sunday	7%
 5.	Organised meetings between members or participants usually happen: <i>Tick ONE that MOST applies</i>	
	Weekly	60%
	Fortnightly	10%
	Monthly	20%
	Quarterly	10%
	Annually	-
 6.	This organisation is open or active: <i>Tick ONE that MOST applies</i>	
	All year round	64%
	All but holiday times	33%
	Frequently for specific activities	3%
	Infrequently	-
 7.	This organisation is open or active: <i>Tick ANY that apply</i>	
	Mainly for men	40%
	To the general public	17%
	Mainly for older men	23%
	For a specific interest group	3%
	For either men or women	7%
	Only for men	53%
 8.	Eligibility to become a member or participant is: <i>Tick ONE</i>	
	Assessed against a criterion	-
	Not assessed	100%

9. **The facilities of this organisation are shared with another organisation:**
- | | |
|-----|------------|
| Yes | 60% |
| No | 40% |
10. **The four main reasons why MEN tend NOT to join this organisation are:**
- | | |
|---|-----|
| Too afraid/shy/lack confidence/feel intimidated to join a new group alone. | 33% |
| Lack understanding about what Men's Sheds is all about/how to become a member and/or how to access information. | 29% |
| Stigma - shed is for the unemployed, depressed, older men only or men with 'problems'. The concept of the Men's Sheds is not appealing. | 20% |
| Too busy e.g. caring for spouse and grandchildren/age i.e. too young or too old/no transport to and from the shed. | 18% |
11. **The average number of different participants who access the facilities of this organisation each week is: 25 men per week (range 4 - 60, st dev 20.03)**

LOCATION, LAYOUT, FACILITIES & ACTIVITIES

1. The facilities this organisation uses are:

Tick ANY that apply

Standalone	50%
Part of a larger building	17%
Not owned by this organisation	80%
Purpose built	17%
In several locations	3%
For members use only	33%

2. This organisation is:

Tick the ONE that MOST applies

On a main street frontage	28%
In an out-of-the-way area	72%

3. This organisation has an area for:

Tick ANY that apply

Inside social activities	80%
Workshop/craft activities	93%
Keeping fit	20%
Serving alcohol	3%
Outside social activities	50%
Serving/eating food	53%
Drinking tea/coffee	97%
Gardening	63%

4. Activities in this organisation are:

Tick ONE only

Diverse	90%
Mainly focused on one activity	10%

5. Activities that participants undertake are mainly decided by:

Tick ONE only

An affiliated organisation	3%
Managers or staff	7%
The participants	90%

6. Activities in this organisation are:

Tick ONE only

Strictly controlled	7%
With some rules	83%
Without rules	10%

7. The organisation is involved in other charity or voluntary activities beyond its main purpose or activity:

Tick ONE only

Yes	79%
No	21%

FUNDING, RESOURCES & RELATIONSHIPS

- 1. Participants pay to take part in particular activities:**
Tick ONE only
- | | |
|-----|------------|
| Yes | 14% |
| No | 86% |
- 2. Funding for this organisation is MAINLY from:**
Tick ONE only
- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Governments | 7% |
| Membership | 7% |
| Fundraising or donations | 15% |
| Grants from various funding bodies | 71% |
- 3. At present, this organisation is:**
Tick ONE only
- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| Totally funded | 41% |
| Partially funded | 24% |
| Underfunded | 35% |
- 4. This organisation is:**
Tick ONE only
- | | |
|--|------------|
| Part of a larger organisation on the same site | 21% |
| Part of a larger organisation but separately located | 59% |
| Independent and stand alone | 20% |
- 5. The future of this organisation is:**
Tick ONE only
- | | |
|-------------------|------------|
| Very secure | 18% |
| Reasonably secure | 71% |
| Insecure | 11% |

VIEWS ON THE IRISH MEN'S SHEDS ASSOCIATION

1. **What should the immediate objective be for the Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA)?**

Connect with sheds more even where a co-ordinator is in place/regional workshops to share ideas and learn from other sheds. Spend more time communicating through the website to the sheds – assist in following this through.	26%
Lobby/liaise with government and/or local partnerships for funding for projects/equipment.	30%
Communing through the website to provide information and guidance to sheds on a range of issues e.g. health and safety, insurance etc., and assist with following queries through.	25%
Improve perception of men's sheds.	19%

2. **Where do you currently get information for your shed?**

Tick ALL that apply

Government departments	7%
NGOs	7%
Media	28%
Public libraries	-
IMSA	86%
Other (website of affiliated organisations)	6%

3. **What subjects do you need information about and would you like to see contained on the website for the IMSA?**

Sample documents, e.g. constitution, applications for funding / how to get charitable status. House rules/health and safety and first aid training/how to set up a shed committee.	30%
Where to source affordable tools/tutors and how to purchase as a group / information on funding, including periods when it is available and who to contact.	28%
Contacts in other Men's Sheds/videos from other groups/a forum to share ideas.	25%
Health information (if provided in a subtle matter).	9%
Ideas for projects and social events.	8%

4. What services should the IMSA provide?

Tick ALL that apply

Advice and support	100%
Advice on useful resources	90%
Networking	86%
Policy development and training	76%
Campaigning	69%
Lobbying	69%
Consultancy	59%
Development of standards	59%
Dispute resolution	31%
Other (response: funding/grant applications)	3%

5. Please consider use the space below to tell us about any other issues you think we should consider? (No issues recorded)

Thank you sincerely for taking the time to complete this Organisation Survey

*You are free to supply any additional, relevant information about your organisation
EITHER to the researcher OR by post to: Lucia Carragher, Netwell Centre, PJ Carroll
Building,, DkIT, Dublin Road, Dundalk*

Appendix 2: Participants' Survey



MEN'S LEARNING & WELLBEING Survey of men participating in the [name] Men's Shed

Based on 297 completed questionnaires. Prevalence rates are presented; the most frequently endorsed responses are indicated in **bold**.

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. It is for completion by you, as a man who participates in the Men's Shed. The aim of the survey is to find out about you and what you get from your participation in the Men's Shed. It is OK if you need someone to help you fill it out. When completing this survey, you do not need to tell us your name. We will not be reporting any information that can identify you.

*Please answer the questions by placing a tick in the appropriate boxes
Results will be available on request.*

Part A: Questions about you, your experiences, and participation in this organisation

1. About your experiences in the organisation (Tick one box in each row)	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoy being able to participate when I want to	74%	25%	1%	-
I enjoy the social aspect	70%	30%	-	-
I feel 'at home' in the organisation	60%	39%	1%	-
I have some say over how the organisation is run	42%	49%	8%	1%
I have made good friends in the organisation	59%	39%	1%	1%
I get a chance to mentor others	30%	54%	15%	1%
I enjoy the activities, trips or outings	53%	41%	5%	1%
It is best for me to participate on set times and days	34%	47%	17%	2%
The role of the organisation leader is important	57%	38%	4%	1%
I get to mix with people of different ages	52%	43%	4%	1%
I feel comfortable with women participating	26%	46%	17%	11%
Someone is responsible at all times	43%	51%	5%	1%

2. As a result of participating in this organisation (Tick one box in each row)	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am doing what I really enjoy	50%	48%	2%	-
I can give back to the community	45%	52%	3%	-
I have a place where I belong	41%	54%	5%	-
I expect to get more paid work	12%	22%	47%	19%
I get access to men's health information	30%	53%	15%	2%
I feel better about myself	47%	50%	3%	-
I feel more accepted in the community	33%	53%	14%	-

I feel happier at home	30%	44%	23%	3%
My communication or literacy skills have improved	23%	54%	20%	3%
My wellbeing has improved	31%	60%	9%	-
My confidence has improved	29%	60%	10%	1%
My social skills have improved	32%	58%	9%	1%
My organisation skills have improved	28%	55%	16%	1%

3. I regard this organisation as a place <i>(Tick one box in each row)</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
To be with other men	49%	45%	5%	1%
To meet new friends	56%	43%	1%	-
To get out of the house	51%	44%	5%	-
To learn new skills	49%	48%	3%	-
To help me keep healthy	42%	53%	4%	1%
To give back to the community	42%	53%	4%	1%

4. About you

Tick if any of the following apply to you

I am a current or former qualified tradesman	45%
I am currently in the paid workforce	15%
I currently have a car licence <u>and</u> drive my own car	77%
I depend on others to get to the organisation	11%
I participated in a similar type of organisation as a boy	12%
I heard about the organisation through friends	70%
I was referred to the organisation by a health or welfare worker	8%
I am married or have previously been married	70%
I currently live with a wife or partner	58%
I receive some type of pension	53%
I am a father	72%
I am a grandfather	45%
I speak another language other than English at home	9%

5. About your experiences in the past five years

In the past five years I have experienced:

Tick if any of the following apply to you

Separation from a partner	10%
Separation from a family home	8%
Separation from children	5%
A significant loss in my life	24%
A major health crisis	26%
A new impairment or disability	14%
Loss of tools or a work space	9%
Retirement	33%
Satisfaction with life generally	57%
A new personal relationship	8%
A new child or grandchild	28%
Difficulties with my business or job	13%
Depression	23%
Unemployment	41%

A financial crisis 23%

Part B: About your learning in the organisation.

1. How often, on average, do you take part in the organisation’s activities? (Tick one)

Daily	12%
A few times a week	29%
Weekly	50%
Fortnightly	3%
Monthly	3%
Occasionally	3%
Never	-

2. What type of learning, if any, is available, through this organisation? (You can tick more than one answer)

Computers or internet skills	67%
Agricultural/horticultural skills	37%
Technical, trade or craft skills	68%
Team or leadership skills	37%
Safety or health skills	49%
Communication or literacy skills	28%
Hobby or leisure skills	75%
Customer service skills	12%
Other learning (please specify): 9 descriptive responses	4%

3. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements as they apply to learning in and through your organisation. (Tick one box in each row).

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Members of this organisation need more opportunities to learn	37%	52%	11%	-
There is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do	5%	16%	66%	13
My skills are already good enough for me to able to take an active part in this organisation	26%	56%	17%	1%
There is too much importance placed on formal learning	4%	19%	62%	15%
There are opportunities to improve my communication skills	22%	65%	10%	3%
Learning is more difficult because of this organisation’s isolation	4%	15%	62%	19%
There is not enough recognition of what I already know	5%	16%	64%	15%
I am keen to learn more	44%	53%	3%	-
I would like to improve my skills	46%	48%	6%	-
My skills help me learn with others in a team	34%	58%	8%	-
Difficulties with my skills make it hard for me to learn	5%	15%	61%	19%
I actively take part in the learning opportunities that are	29%	62%	8%	1%

offered				
Being part of this organisation helps me to learn	32%	63%	5%	-
Opportunities for leaning elsewhere in this community are limited	17%	50%	29%	3%
This organisation's small size makes learning easier	29%	63%	7%	1%
This organisation should offer more opportunities for learning	22%	56%	20%	2%

4. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements as you think they apply to your organisation. (Tick one box in each row)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
This organisation warmly welcomes new members	76%	23%	1%	-
This organisation is equally welcoming of male & female members	25%	27%	31%	17%
This organisation's resources are available for wider community use	30%	51%	15%	4%
This organisation only welcomes men	31%	31%	27%	11%
This organisation is well connected to the local community	36%	57%	7%	-
This organisation has strong links outside of the town	30%	52%	16%	2%
This organisation's members are mainly men	49%	48%	2%	1%

5a. If more learning opportunities were available through this organisation, would you be interested in taking part?

Yes	76%
Maybe	20%
No	4%

If 'Yes' or 'Maybe', which type of learning would you be interested in?

(Tick as many as you like)

A course to get a qualification	42%
Special interest courses	57%
In a small group	46%
Field days or demonstrations	50%
'Hands-on' learning	71%
In a class	29%
Through the internet	34%
By taking on responsibility	29%
Preparation for further study	20%
Where I can meet other people	56%
Individual tuition	25%
Other way (<i>please specify</i>): No descriptive responses	-

5b. How and where would you prefer these learning opportunities be provided?

(Tick the **one** box in each column that you would most prefer)

By...(tick one)		IN...(tick one)	
another member of your organisation with the appropriate skills	47%	this organisation	88%
bringing in a local tutor/trainer from outside of your organisation	40%	another local community organisation	3%
bringing in a tutor/trainer from outside of your town or county	9%	a local community learning centre or neighbourhood house	3%
the internet	1%	an adult or vocational education provider	3%
a organisation elsewhere in a lager centre	1%	your home	1%
other way (please specify)	-	a venue outside your local area	2%
		other location (please specify)	

6. Most places have a community organisation where adults go to learning things. When responding to the statements in Question 7, think of that organisation closest to where you live. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements as they apply to your closest adult learning organisation. (Tick one box in each row)

Statements about the 'local' adult learning organisation	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I don't feel comfortable going there	13%	26%	47%	14%
It is valuable to me as a resource	20%	60%	16%	4%
It is a useful place for me to do courses	19%	60%	19%	2%
I don't know enough about it to use it	12%	32%	44%	12%
I would go there more if more people I knew went there	11%	42%	37%	10%
I would use it anytime if I really needed it	18%	59%	19%	4%
I would go there more often if more men I know went there	12%	40%	41%	7%
It is held in high regard by the local community	24%	59%	16%	1%
It doesn't offer anything I need to learn	6%	21%	55%	18%

7. Your general preferences for learning (Tick one box in each row)

I generally enjoy to learn...	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In a mixed group including women	26%	44%	22%	8%
In a group with men	33%	53%	12%	2%
In practical situations	35%	61%	3%	1%
In a classroom	10%	41%	43%	6%
By doing	37%	55%	7%	1%
On my own from books and other written materials	9%	34%	44%	13%
In outdoor settings	20%	52%	24%	4%
Via the computer or internet	14%	40%	35%	11%

8. I would be more likely to be involved in learning if... (Tick one box in each row)

Statements about the 'local' adult learning organisation	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I had more free time	18%	44%	33%	5%
I had more opportunities locally	17%	61%	21%	1%
There were more male tutors or teachers available locally	14%	43%	39%	4%
There were sufficient learning resources locally	15%	61%	22%	2%
There was somewhere locally I considered a good place to learn	16%	63%	18%	3%
There was something I really wanted to learn	33%	58%	9%	-
I had more support from my family or partner	7%	27%	52%	14%
I was younger	16%	30%	41%	13%
This organisation was open more often	11%	46%	36%	7%
My health allowed it	10%	29%	49%	12%
There were more learning situations where men were encouraged	13%	55%	27%	5%
Programmes or courses were available at times that suited me	17%	55%	24%	4%
I lived closer to this organisation	10%	31%	50%	9%
Courses were shorter	6%	24%	61%	9%
I was more confident	14%	32%	41%	13%

OTHER THINGS ABOUT YOU

9. Please tick any statements that apply to you.

I am an active participant in this organisation	90%
I am a returned serviceman	4%
I have a leadership role within this organisation	32%
I began participating in this organisation within the past two years	67%
I have special needs (an impairment or disability)	13%
I attended a formal learning programme sometime in the past year	19%
I am retired from paid work	53%
I really enjoyed learning at school	33%

10. How long (in years) have you participated in this organisation?

≤ one year	67%
2-5 years	33%
>5 years	-

11. Your age:

< 20 years	2
20-29 years	9
30-39 years	8

40-49 years	10
50-59 years	20
60-69 years	32
70-79 years	17
> 80 years	2

12. Your highest completed formal education. (*Tick one box in each column*)

Professional qualification (of Degree Status at least)	10%
Primary Degree (Third Level Bachelor Degree)	5%
Non Degree: National Certificate, Diploma NCEA/Institute of Technology or equivalent	15%
Both Upper Secondary and Technical or Vocational qualification	9%
Technical or Vocational Qualification: Completed apprenticeship NCVA Level 2/3 Certificate NCEA Foundation Certificate, Teagasc Certificate/Diploma or equivalent	11%
Upper Secondary: Leaving Certificate (including Applied and Vocational Programmes), 'A' Levels, NCVA Level 1 Certificate / Diploma or equivalent	9%
Lower Secondary: Junior/Intermediate/Group Certificate, 'O' Levels / GCSE's, NCVA Foundation Certificate, Basic Skills Training Certificate or Equivalent	18%
Primary education	21%
No formal education	2%

Part C: About your health and wellbeing

1. Health rating

Very good	27%
Good	42%
Fair	25%
Bad	4%
Very bad	2%

2. During the past four weeks, how much have physical health issues interfered with your social activities?

All the time	3%
Most of the time	4%
Some of the time	16%
A little of the time	15%
None of the time	62%

3. How often do you lack companionship?

Hardly ever	58%
Some of the time	32%
Often	10%

4. How often do you feel left out?

Hardly ever	66%
Some of the time	29%
Often	5%

5. How often do you feel isolated from others?

Hardly ever	63%
Some of the time	29%
Often	8%

6. During the past four weeks, how much have emotional health issues interfered with your social activities?

All of the time	2%
Most of the time	4%
Some of the time	16%
A little of the time	15%
None of the time	63%

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Please place your survey in the envelope, seal it and return it to the person in the organisation who gave it to you, OR post it back as soon as possible. (The postage is pre-paid).

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. Please use the space below to provide any additional comments that you feel will help our research to identify what you get from your participation in the Men's Shed.

Any **questions** about the project can be directed to: Dr Lucia Carragher, Netwell Centre, School of Health & Science, Dundalk Institute of Technology. Telephone: 00353 429370497. Email: lucia.carragher@netwellcentre.org. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee, Dr Edel Healy, School of Health & Science, DkIT, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth. Telephone: 0429370200

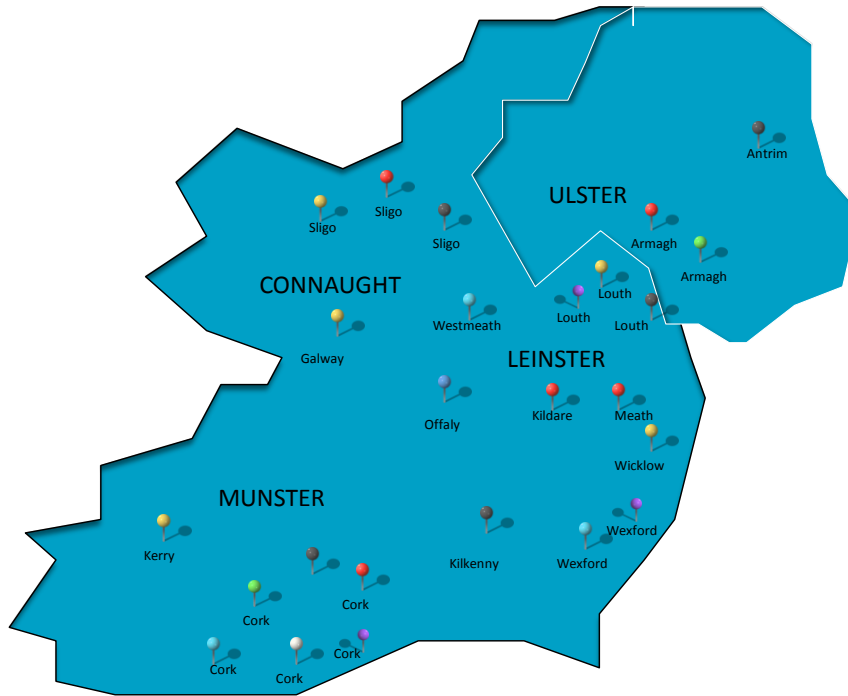
Appendix 3: Focus Group Questions

Questions for men who participate in the shed

1. Tell me about this shed and what you do when you come here?
2. What benefits do you get out of participating in the activities in this organisation?
 - Do these benefits flow on to others, such as to your families, work and communities?
 - Tell me about those benefits.
3. What do you learn through coming here and participating in these activities?
 - Give some examples.
4. Thinking back over the course of your life, how has learning affected you?
 - How do you learn new things?
5. What advice would you give to similar organisations in order to attract, involve and benefit other older men?

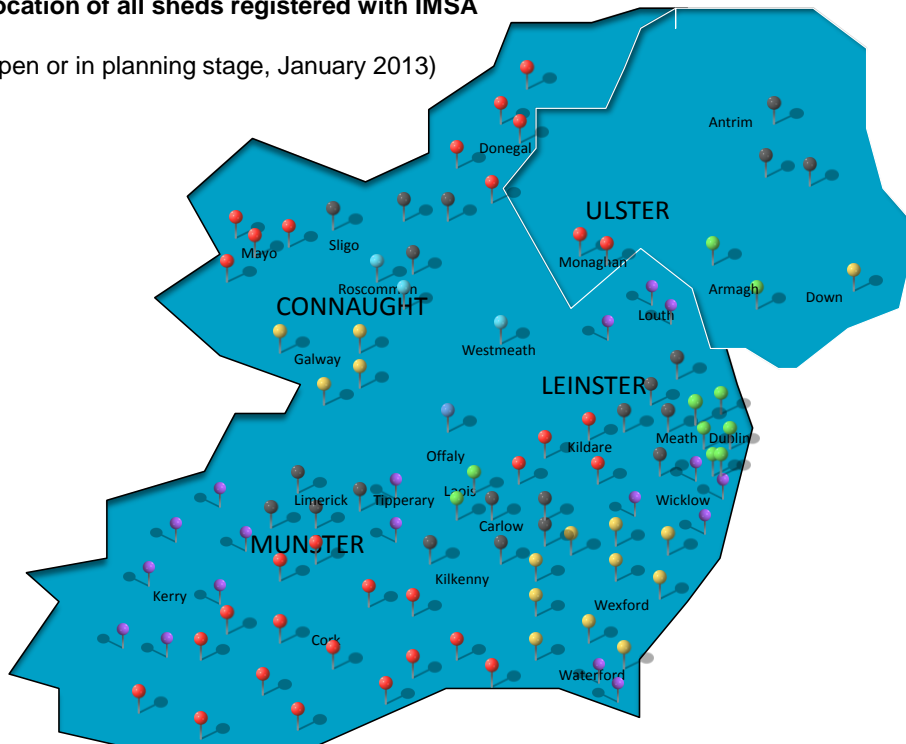
Appendix 4: Location of Sheds

Location of sheds that participated in national survey



Location of all sheds registered with IMSA

(open or in planning stage, January 2013)



Appendix 5: Letter to Sheds

[date]

Dear [name]

Thank you for agreeing to oversee the completion and return of the enclosed questionnaires. As discussed, I have enclosed [number] copies of the survey for the men participating in your shed to complete. This survey is designed to explore men's informal learning and the role sheds play in learning. I have also enclosed one copy of a survey that is specifically for you to complete, as the main contact person for this shed. This survey will support the development of a profile of sheds in Ireland and will compliment participants' survey. Both these surveys are currently being sent to sheds and the main contact person in sheds across Ireland.

Below I have outlined the issues which I discussed with you earlier and which I feel are important to keep in mind when you distribute the survey in your shed.

1. Explaining the importance of the research

First, please explain to the men that the questionnaire is quite short. It is part of a large research project by researchers in the Netwell Centre, Dundalk Institute of Technology. It will provide much needed information on sheds in Ireland and the benefits or otherwise of sheds for men's informal learning. All sheds in Ireland are invited to take part in this research.

2. Confidentiality

The survey is totally anonymous; we are not asking the men to write their names on the questionnaire they complete. This is intended to facilitate honest and truthful answers. There are no right or wrong answers – please encourage the men to ‘tell it like it is’.

3. How to complete the questionnaire

It would probably be easier for everyone if you speak to the men in a group/groups and give them a copy of the survey before going through questions to ensure the men fully understand. It is quite a short questionnaire, consisting largely of a series of tick boxes. In some questions you tick one box on each line to indicate a response to each statement - this is the case, for example, in Questions 1, 2 and 3 of Part A of the survey. In other questions you may tick as many responses as you want – this is the case, for example in Questions 4 and 5 of Part A in the survey.

4. As we discussed earlier, I would be concerned to ensure:
 - i. that the men understand how to complete the survey;
 - ii. that anyone who needs help, gets it (for example, you may have someone with reading problems);
 - iii. that survey are fully completed;
 - iv. also, while I think it is important that you explain the survey to the men, I also think it would be best if you left the room when they are actually completing their surveys as they may not want to write something negative about the shed if you are in the room - perhaps you have another man who could stay in the room to provide assistance for anyone who may need it.

I will contact you shortly when you have had an opportunity to look at the surveys and to answer any questions you may have for me. In the meantime, please feel free to contact me on 00353 429370497 or email me at: lucia.carragher@netwellcentre.org

Once again, many thanks for your assistance, it is much appreciated.

With best wishes,

Lucia Carragher.

I have included a free post envelope for you to return completed surveys.