**Suffolk Men’s Shed Project – Building A Shed**

Despite the name, ‘Men’s Sheds’ are not primarily concerned with buildings – **the Shed is the people!** Therefore, the building of a shed is all about getting a group of people together, understanding and deploying their skills, firing their imagination and creativity and developing a sense of shared ownership – ‘our shed’! But a building certainly does come in handy along the way!

Every Men’s Shed evolves in its own way because no two sheds will ever have the same mix of skills, interests, characters and local conditions. However, there are several stages along the road that are common to the development of most sheds, although the order in which they happen can vary!

The Main Areas of focus in Building a Men’s Sheds are as follows:

1. Raising Awareness.
2. Forming ‘The Action Group’
3. Adopting a constitution.
4. Choosing The Officers.
5. Setting Up Essential Organizational Structures.
6. Finding Premises.
7. Reaching Out & Engaging with the Community.
8. Setting up the building.

Each of the above elements are explained in more detail below.

1. **Raising Awareness**

The life of a Shed usually begins with one or two people expressing interest in the idea. As an international movement, Men’s Sheds do periodically gain coverage in local, regional and national media, whilst people may also encounter them on their travels around the county and county. It usually starts with an interested individual saying ‘I’d like one of those in my town/village’.

We support these initially small ‘cells’ of interest to connect with their wider community, helping them find likeminded people who would also be interested in the prospect of a Men’s Shed. This is usually done via promoting the idea through local media, voluntary organisations, statutory bodies and even some relevant businesses, with the usual outcome being a public meeting where we bring everyone interested together, share the basic idea of a Men’s Shed, give space for comments and questions and hopefully inspire them to ‘get on board’.

1. **Forming The ‘Action Group’**

There are always people who would be interested in joining a shed when it is already up and running. However, the shed is never going to get to that stage unless people are willing to be actively involved in creating it. Following the public meeting, there are usually a small group of people who are interested in helping set it up, and thus we work with these people to help them to do so – not only to support them in the practical tasks, but also to encourage and reassure them, inspire them and instill a sense of team endeavour. Many people coming to Sheds, including those willing to lead them, are often living with the side-effects of social isolation – loneliness, mild depression, self-esteem issues, poor physical or mental health, so time needs to be spent helping the group get to know each other and grow ‘organically’ at their own pace, whilst keeping them focused on the development of the Shed.

1. **Adopting A Constitution**

As most sheds are self-governing organisations, the first task for this ‘action group’ is usually to prepare and adopt a constitution. In some cases, another body may be instrumental in setting up the Shed e.g. a church or a museum, thus the Shed may largely integrate into their existing structures and policies, although most will still need their own internal decision making mechanism. But for most, ratifying the constitution is the first major step, and how they constitute is the first major decision the action group will take. We advise on the different forms available and the pros and cons of each, and provide resources and support to this end, but it is the action group’s decision as to which form they choose. Most sheds will start out with the simple unincorporated association model and may later opt to upgrade to Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status as they grow, although some proceed with CIO status from the start whilst others remain unincorporated associations throughout their life!

1. **Choosing The Officers**

The adoption of the constitution represents a significant point at which the ‘action group’ takes on the responsibility of the shed. One helpful side-product of the process of discussing and agreeing the constitution is that it frequently becomes clear, as the group engage with this, who should fill the key officer roles of Chair, Secretary and Treasurer (and any other roles the group feel would be helpful). Some will resist the idea of taking on formal responsibilities if pushed too early. However, facilitating the group to work together and get to know each other during the constitution process usually not only increases their confidence and their passion for the project, but also makes it clear (particularly to other members of the group) who should take on the officer roles. Furthermore, because they have all worked as ‘equals’ to this point, it lessens the risk of the officer roles becoming ‘pedestal’ positions, and the principle that the management committee/trustees are ultimately equally responsible is better understood and upheld.

Thus, having signed the constitution, the action group become the founding trustees/management group (the word ‘committee’ doesn’t sit well with most Shed members!) and, with as little intervention as possible from us, they choose their officers from their number.

1. **Setting Up the Essential Organisational Structures**

With the officers in place, the next step is to identify the essential structures that the shed will need and allocating the tasks. These will normally include:

* Setting up a bank account
* Preparing and ratifying the necessary policies and procedures, including health & safety, safeguarding, financial controls, COSHH provisions, risk assessments and, for the foreseeable future, COVID-related issues.
* Identifying and applying for funding
* Researching and obtaining insurance
* Determining what ‘Shed membership’ will mean and any subs/contributions
* Adopting a Code of Conduct for the Shed.
* Joining or signing up with relevant support bodies e.g. CAS, UK Men’s Shed Association

Although much of the above can be proceeded with straightaway, some will depend on knowledge of the premises that the Shed is going to inhabit e.g. insurance, risk assessments. We support the new management group with resources and advice as needed, giving them access to the necessary templates from the likes of CAS, UKMSA and existing Sheds.

1. **Finding Premises**

Whilst it is important not to let the search for a building become the ‘be all and end all’ of the development process, it is obviously a pivotal stage in the lifetime of the shed. In many ways this has to run parallel with every other stage outlined above and can potentially happen at any stage of the journey. However, if not already achieved, it becomes increasingly critical once the Shed has constituted and has embarked on setting up its structures. Whilst it is helpful that someone on the action group takes responsibility for the process of finding premises, it is a key task that should involve everyone connected to the Shed. It is also the least predictable of all shed tasks and progress (or otherwise) towards this goal can have a significant impact on the morale of those creating the Shed! Thus, regular encouragement and a bit of perspective is always required when supporting Sheds at this stage. It is not uncommon for Sheds to move several times in their lifetime, and also to start out in very obviously temporary accommodation – it may not, for instance, be possible to undertake practical tasks at first, but by meeting socially, growing the group and sharing the vision, the Shed is still being developed, even if a vital part is yet to fall into place.

It can be valuable to approach local business centers, pubs, community centers, warehouse locations and a wide range of local organizations to explore what opportunities might be available. Sometimes there can be space either as a blank canvas where a container or portacabin can be placed. Or others may be able to help find areas within existing or disused buildings.

Local councillors, MPs and other local decision makers are also good stakeholders to discuss and present the benefits of Men’s Sheds. Joining local charity networks are often effective in discovering valuable local information. Sports clubs, sports centres, local football teams or activity centres may also have available space especially as they are aware of how valuable physical activity creates positive wellbeing. Existing Men’s Shed are another good source of advice as they can help share their own experience of how they obtained premises.

1. **Reaching Out and Engaging With The Community**

Once constituted, Sheds are actively encouraged to start building links within their local community, and to that end, an ‘outreach officer’ is recommended as a role within the action group. Outreach can involve:

* Seeking potential new group members, both those who can ‘come on board’ now and help create the shed, and those who might wish to join once fully open
* Engaging with the wider community to seek potential activities that the Shed might be able to get involved with e.g. Christmas festivities etc. or maybe even longer-term partners with whom larger project might be worth exploring.
* Engaging with statutory bodies e.g. parish and district councils, to let them know you are there and to start a dialogue as to how each can help the other!
* Individuals and organisations who may be able to help the shed – from supplying wood or tools to a potential building!

Reaching out also involves engaging with other Sheds in the county for mutual encouragement, support, information and skill sharing. We are currently setting up a county network, involving, amongst other things, Shed Leaders’ Zoom meetings to facilitate regular interaction between Suffolk Sheds. There is rarely a problem in an individual shed that hasn’t happened somewhere else before, and a network of Sheds is an excellent source of wisdom, not only for the individual Sheds but for the wider community as well.

1. **Setting Up the Building**

One way or another, most sheds reach the point where they have identified premises, made any arrangements necessary in order to obtain them (e.g. sign a lease) and they at last have the keys! The preparation of the Shed building is probably the final key stage to getting the Shed open and the collective endeavour of ‘getting it the way you want it’ is one of the most important activities that brings people together as a ‘Men’s Shed’. This is often the stage at which those who have thus far not been involved in the development process can be brought on board, as ‘doing up your premises’ is a major bonding activity for the Shed members that will set the tone for relationships and activities within the Shed for the foreseeable future.

Of course, setting up a Shed is never without its unexpected challenges, but hopefully the above presents a picture of the stages that Sheds can go through when in development. On the whole, with the right people and the right support, and with a sense of direction and vision, most challenges can be overcome!

If you would like more information about setting up a Men’s Shed in Suffolk, please contact Community Action Suffolk’s Community Development Officer:

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