



SCOTTISH MEN'S SHEDS ASSOCIATION

Protecting a space for male health and wellbeing

In recent years, there has been growing discussion around the idea of transforming Men's Sheds into "Community Sheds" open to all genders. While inclusivity is a valuable social aim, the SMSA feels it is vital to remember that Men's Sheds were created with a very specific and essential purpose: to support men's health and wellbeing, especially as they age, retire, and/or face social isolation, loneliness, and boredom. Diluting this focus risks undermining what makes the Scottish Men's Sheds Movement effective, unique and – most importantly – necessary.

Born out of necessity

Men's Sheds did not appear by accident; they were a response to a real and pressing need. For decades, men – particularly older men – have been less likely to seek help, open up about their feelings, or access traditional support services. The consequences have been stark: men face disproportionately high levels of loneliness, depression, poor physical health, and suicide.

The Shed model provides a subtle but powerful solution: a practical, non-clinical, male-friendly space where men can find purpose, friendship, and the opportunity to talk – or not talk – as they choose. Shared activities open the door to quiet conversation, camaraderie, and peer support through their community. And, this is not something easily replicated in a mixed environment.

Why male-only matters

The phrase “men only” can sometimes be misread as exclusionary, but within the Shed movement it is about comfort and understanding. Many who walk through a Shed’s doors have spent years in isolation or searching for purpose. They may be grieving, unwell, recently retired, or simply struggling in silence. For them, stepping into a familiar, male-only environment provides a sense of ease that encourages engagement.

The relaxed, honest atmosphere – one of the key strengths of a Men’s Shed – becomes harder to sustain. Research shows that many men are far more likely to open up in male-only spaces, where cultural expectations and inhibitions are lowered, and trust can develop more naturally. If this element was removed, the dynamic shifts.

Funding challenges

It is important to acknowledge that some funding streams come with conditions that can make life challenging for male-only Sheds. A number of funders place restrictions on supporting single-gender initiatives, even when there is strong evidence of need. In many cases, applications are processed by automated online systems rather than a human being—which can sometimes result in instant rejection or being ineligible to apply—without any real understanding of the Shed model.

This overlooks not only the social value of Sheds but also their fiscal benefit – by improving men’s health and wellbeing, Sheds help to reduce the growing pressures on our health and social care services, ultimately saving money for society. Faced with this, some Sheds may feel compelled to comply or dilute their male-only model in order to secure funding, even when it runs counter to the reason they were set up in the first place.

“Men’s Sheds were founded to provide men with a unique environment tailored specifically to their needs. While inclusivity is important, we must be cautious not to lose the essence of what makes these spaces so valuable to men’s health and wellbeing.”

David Gardner, SMSA Chairman

But doing so carries its own risks: by becoming a “Community Shed,” Sheds may actually render themselves ineligible for specific funding streams aimed at men’s health projects and initiatives.

The SMSA has also recently heard feedback from Sheddors who are concerned that it might even be ‘illegal’ to operate as a Men’s Shed – a concern born from the confusing and inconsistent messages that come from some funding bodies.

The SMSA continues to make the case that protecting men’s spaces is not about exclusion, but about fairness – ensuring men, too, have a safe and supportive environment designed specifically for them.

Inclusion is not about one-size-fits-all

Inclusion does not always mean everyone in the same room at the same time. It can also mean recognising and respecting different needs within the broader community. Thousands of women have access to numerous thriving social and support groups—such as the Scottish Women’s Institute—which play a vital role. Why then, should a proven male-centred model be reshaped to fit a one-size-fits-all idea of inclusivity?

The SMSA believes the way forward is not to dilute Men’s Sheds, but to encourage parallel models where appropriate – supporting women, families, and young people in their own dedicated spaces. Inclusion does not mean uniformity; it means respecting difference.

Defending the core mission

At its heart, this 'debate' is about safeguarding the very reason Men's Sheds exist. Rebranding or reshaping Sheds to satisfy broad inclusivity agendas or tick funding boxes risks losing the very thing that makes them work.

This is not about turning people away. It is about preserving a rare and vital lifeline for men, created by the men, and for the men. Scottish Men's Sheds save lives. They change lives. And they must be protected as male-only spaces if they are to continue doing so effectively.

The SMSA is not against inclusion – but, through new research, we know that for men to thrive in a healthy way they need, and deserve, a space to call their own.