

## Women and Men's Sheds

### <sup>1</sup> Introduction

Women have played major roles in developing and championing many Men's sheds, and the movement generally. Men with female partners typically participate with their strong support and encouragement.

In the UK, Women currently are the lead coordinator on 20% of the Men's Shed that are open. More importantly, they take the lead on developing new sheds (behind many shed start ups & the procurement of funds) – So 80% of the planned Sheds in the UK currently are being led by a women. Some open Men's sheds in the UK make a local decision to include women as participants. For example, the Camden Town Shed runs a Wednesday Session (10am to 4pm) for Women.

In Australia, where there is more detailed statistics on this, have found that one-third of Sheds are open to women but most have few women participating. Again, In Australia they found that men sometimes shift the stuff they don't want to deal with in Men's Sheds to women (e.g. paperwork, budgeting, accountability).

### Naming a Shed

Should it be called a Men's Shed, People's Shed or similar gender neutral name ?

In the UK today 75% of the current open or planned Sheds contain "Men, Mens, or Men's in their title.<sup>1</sup>

The UK Men's Shed Association (UKMSA) don't have a formal stance on this on the naming of men's Sheds - Although the Australian Men's Shed Association requires all their member Sheds to be called Men's Sheds - "Full Membership Level 2 Is Membership to AMSA that complies with the constitution and Bi-Laws being by definition in name a "Mens Shed" and is entitled to the full benefits of membership."

Some examples of gender neutral names in the UK include "The Camden Town Shed", "The Frome Shed", the Broadstairs Town Shed", " The Silvers Shed" etc

Including Women in the Membership (or not)

You can see the very positive part that Women play in the development and launch of Men's Shed from the introduction. However, older men are particularly vulnerable to a range of health problems because they are more likely to be socially isolated than women.

Some Men in this category may resist joining a Men's Shed, if Women are members. Many men do not find joining social activities at all easy. This can be because what offered in the community sphere doesn't appeal to them, sometimes because 'it's full of women', or perhaps they are too proud to admit to themselves that they need something they haven't provided for themselves. Whatever the reasons Men's Sheds are a provision which aims to redress that balance and the use of the term 'Men's Shed' can signal to those who are ready-to-dismiss that it is something different. It also helps local voluntary and public sector bodies know who you are aimed at. Conversely, this can also have a negative effect – See later section on funding.

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<sup>1</sup> DRAFT – Patrick Abrahams

“If you put up a sign that says ‘Men’s Health Centre’ men won’t come. If you put up a sign that says ‘Men’s Learning Centre’, men won’t come. But if the sign says ‘Men’s Shed’, then people will come. And that’s when the magic begins.”

The aim of many Men’s Sheds is to relieve distress derived from unemployment or enforced retirement at the end of our working lives. This distress can include loss of purpose and direction, loss of social interaction, loss of opportunity to exercise skills, loss of identity and status, and loss of control over your life. These and other factors eg. the effects of reduced income and ageing can lead to further health problems, including depression, reduced confidence, decline in abilities etc. Research indicates that this distress tends to be worse in men because men are less likely to have developed social relationships to the degree women usually do, and men are less likely to be able to have a validating domestic role which they can continue after retirement.

### **Can a Men’s Shed only have Male members ?**

If you review the Women's Institute website you will find this Frequently asked Question and answer:-

Why are men not allowed to join the WI?

While WI membership is only open to women, men are welcome to attend courses at our residential adult education centre, Denman College, and take part in many activities, events and campaigns both locally and nationally. The Women's Institute is an educational charity with a constitution that states membership is only open to women. Under UK law charitable organisations whose constitution stipulates single sex membership are entitled to restrict access to the opposite sex.

You could also have a look at the section on this subject entitled: "Single Sex Voluntary Organisations - s.342" It is not unlawful for a voluntary organisation to restrict its membership to one sex. It is also not unlawful for a voluntary body to provide services and benefits to one sex only if this is the main object of the body i.e. the main reason why it was set up. This exception only applies if the organisation was not set up under an Act of Parliament, and does not operate for a profit. For example, section 34 could apply to a voluntary group which is set up to provide a free taxi service for women only or a voluntary boy's group which refuses to admit girl members. Once a body has decided to either admit both sexes or to provide services to both sexes, it is no longer allowed to discriminate between the sexes (disregarding any minor exceptions to membership rules or any provision of services to the other sex which is exceptional or relatively insignificant).

### **Funding restrictions**

However, restricting membership of a Men’s Shed to only Men, may have an impact on fund raising, as some Organisations (Especially Public Bodies) may be reluctant (or restricted due to the nature of their constitution) to issue grant funds to a Men’s Shed should they restrict membership only to Men.

### **What about employed staff ?**

The Women’s Institute have several men working for them because they were the best people for the job in the recruitment process. There is a distinction between the rules governing membership of the Women’s Institute and employment law; when selecting staff it is important to make sure that employers select the right personnel regardless of their sex.

So, if a Men’s Shed is recruiting for employees, then UK employment law will apply. As an integral part of UK labour law it is unlawful to discriminate against a person because they have one of the "protected characteristics", which are, age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The primary legislation is the Equality Act 2010, which outlaws discrimination in access to education, public services, private goods and services or premises in addition to employment.

### **How to decide**

Not easy - You have to balance the advantages and dis-advantages of both ! – If you put this to a Committee, you may get different answers than talking to Shed Members individually.

### **How to formalise**

Who is eligible for Membership of the Men's Shed should be detailed in the written constitution – See example extracts below:-

MEMBERSHIP (All people) - The group shall have a membership. People who support the work of the group and are aged 18 or over, can apply to the trustees to become a member.

MEMBERSHIP (Men only) - The group shall have a membership. Men who support the work of the group and are aged 18 or over, can apply to the trustees to become a member.