

# The impact of Covid-19 on Irish Men's Sheds Members and their sheds



Irish Men's Sheds Association



## The Irish Men's Shed's Association

The Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA) was formed in January 2011. The IMSA mission is to support the development of the burgeoning Men's Sheds movement throughout the island of Ireland. The IMSA is a member-based organisation which exists to maintain links and share information among the network of men's shed in Ireland. The IMSA also act as a representative body to carry the message and ethos of men's sheds onto the national stage. As a grassroots organisation, the IMSA believe strongly in the autonomy of each individual shed, as they strive for a future in which all men have the opportunity to maintain and improve their well-being on their own terms within their own communities. The IMSA aim to make it as easy as possible for any like-minded group of men in Ireland to set up, run and maintain a Men's Shed. To this end, they provide information, resources and support to its member sheds throughout Ireland; listening and responding to its members' concerns is a cornerstone of the IMSA ethos. The Irish Men's Sheds Association is a registered charity; CHY number is 19928 and Charity Reg. Number: 20078591.

This report was produced in May 2020 on behalf of the Irish Men's Sheds Association by Aisling McGrath, an employment based postgraduate (PhD) researcher, funded by the Irish Research Council.



## Introduction

### Background

The impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic will be far reaching across multiple levels of society. Ireland is currently in Phase 1 of the government's road map for reopening society and business. These guidelines see social distancing of at least two metres enforced, school closures, limited social contact, travel restrictions and the majority of non-essential workers working remotely or not at all. The overarching message of this phase remains the same- to continue to stay at home as much as possible to ensure current measures remain effective. As a result of these guidelines the IMSA recommended on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, that the 450 plus men's sheds across Ireland temporarily close their doors.

*"It's a breakdown in local communication, local knowledge, and local meetings.  
It breaks up, the kind of the community you've built up. Broken"*

**-Shed Member on closure of shed**

### Rationale for research

The impact of closing the men's sheds is having, and will have significant impact on men's shed members. The exponential growth of the men's sheds in recent years is a testament to the benefits that men's shed members experience from attending them. The men's sheds are organic, familiar, comforting, grass roots spaces that facilitate sense of purpose, social support and comradeship and sense of belonging while simultaneously providing opportunities to engage in meaningful work, improve on or learn new skills. The aforementioned are important in protecting and enhancing wellbeing, particularly for men who benefit from the informal health promoting approach found in the community setting that is non-clinical, non-imposing and does not challenge constructs of masculinity. Many men's shed members attend the shed to work on projects and experience the "banter and craic" with other men over tea. However, there are also particularly vulnerable cohorts of men within the sheds that are at increased risk of loneliness through bereavement, mental illness and other vulnerabilities who rely heavily on the shed to provide fundamental supports to maintain their wellbeing. The IMSA have recognised the inherent health promotion that occurs within the sheds and have been working on ways to enhance the health promoting environment within the sheds, in a sensitive approach that does not upset the routine environment of the shed but seeks to enhance the organic sense of community within it. For this reason a dedicated health and wellbeing programme



“Sheds for Life” was currently being tested and rolled out in the sheds. This, among other initiatives the IMSA implement to enhance and strengthen the men’s shed movement, have ceased along with shed closures. Loneliness and isolation are widely understood to have negative consequences for mental, physical, spiritual and social wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic, including its physical health risks, unfortunately exacerbates the loneliness epidemic in tandem with it. Moreover, a majority of the men’s shed members who attend the sheds are at retirement age and beyond, meaning that they are at an increased risk of suffering serious health implications due to COVID-19. As a result, the IMSA have concerns for the physical, mental and social wellbeing of its members, particularly for those who are at an increased risk of social isolation and lack of support without their shed to attend. Since the government announcement which ultimately led to shed closures, the IMSA have been mobilising a strategic effort to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of the men’s shed members. The IMSA embarked upon a resource intensive effort to maintain communication with sheds and their members where possible. The #CALLTHEMFORACUPPA is an example of a campaign that was launched by the IMSA to encourage others to stay connected and reach out to those who may need support by simple measures such as having a conversation over tea via the phone. Communication has also been facilitated through the use of technology and online platforms, however with the cohort of men who frequent the sheds, this may not be possible as they may not have access to the internet or are unfamiliar with more modern forms of social networking. For this reason, the IMSA have made a collective effort to contact members via telephone to maintain communication. Shed members require guidance, direction and most importantly reassurance that sheds will reopen but in a way that may be different while adhering to safety guidelines. The IMSA currently plans to focus on an immediate response to supporting the wellbeing of men’s sheds through the COVID-19 pandemic as well as ensuring that suitable procedures are put in place to facilitate the safe reopening of sheds where possible. For this reason the IMSA chose to collaborate with men’s shed members and shed support volunteers to capture their experience and understand their worries and concerns for their sheds during the pandemic.

### Objectives

This rapid response study aims to; understand the impact of COVID-19 on sheds members, gain insight into the worries and concerns about sheds as a result of COVID-19 and identify ways to best assist shed members and their sheds during the pandemic.

## Methodology

Due to COVID-19, semi structured focus groups (n=2) were carried out remotely via Zoom. The first focus group (n=8) consisted of Shed Support Volunteers, key contacts who guide the sheds and communicate directly with the sheds in their locality on behalf of the IMSA. The participating Shed Support Volunteers were from a mix of counties around Ireland. The second focus group (n=12) consisted of men's shed members from various sheds around Ireland. Participants were invited to take part in the discussions via email and through identification by the Shed Support Volunteer. This was to ensure that participants were familiar with getting online and could participate in the focus groups. The focus groups allowed a more in-depth representation of the views and experiences of the shed members and volunteers across Ireland and facilitated an opportunity for the participants to discuss key areas of concern. Alongside this approach, the IMSA had also devised an assessment of sheds via a national survey to assist with developing guidelines for reopening of sheds. To complement the focus groups, open questions were also asked in this questionnaire, around main concerns for sheds during the pandemic and response rates (n=224) will be included in this study. Data via questionnaires was collated using Survey Monkey and relevant questions were analysed. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic content analysis. Data was then used to inform the results and recommendations.

All participants had the purpose of the research fully explained prior to commencement, notably voluntary participation and maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity. This was to facilitate open and honest responses. For this reason no names are used in this report. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

## Results

Results are presented in mixed method format, merging key themes from the questionnaire and focus groups. Consistent themes that emerged from the data were in relation to; communication during COVID-19, wellbeing during COVID-19 and the impact of COVID-19 on sheds. A number of sub themes fell under each of these (See Figures 1,2 & 3).

### Wellbeing during COVID-19

Participants highlighted the various ways their wellbeing has been impacted as a result of the pandemic, while also alluding to barriers and facilitators that effect their wellbeing.



**Figure 1: Representation of sub-themes under Wellbeing during COVID-19**

The participants discussed the impact of **cocooning** on themselves and other shed members suggesting that *“80 to 90% of the shed members are all cocooning because of the age demographic”*. Some participants reported increased feelings of *“isolation”* and *“boredom”* as a result of being restricted particularly for those living alone when *“we can’t even talk to our families”*, with feeling *“cut off from grandchildren a particular drawback”*. They discussed how the anxiety of contracting COVID-



19 means there is *“quite a bit of fear there as well”* feeling that they go out *“at your peril”*. This wariness reportedly may also impact some men’s shed members accessing essential services and seeking medical advice out of fear of exposure to the virus whereas others reported not *“having any reservation about going for help if I had an inkling I was going to have a heart attack”*. Participants reported their **fear of contracting the virus** has led to a heightened sense of stress where *“you think you have the symptoms, you’d be coughing and you’d think “Oh Jasus have I got it?””*. Shed members also discussed the stress of **worrying about their family members** and loved ones and how that is impacting their wellbeing;

*“Fear for myself and fear for my wife, my family, just fear that you might impact on somebody else’s life by coming in contact with them.”*

The anxiety is exacerbated by the *“surreal”* and unfamiliar atmosphere in society that they discussed feeling during the pandemic. This anxiety is conflicted with *“the lack of a sense of freedom which affects us more than being cocooned, the sense that you’ve no freedom to do what you want when you want to do it is threatening”*. Shed members highlighted in this instance how they feel that their **sense of freedom** has been taken from them with the restrictions that have been *“imposed”* upon them. This was also coupled with feeling of **loss of independence** by having to rely on others:

*“The fact that you can’t go to the shop to get a pint of milk, that you have to ask someone else to get it for you”*

Shed members highlighted how they felt a marked difference in choosing to stay at home when feeling unwell versus being forced to do so and how it negatively impacts their wellbeing and sense of self.

*“There’s an element of choice where you can accept it and just say, “This is what I have to do” but it is different when it’s imposed on you”*

Concerns were raised for how this may contribute to decline in wellbeing, particularly for older men when *“some of us felt great and go for walks and cycles and swims and all of a sudden we’re not allowed do any of that thing”*

Conflicting feelings of fear and frustration reportedly contributes to **increased feelings of anxiety** and emotional confusion that *“fluctuates from day to day”* among the shed members who reported how their feelings are *“yo-yo-ing”* and how at times they are *“unsure what to feel”*.



Shed members also highlighted the void that was left by not having the shed to go to and **the loss of comradery and connection** alongside the accompanying fears and anxieties for their sheds (see shed impact);

*“The biggest disappointment is not having regular meetings, you know all the members are very disappointed and are looking forward to meeting again”*

Facilitators towards maintaining the wellbeing of shed members during the pandemic were highlighted, markedly the contact with the sheds and other members through remote platforms;

*“We keep in touch with all the members in WhatsApp and phone calls and in the last few days we visited each other”*

The efforts of “community spirit” and **togetherness of sheds** and witnessing those “who are isolating but coming together in a way that can actually work, has been a very positive experience. To see the society of the members has been fantastic really”. The social support of other shed members has been reported as facilitating hope and easing the burden of isolation. Some of the members have been reported to be volunteering for the local communities to maintain their wellbeing and help others;

*“Well I’m a voluntary delivery person, I suppose it’s the best thing for me. For one of the local pharmacies. It’s amazingly rewarding mentally”*

Another facilitator that has assisted the men’s shed members in maintaining their wellbeing and remaining positive during the pandemic was staying productive by participating in hobbies such as gardening or doing “jobs around the house”. The weather was also a marked predictor of wellbeing; *“The weather has been so good you can get out and about. It is very hard when the weather isn’t good”*.

Participating in table quizzes remotely with other shed members has also been a common practice. This support alongside the support of family members were protective factors. Some participants highlighted how it was a chance to slow down;

*“There’s always the yin and the yang and the thing is there that sometimes maybe we overdo it and get ourselves into a state and maybe a break is no harm”*.





Outdoor spaces were reported to facilitate wellbeing as well as having the ability to **be physically active**; *“Just to get out for a walk really is brilliant, even just to get out for half an hour”*. Shed members also reported an appetite for online wellbeing initiatives from the IMSA such as the Siel Bleu “Exercise for Shedders” class which is currently being delivered remotely;

*“I stretched muscles I didn’t know I had but I thought it was excellent because you do it at your own pace and nobody saw you”*

They also discussed the possibility of mindfulness talks to promote mental health and the need for these initiatives but also expressed concern for buy-in for these approaches without the safe environment of the shed with online platforms being unsuitable for many members in terms of familiarity, safety and accessibility. This presented as a challenge for accessing **the harder-to-reach groups of men**. Sheds members expressed concern on behalf of other members who are at increased risk of isolation due to underlying health conditions, mental illness, living alone, and lack of outdoor space;

*“We find it very difficult communicating with members with mental health issues without the shed. A lot of them won’t use Zoom. It’s the anxiety you know? They can’t spend too long on the phone. It is keep them all on board and keeping their mind at rest”*

This also highlighted the theme of communication (below)

## Communication between Sheds during COVID-19

Participants spoke largely about their efforts to maintain contact with shed members and some of the barriers and facilitators they face in doing so during throughout the COVID-19 restrictions;



**Figure 2: Representation of sub-themes under Communication between sheds during COVID-19**

Shed members discussed their **efforts to maintain contact with other shed members**. Highlighting how they feel it's *"a learning curve, them trying to get through, we can't help one another except through WhatsApp and phone calls"*. They mentioned how they employ a collective effort to stay in contact and *"take it in turns to contact people"*. The priority for shed members was about maintaining the *"connection"* and ensuring that they are *"keeping an eye on"* more vulnerable members, that those living alone, with underlying conditions or with mental illness are looked after.

*"We're watching the people who are on their own, and we are keeping an eye on those, we've been in contact and they're okay"*

*"I have had a good few calls from shed members because they're aware that I'm not able to get out in the same way. I have to be careful with my respiratory complaints"*



*“One particular widower god he loves to get the call, he’s on his own completely and he’s delighted when he gets the call”*

Participants also highlighted how their connection and bond already fostered from the sheds helps them to stay connected virtually;

*“We’ve just carried on, we talk to each other on a regular basis”*

*“We have found that groups of men in the shed tend to come together on the phone, groups that naturally come together”*

They also identified ways that they are using *“creative ideas”* to keep the connection going in a personal way;

*“I’ve started growing vegetables into seedlings and I’m giving them out to the men to grow themselves in their yards”*

The main ways of maintaining contact identified by shed members were phone calls and online platforms that they used to stay connected with fellow shed members and engage in activities;

*“I think the phone calls help and we maintain the connection, which was a good, a very good idea to keep up contact and to get the sheds to keep talking. Its members talking to each other, make that phone call, it’s appreciated”*

*“Each week one of the gang sets 20 questions, general knowledge with an emphasis on the word general and not so much on the knowledge, completely arbitrary and incredibly difficult because they all have different interests. Anyway, just if you are on Zoom, it’s worth a try, stretches the brain”*

*“In our shed we have a zoom group we meet on Tuesday and Friday for an hour. We talk about our days and put up photos of what’s going on in our gardens or what activity we are doing. We find that’s a big help”*

Participants reported some **barriers with connecting virtually** or on the phone which was identified as a risk for isolation of a cohort of men’s shed members. **Connectivity issues** such as WI-FI signal and connection was identified as an issue for some members, particularly those in rural areas, meaning that they have difficulty connecting with their shed in this way;

*“It’s not great down my way the WI-FI situation is very poor at the moment”*



“Even sending emails and stuff like that at the moment is iffy”

A reoccurring theme in relation to communication between shed members was digital literacy. The participants highlighted the challenge of become digitally literate and accessing social networks online;

“It’s hard for us to just automatically switch, to be I.T. savvy. Kids are learning from the minute they are born these days so you can’t just switch like that”

*“The latest thing is; “I have a yoke I got at Christmas but I don’t know what to do with it””*

They highlighted how there are **reservations around using smartphones** and other equipment to get online among shed members as it is unfamiliar to them;

*“There’s still a few members who are scared of using I.T., mobile phones, and using the laptops, iPads, they’re scared of it. There is a huge fear factor with some members, with a small number albeit but there is a huge fear and they don’t want to be contacted”*

This, reportedly presents a challenge for **maintaining contact** with certain members, which was worrying for participants who discussed trying to find other ways to check in on more vulnerable or disconnected members. **Lack of digital literacy** also presents a challenge for maintaining routine contact as a group and engaging in activities;

*“There are a couple of members that we have not been able to keep in touch with because they don’t have smart phones but we keep in touch with their family.”*

*“You know in terms of knowing how the mobile phone is used, knowing how, well a good lot of them know that, the texting, the WhatsApp, the Zoom might be a step too far, I don’t know, our shed certainly aren’t communicating with Zoom because they’re just, they’re not into it and they don’t have the technology, like one of the guys I spoke to this morning, they have a tablet, right, belonging to the shed and a laptop, where is it? In the shed.”*

This was noted as a particular barrier when **the key contact in the shed** is virtually disconnected, meaning that the shed may have trouble communicating with each other if there is no one to facilitate it. It also highlighted the importance of the key contact understanding the need for digital literacy;



*"I rang two sheds this morning and neither one of them are proficient with WhatsApp. They don't have a smart phone"*

*"If I think it's a load of rubbish I'm not going to promote it to anybody because I won't feel confident in selling it."*

Shed members who were connecting online did report an **increase in confidence** using this approach to stay connected with other members, highlighting how this has helped them during the pandemic;

*"The first two meetings were catastrophic but we now have table quizzes and all sorts and we are now experts at this stage."*

*"We are all becoming experts in the old IT. I was one of the people who had to cocoon because I'm over 70 so I couldn't really leave the house at all."*

The participants discussed how becoming **more confident with using online platforms** out of necessity has begun to change their attitudes towards this method of communication going forward;

*"And look at us, here we are, there's a group of us here, how many of us, eleven of us talking and listen guys, couple of weeks ago, we wouldn't do this, we didn't even know about it and here we are, communicating"*

They highlighted how they now see the value in this mode of communication, particularly for maintaining contact with other shed members and to identify ways to maintain their shed;

*"A lot the men in their sheds don't have smart phones, they don't have an email address or if it is, it's non-functioning and stuff, so for me, one of the big lessons to learn out of this is, the importance of communication"*

*"The first thing we have to do is get the sheds Zoom-happy and comfortable so that we can have the conferences like these and get this money into the sheds"*

Participants also highlighted "how having gone through this episode of COVID19", shed members might be "a bit more open" to **digital literacy training**. They highlighted how "now I see the reason for it and I think maybe the sheds will see the reason for it when we go back, that it's important to know and maybe that's where an element of training comes in when all this is over. Now, we all need to upskill a little bit." Alongside the need for digital literacy training they also reported feeling optimistic



that sheds could continue this method of communication when they return to enrich their current activities;

*“The Zoom’s and the WhatsApp’s and what not, that’s something that we could continue afterwards when the shed reopens again, that kind of class that’s you know, we get the technology up and running and we could do that kind of stuff”*

*“I think we should use technology more once we get back to operating again, I think all sheds should be made converse on how to use WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube and anything else you want to decide to get them to do because it’s proving to be a very useful tool”*

Participants also highlighted how the pandemic has shone light on the need for ensuring that shed members share their **contact information** with one another so that in the event the sheds closes or a member become unwell they can stay in touch;

*“From the shed’s perspective, what I learned anyway, the importance of communication and knowing for example the addresses of the men for example, right, because wanting to send out those cards and that and not knowing.”*

*“When we get back, I’d hope you can see a reason for this now, there wasn’t really a reason up to now why I might need to know, you know, the knowledge that I have, the contact information and other details.”*

While the participants reported the ability to stay connected online and over the phone as being useful and helpful towards maintaining their wellbeing and sense of connection, they also highlighted how it does not replace the connection and support fostered by **face-to-face contact** in the sheds, and for the volunteers; the ability to understand what is happening across shed groups;

*“It’s hard to find out how sheds are really doing because you are only on the phone to them, you are not physically in a shed”*

*“Meeting like this is fine and it’s nice to see other people but nothing beats coming together”*

Lack of in person contact was a particular concern for more vulnerable members; those living alone or those with physical or mental illness. Participants expressed their concern about being disconnected from these shed members;



*"Some are seriously ill, and I can't go into their house to wish them well, so it is really difficult"*

*"They are all cocooning and elderly and they look forward to coming out and to get the news off the other boys and the chat to get out of the house like, even since before COVID to get away from the house. Company face to face."*

*"We have to be aware of people in the shed with mental health issues as they have been out of the shed for so long. We found with our shed with people with mental health issues it was a great benefit for them to mix with men, it was brilliant for their health."*

## Impact of Covid-19 on Sheds

Throughout the focus groups and within the questionnaire, shed members largely discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the sheds

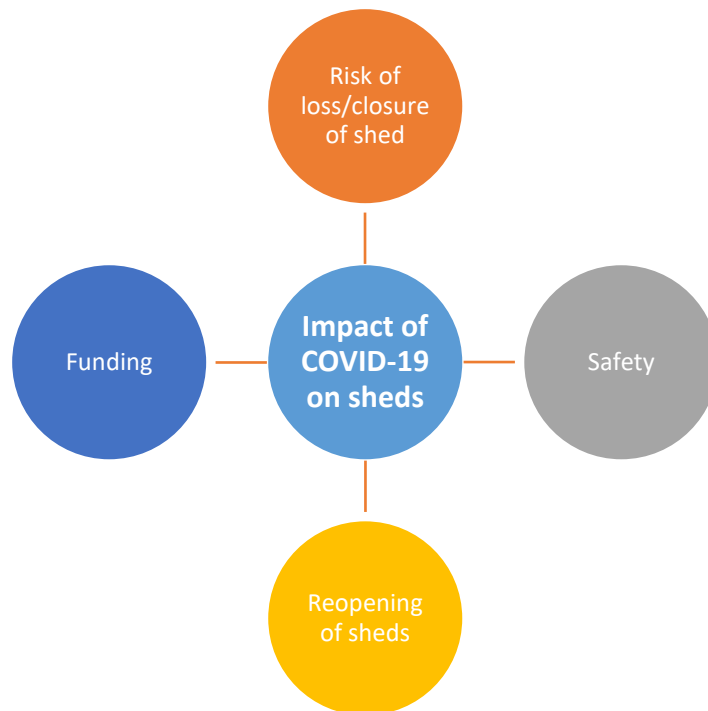


Figure 3: Representation of sub-themes under Impact of COVID-19 on sheds



Shed members (N=224) were asked how **stressed** they were about the impact of COVID-19 on their shed with an average score of 6/10 (see figure 4)

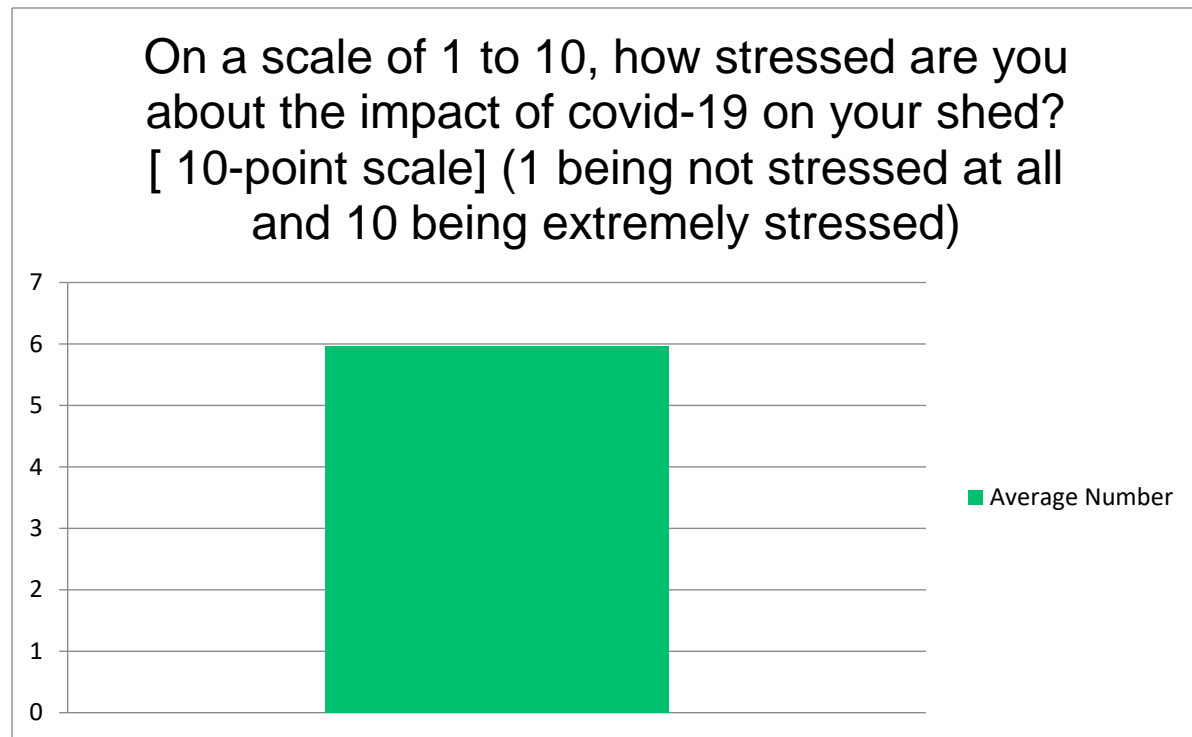


Figure 4: Self-reported stress rating of shed members (n=224)

An overarching concern identified in the focus groups and questionnaire was what impact COVID-19 will have on **funding and the financial security** of the sheds. Participants of the focus groups highlighted how they have missed important fundraising opportunities to ensure financial security of their shed. They noted how this will impact the sustainability of sheds, particularly newer sheds that are less established in the community;

*“Unfortunately you know yourselves it is all down to money, we had a fundraiser and a bake sale planned. That’s the issue with us because we weren’t established at all. We need the money to get ourselves back on track again.”*

*“We were in the process of building a new shed and we had a fundraiser organised for it for the end of May to tidy up bills and now we are in a sticky situation and we have no way of fundraising, there’s nowhere to go, nobody is around and no one has sponsorship so we are in a bit of a situation.”*

Figure 5 (below) also highlights how 81.7% of questionnaire respondents (n=224) have noted that fundraising efforts have been impacted by COVID-19.

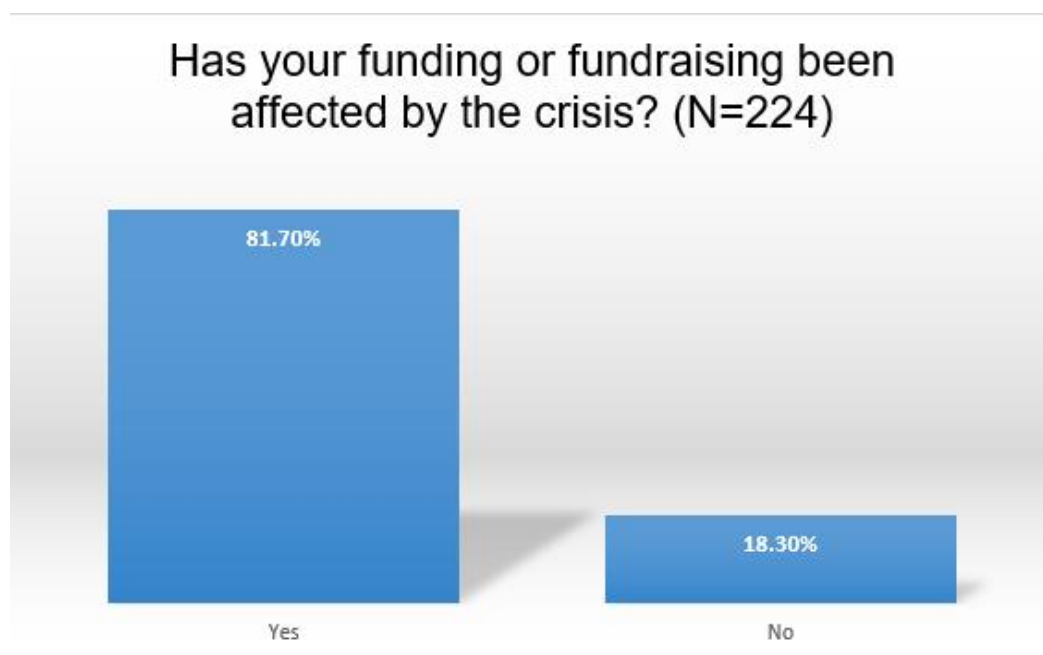


Figure 5: Impact of COVID-19 on fundraising (n=224)

Participants and respondents also noted that they are unable to make goods to sell such as kindling and crafts which is contributing to a loss of income. Some sheds also charged a weekly contribution from members to sustain the shed and cover overheads which has now been ceased as well as a loss of donations. Alongside this, shed members noted that although funding is ceased and the sheds closed, *“the landlord is still insisting on getting the rent every week”* and the continuation of *“significant overheads might make it impossible to reopen”*. A significant overhead for the sheds was insurance coverage, which still had to be covered during shed closures;

*“The big part of our insurance is the public liability side of things even though were not in the shed the shed is still there.”*



Other shed members discussed how they *“had commenced some construction work, paid out money to builders, they don’t even know if those builders will be still in business. You know so there might be some financial impacts on some for the men’s sheds.”* The shed members reported feeling a need for urgency to financially support the sheds feeling *“the men’s shed is still providing a vital service to its members”* and *“we have to be working on it now, we can’t just sit back and do nothing, we have to be pushing it forward now. There are cases to be made.”* Shed members also expressed concern around the continuation of vital grants to support their sheds throughout COVID-19;

*“Is the minister going to give the grant to the men’s sheds this year is there any sign that this is going to happen? It’s only half a million in the grand scheme its nothing but it could be vital to the sheds”*

**Table 1: How worried shed members are about the financial security of sheds due to COVID-19**

<i>How worried are you about the financial security of your shed</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
	<i>N(%)</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Extremely worried</i>	8.93%	20
<i>Very Worried</i>	19.20%	43
<i>Worried</i>	16.07%	36
<i>Somewhat worried</i>	15.63%	35
<i>A little worried</i>	21.88%	49
<i>Not at all worried</i>	18.30%	41
<b>Total</b>		<b>224</b>

The financial impact of the shed contributed to shed members expressing concern over their fears that **sheds may close permanently**. They highlighted how the need for the shed meant *“there was a great reluctance to stop and we were doing everything to prevent it closing and we were very disappointed”*. They also discussed how the mental health impact on shed members during the closures would be aided by **reopening** the shed; *“I think if we open the sheds, it’ll be 50% of that battle.”* There was an urgency among shed members to know when the shed would reopen out of fear that their *“sheds and gardens are being neglected”* or that they would lose members or shed progress would be damaged;

*“I would be afraid if it went on too long the sheds would just fall away.”*



*“We were doing very well, we would have 20 every night and different activities and getting on better than ever and it was disappointing to stop.”*

This was particularly applicable according to the participants, in the case of more vulnerable shed members who may *“get out of the habit of coming to the shed”* and become more isolated as a result. Shed members were also concerned of losing fellow members to COVID-19 and also to the anxiety of contracting the virus;

*“There’s going to be a big reluctance for fella’s to come back to the sheds because there’s going to be that level of anxiety there that you know, maybe somebody somewhere has contracted the bug and when we go back into the shed that we’re exposing ourselves to it, so it’s going to take a wee while to get over that again”*

*“Quite a few of the sheds are concerned that they won’t see certain members back again.”*

Respondents to the questionnaire also highlighted their fears of losing their premises due to lack of financial support or that the location they use for their shed becomes unsuitable to adhere to safety guidelines.

**Safety** precautions were therefore a concern among shed members;

*“Its’ that safety element you know because no one would forgive themselves if someone got sick.”*

There was a reported fear of contracting the virus in the shed. There was also a concern that adhering to the safety guidelines would be challenging in the different shed environments

*“The biggest concern would be how to maintain the members’ safety given the confined space. The shed is small and how to have the members when they return with additional unemployed men, it’s not very amenable for people of our age to be outside.”*

A concern among members was the fear that sheds may be forced to select members to attend based on restrictions which goes against the ethos and welcoming environment of the sheds;

*“The fear we would have to go through a selection process of who to let back into our shed because our shed is so small”*

As a result of safety concerns, there was an expressed need among participants for guidance on reopening and safety precautions from the IMSA and governing bodies;



*“I think getting back as soon as we can and I know it’s very hard to follow the guidelines but if you give us directions, if you could do a road map for the sheds that we would know what is happening and it would give them something to look forward to”*

*“We need to have some date to work towards because there is going to be a lot of preparation with social distancing coming into your shed and you know all the health issues tied into it.”*

This was also applicable to Northern Irish based sheds who sought clarification on conflicting guidelines in the different jurisdictions;

*“We have to prepare to leave this bubble and the guidelines you have in the south you have a roadmap with dates and times and we don’t have that here and how to approach this if there is different northern southern guidelines to work on.”*

Participants also discussed what **reopening the sheds** might be like. They highlighted how they are missing *“the banter, friendly chats and slagging”* and how they are concerned for their fellow shedders because of *“lack of social interaction”*, particularly those suffering from *“loneliness and depression who maybe feeling ignored and lacking an outlet”*;

*“Get back to the guys and the banter, back to the community, give us a purpose and somewhere to come for the week. Get back at hobbies and sharing ideas just to give us purpose to get up in the morning and have the day planned”*

*“I suffer with anxiety and depression and use my shed as therapy”*

Respondents expressed remorse at being unable to help the community by *“making repairs”*, as well missing the community of other shed members;

*“It’s a breakdown in local communication, local knowledge, and local meetings. It breaks up, the kind of the community you’ve built up. Broken”*

They also highlighted how the sheds will be needed more than ever in the aftermath of COVID-19;

*“We’ll be back to a situation with a lot more people out of work when we go back initially, there will be a need for the shed.”*

*“It’s great for the country for different men for different purposes.”*

Participants highlighted that the sheds may struggle to reopen but that they plan to focus on *“new efforts to expand recruitment”* and *“relaunch”* and *“the sooner we get back that will be the focus”*.

## Discussion

It was clear from both the participants in the focus groups and the questionnaire respondents that the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent closure of sheds has had a significant impact on men's shed members. Cocooning members, while some have the comfort of family members and partners, others are isolated and particularly feeling the loss of the social support within their shed. Shed members who participated in the study highlighted their concerns for the more vulnerable in their shed community, this is particularly alarming for men who are in an "at risk" cohort. Their withdrawal from the shed may significantly impact their wellbeing and incur further isolation. A limitation of this study indeed is its failure to access the hard-to-reach men continually highlighted in this study due to having to carry out the research remotely. The impact on their wellbeing may be more profound than what is captured here. It is clear however, that shed members are dedicated to maintaining the sense of community they have fostered among themselves, showcased by the lengths they have gone to stay in contact with one another and maintain the sense of connection and social support. Maintaining this connection has been a protective factor for many men's shed members' wellbeing.

The ongoing communication between sheds has been facilitated by online and social networking platforms namely Zoom and WhatsApp and where necessary more traditional forms of communication such as phone calls and postcards. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed perhaps a vulnerability in this cohort of men who are at risk of digital isolation. While some have reported an increase in their self-efficacy around using digital platforms to communicate, many remain isolated for reasons highlighted such as fear, anxiety, mental illness and lack of knowledge or understanding on how to utilise these platforms. A positive outcome from the COVID-19 pandemic may be an increased awareness among shed members of the need to become digitally literate and an appetite for this type of training within the sheds to enhance their wellbeing and ability to engage with other members. In fact, as per the results, many shed members are now beginning to change their attitudes towards getting online and recognise a need for it within the shed going forward. It is clear however, that this method of communication while helpful, does not replace the benefits the shed members experience from being in one another's company and engaging in meaningful exchanges and indeed silences which may be lost in translation across social media platforms.



The impact of COVID-19 on the sheds themselves was a clear theme echoing throughout this work. There is no doubt that men's shed members dearly miss their sheds and fellow members "the banter and craic" and the comradery, the sense of meaning and purpose that can be found there. The concern for funding to ensure the sustainability of sheds in the wake of COVID-19 is a valid one. Many sheds are now at risk of using what resources they have without being able to replace these vital funds while the sheds are not operating. This may make re-opening the sheds a challenge and some financial investment may be critical to save sheds, particularly those less established. There is no doubt that sheds are inherently health promoting based on this work, and how the men described what it would mean to them to reopen their sheds. However, the fear of losing more vulnerable members means the shed members will remain anxious about reopening sheds until clear instructions are received. Safety is of the utmost importance to protect members and also ensure that those who are anxious feel safe enough to return. Many sheds are large open spaces and once it is safe to do so, may return reasonably quickly once adhering to the correct guidelines. However, clear guidance to ensure safety of sheds and their members, alongside practical solutions to overcome barriers towards adherence to safety regulations in the sometimes impractical environments and confined spaces of certain sheds, is now the challenge for the IMSA and other governing bodies. It also imperative that this is done in a way that maintains the ethos and familiar shed environment for shed members. Considering the unprecedented changes that are likely to occur in the aftermath of COVID-19 and remain for some time, notably increased unemployment, anxiety and vulnerability, it may be the case, as was highlighted by the men's shed members themselves, that the sheds will be needed more than ever, alongside the initiatives offered by IMSA to support and enrich the environments of the sheds and wellbeing of its members.



## Recommendations

- Continue to facilitate ways for the men's shed members to communicate and include more vulnerable or hard-to-reach members where possible.
- Tailor and implement initiatives to encourage contact, communication and enhance wellbeing of shed members during and after shed closures due to COVID-19.
- Engage men's shed members with, and implement digital literacy training when the sheds reopen.
- Secure funding for sheds to improve the likelihood of their sustainability and the wellbeing and social support of men's shed members.
- Support sheds in their recruitment and re-launching efforts when reopened.



McGrath, A. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on Irish Men's Sheds. The Irish Men's Sheds Association



**Irish Men's Sheds Association**, Irish Farm Centre, Naas Rd, Drimnagh, Dublin  
12, D12 YXW5 . **Telephone:** 01 891 6150 **Email:** wellbeing@menssheds.ie

**Website:** [www.menssheds.ie](http://www.menssheds.ie) | [www.malehealth.ie](http://www.malehealth.ie)  @IrishSheds

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