

Kent Sheds - Men's Health Week 15 to 21 June 2020

As part of Men's Health Week, Kent residents are being urged to join their local Sheds project which aims to support wellbeing by encouraging people to make friends, share skills and support their local community.

During the current social distancing guidelines, a number of Sheds have adapted to offer members support on a virtual reality basis. One of these is the Bodgers Hut in Whitstable which has around 40 members and is led by 76-year-old retired carpenter Tony Arnold. He explains: "I live alone and I joined for the social company and to pass on my carpentry skills, teaching the members the correct use of tools and basic carpentry skills. The members make their own individual projects with my assistance. During lockdown, we're communicating by WhatsApp regularly and Facebook. "We have men and woman members from 25 years-old and upwards; many are single, lack company and confidence and may have mental health problems. The companionship of the gang helps people to socialise and improve self-confidence. I think men in sheds is a great organisation."

The Kent Sheds project started in 2014, jointly funded by Libor, building on the success of the international Men's Sheds movement, in a bid to tackle issues such as loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems.

Now part of EU SBS Sheds, the project is a collaborative, innovative partnership of different organisations from UK, Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Kent County Council (KCC) receives EU funding as part of the SBS Sheds project and commissions Activmob to help create new sheds and develop existing mobs.

Each Shed is unique to reflect local interest and skills of those attending. Very few are actual 'sheds' and most – during normal circumstances - have fun and engaging themes and venues such as fishing lakes, boats and allotments.

Prior to lockdown in March 2020, there were 21 'real' sheds in existence and - since restrictions began - those sheds have tried to continue in some fashion while another three new 'virtual' sheds have also been created.

67-year-old retired Programme Manager, Nigel Sheeran, from the Staplehurst Men's Shed said: "I helped get the shed up and running over two years ago and we have 33 members attend at least monthly when we are open.

"During current lockdown conditions, we've had weekly Zoom Calls with most members attending at some occasion. These calls cater for those who have the technology but also those with just a telephone. We have different members offering fun Weekly quizzes and have also set-up a telephone communications tree where pockets of three to four members keep in touch and pass on messages. These communications particularly help those who don't attend the ZOOM call or have medical restrictions such as Dementia."

Activmob Director Caroline Hooper explained how they have been supporting the Sheds to adapt during lockdown to continue to support members: "We saw how important it was to the Shed members to maintain connections, not only with their own Shed members but with other Sheds in our network. We set up the Kent wide Virtual Shed so members could continue to support and learn from each other during these uncertain times. It not only provides the support but is also a great way to have fun and get to know each other.

"We have the Quiz Virtual Shed and the Activity Shed also up and running, which bring people together in a common interest where they can talk and learn about things they may not have had an interest in before. Shed members have also said how important it is to have something to look forward to in the week, as in these present times, all the days start to look the same."

KCC Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health, Clair Bell said: "We know that the Coronavirus pandemic and social distancing restrictions are causing anxiety and isolation for some residents; there is support available despite the restrictions and we are pleased that so many Sheds have been able to use digital

technology to not just keep running but improve their offer to new members. We are keen for people to get involved who may benefit from the support of Kent Sheds.”

65-year-old John Marsden living in Maidstone, a retired IT Security Consultant, has been a member of Cobtree Men's Shed, Aylesford for nearly five years. He originally joined the 30-strong group as he was retiring from full-time work and "wanted to do something constructive with my newly acquired spare time".

He said: “I have been a regular attendee of the weekly video conference meetings arranged by Kent Sheds. I have also been keeping our Shed membership up to date on developments, typically via email and phone conversations. Some of the members, including myself, have been busy working on home projects.”

He added: “I would encourage others to join Kent Sheds so members can find out what other Sheds in Kent are doing and share information, problems, solutions, interests and skills, particularly at this time of the Covid-19 lockdown.

“I see this as an ideal way for like-minded retired or semi-retired men and women to get together to enjoy each other's company in a safe and welcoming environment.”

For more information got to www.kentsheds.org plus look out for the Kent Sheds Network Facebook group.

Notes:

The Men's Sheds movement started in Australia – initially aimed at recently retired men. Kent Sheds are for men of all ages and women, with ex-service people particularly welcome. You can find more information about the SBS project at <https://www.kent.gov.uk/business/business-loans-and-funding/eu-funding/step-by-step-funding>