**A year in the life of a shed**

I want to tell you a bit about a shed that I was involved in until May. There was no actual, physical shed to speak of, instead this shed was a group of people. Essentially a ‘men-in-sheds’ group – except we didn’t meet in a shed and it was for women and men. Initially envisaged as a community gardening project we called it ‘The Pottering Shed’.

It started when I happened to mention during a meeting that I’d like to set up a ‘men in sheds’ group but that I didn’t think there was time left in my placement to do so. Others present disagreed and before I knew it, we had set up a gardening group, in the grounds of the local Sea Cadets building. For six weeks it was just me and two volunteers, mowing the grass and trying to clear a bit of ground for a garden. This started to be quite dispiriting, so we relaunched as a woodwork group and before we knew it, we had a regular core of members who turned up every week. Members ranged in age from 25 to 93, some had worked as carpenters whilst others had never picked up a saw before.

Within a few months this group had become a little community. It had a warm and friendly atmosphere, where people would help each other out, teaching new skills and offering suggestions on how to make ideas into something real. We began to gain a few members who came but never picked up a tool, they came for the conversation and were happy to watch whilst others made noise and mess around them.

After 6 months we decided that ‘The Pottering Shed’ needed a shed. As is often the case, this was not as easy as we’d hoped and as I left nearly 12 months into the project we hadn’t got the portacabin we’d been hoping for, much to our frustration. But in my last few weeks the group began to plan to build a shed from scratch. This promises to be a fantastic learning experience for the group but given that most people’s first projects in ‘the Shed’ were bird boxes, it shows how far they’ve already come.

I recently had the opportunity to visit a similar project set up around the same time. This group has several substantial and impressive buildings that they have created and kitted out as workshops, thanks to lots of generous support. However, one of the committee members told me that they knew they now needed to focus on creating the right community feel, to be less busy doing and spend time being instead. Having facilitated the Pottering Shed, I was a bit jealous of the practical set up I saw, but I suspect they might have been jealous of the atmosphere we fostered. Both projects set out to tackle social isolation, particularly amongst older men, and both have been, and will continue to be, successful in this regard.

But I learnt some valuable lessons from our shed. That being is as important and valuable as doing. We only undertook small projects but the impact the Pottering Shed has had is huge in the lives it has touched: two members have said that they wouldn’t still be alive without it and the increase in confidence of members (generally as well as with woodworking tools) has been remarkable.

It’s also an example of that saying that “God’s work, done in God’s way will never lack resources” (this was what was pinned to the wall in the office at my first placement and it has stuck with me). Since I encountered men-in-sheds in Devon whilst on holiday I knew
that this was something I wanted to be involved in. It’s all my hobbies (gardening, woodworking, tools and machinery) and it’s community development too. We started the project as one thing and it didn’t work but when we went back and changed our focus it quickly took off. We found the resources we needed to set up and people that needed the project. The process we went through trying to get a portacabin was frustrating for all involved but at the end of it the group felt confident enough to learn new skills by building a workshop from scratch, skills they would never have got with a portacabin.