

Covid 19: Community impact, action, needs

Input from Ratoath Men's Shed to the MPPN on the impact of Covid-19 on communities in Meath.

Introduction and Context

The following paragraph is a quotation from a report specially commissioned by the **Irish Men's Sheds Association** in May 2020.

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 12th 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 shed¹

The report produced on behalf of the Irish Men's Sheds Association by Aisling McGrath in May 2020, accurately records how Sheds across the island of Ireland have been impacted by the pandemic.

This is a report on both the impact and the response actions taken by Ratoath Men's Shed along with the challenges our Shed members and Executive Committee have faced to date.

- Up until March 2020, Ratoath Men's Shed members met at our Shed every Tuesday & Thursday morning [11:00am – 13:00pm]. On Tuesdays, following morning tea/coffee and a chat, members participated in an hour long exercise & keep fit session led by two of our Committee members. Woodwork project work was planned on Tuesdays and mainly took place on Thursdays.
- Due to the COVID-19 emergency, the Shed was closed early in March 2020 in accordance with advice from the Irish Government and Health Authorities which was circulated to all sheds by the Irish Men's Sheds Association [IMSA]. All work-in-progress projects were halted and the well-equipped, and grant-aided, workshop was closed then and has remained closed since. All projects are at a standstill since then. Our insurance company, FBD, were kept informed.
- The Shed Facebook Page was updated accordingly with relevant COVID-19 information and the Shed WhatsApp Group and text messages were/are used to regularly disseminate information to members as appropriate.

The community response in Meath is built on the activity and supports provided by groups such as your own in Ratoath Men's Shed.

¹ <https://menssheds.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Irish-Mens-Sheds-AMCGRATH2020.pdf>

Here is a summary of the tasks that Ratoath Men's Shed have undertaken in direct response to supporting their members cocooning in the community during the Covid-19 health crisis:-

- During the period March 2020 to July 2020 Shed members kept in touch with one another through a "buddy" system and we had virtual sign-ins on WhatsApp every Tuesday morning. Those who didn't have to cocoon provided additional support for shed colleagues who were cocooning – shopping for and delivering paints and gardening items to their homes to enable them avail of the good weather to undertake home-based projects during the lockdown.
- Regular phone calls and words of encouragement were provided for those living alone and some with underlying health conditions.
- The Shed Factor initiative by IMSA encouraged men to join various online events. For example, members were alerted about the **Meithael Ceol music sessions** that were streamed from Gwedore every evening. See <https://www.facebook.com/MeithealCeol/> .They recorded videos of the 61 evenings of **Daily Online Sing Songs for the Soul** from 17th March to 17th May 2020, "Covid time". These videos are all available on the Meitheal Ceol Youtube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRyWYki9hIhACD-aVJezf2A>. The song lists for each night are listed. It was an opportunity for Shed members across the country to practice and singalong.
- Ratoath Men's Shed was, and is, represented at the weekly ZOOM meetings of the Collaboration Space initiative by Meath Partnership and hosted by Natasha Bagnall and later by Angela Farrelly. Reports from those valuable meetings are circulated to members as appropriate. The resultant collaboration space Information Hub was/is a tremendous resource and a wonderful innovative initiative on behalf of the Meath Partnership team who set it up and maintain it. We are very pleased that the PPN has continued with this initiative into the Autumn/Winter period.
- We value and very much appreciate the support and information provided by the Resource Officers in Meath Public Participation Network throughout.

Responding with some key points drawn from the work of your group and experience regarding community needs and priorities would be of real value.

Throughout the 6 years since our Shed was set up in Ratoath, we have received excellent support and encouragement from the local community and from the Local Authority in the form of grants.

Ratoath Men's Shed applied for various grants as they were announced in 2020 and we are very grateful to Meath Partnership, Meath County Council and local County Councillors in the Ratoath Municipal District for responding generously to our grant applications. The grants received were used to implement the improvements at the shed that were specified in the application forms.

The following are Ratoath Men's Shed's response to the following questions posed by MPPN...

1. What are the current needs in the community that your group is responding to?

Our Shed members are responding to national guidelines on what to do to stay safe, healthy and alive! This means that over half of our members are staying at home and not venturing out. Shed members cannot participate in any community activities that they routinely enjoyed. By obeying the guidance and isolating, some members are becoming quite lonely and unsure. A few members assist Ratoath Tidy Towns with litter picking & major clean-ups, while socially distancing. This is one of the very few community activities that our Shed can do currently.

To keep going and to remain positive, our community requires the personal resilience of individuals, collective responsibility and a heightened sense of awareness of the need to take good care of each other. This can and must be achieved through cross-community group communication and engagement. For example, a community-based check-in and support structure to facilitate and encourage neighbours to keep in touch and assist one another.

2. How have you adapted or developed supports for your community?

Here is a summary of the tasks that Ratoath Men's Shed have undertaken in direct response to supporting Shed members cocooning in the community during the Covid-19 health crisis:-

- Since March 2020 Shed members have continued to keep in touch with one another through a "buddy" system and we had virtual sign-ins on WhatsApp every Tuesday morning. Those who didn't have to "cocoon" have provided additional support for shed colleagues who were cocooning – shopping for and delivering items to their homes.
- Regular phone calls and words of encouragement were provided for those living alone and some with underlying health conditions.
- From Monday 29 June, all sheds received their Covid-19 support packs from the IMSA in the post. These packs contained vital information on staying safe at the shed, should our shed decide to reopen in a limited capacity. The packs also contained resources such as social distancing markers and posters.
- IMSA produced a video on staying safe at the shed amid the current pandemic. We shared it widely, in our WhatsApp groups.
- The Executive Committee of the Ratoath Men's Shed have kept in touch with one another throughout and we have been in touch with our Insurance Company to keep them informed about our situation at the various stages. We decided not to rush the reopening – we took our time to plan for a safe reopening in August 2020. Committee members used the month of July to work on the preparations for a safe reopening as national restrictions eased.
- During the August-September period about half of our members attended weekly one-hour outdoor gatherings in the Shed yard at the back of the Shed – following COVID-19 guidelines.
- Shed members were delighted to meet up again and be able to share a story or yarn.
- When Level 5 was announced our shed was closed again. Two key holders check the Shed building regularly while other members pick litter around the Shed area after weekends.

3. What resources are needed to sustain what you are doing?

- Consistent with the ongoing goodwill towards our Shed in the local community, we received a generous donation of new Sanitiser units and a "hamper" of very useful products including Antiseptic Disinfectant, Sterilising Fluid, all-purpose heavy duty wipes and Hand Gel. These were used effectively by members to follow guidelines and keep safe during short weekly social gatherings outdoors in the Shed yard during August and September 2020.
- Shed back yard was cleaned up, flower beds were cleaned and outdoor seating arrangements were put in place to ensure safe distancing.
- Walls, ceilings and skirting boards of the social room, hallway and kitchen were all freshly painted by members of the Shed Committee.
- New face masks and visors were procured for each shed member
- A new non-contact infrared thermometer was purchased.

- Individually named mugs, with our Shed logo and each person's first name have been ordered from a local supplier. These include a number of extra mugs for potential guests
- Instead of signing in at the Shed on the day of attendance, a rollcall took place and the names of all members in attendance are recorded in accordance with the new guidelines.
- A new vinyl floor covering was laid in the reception, toilet, social room and kitchen. This will be much easier to keep clean and we have also obtained a set of easy to clean foldable tables and stackable chairs.
- Ahead of the winter months our Shed CCTV and Alarm systems have been upgraded.

Unfortunately, the indoor space available at our shed is relatively small and compact and it is no longer suitable for all members [16 – 20] to come together for indoor events. We require a more suitable, well ventilated larger area – either by liaising with a local sports club to use their building or to modify existing facilities at our shed premises.

The benefit to the local Ratoath community is that Shed members have a safe place to attend, to maintain contact with one another and to offer assurance and confidence to each other and their families that all the COVID-19 guidance is being adhered to. The importance of human to human contact in a local community setting was, and remains, very important for all members.

4. How have community needs changed over year 2020 & what is your outlook for the future?

Community needs have changed significantly over the year 2020. During the Level 5 restrictions most local amenities are closed and are out of bounds [e.g. sports grounds]. This means that there are very few places for the entire community to get exercise. Thus, Ratoath footpaths are becoming more and more congested with runners, cyclists and pedestrians – resulting in some vulnerable people opting to stay at home altogether to avoid the risk of being pushed off the narrow paths.

A local woodland area has become a place of refuge and a place to get away from the crowds. But there is inadequate seating and no publicly available toilet facilities anywhere in the area.

Apart from the Supermarkets, only take-away outlets are open in the area. This has resulted in increased levels of all kinds of litter and the bins would need to be emptied more frequently.

Shed members and Tidy Towns volunteers are struggling to keep on top of the litter problem.

5. What do you think of communities' abilities to come together and take action as needed?

Locally each area seems to rely more and more upon volunteers to come together to take action as needed. The pandemic has shown that people will volunteer when / where they can.

However, it is very onerous being a volunteer and some people shy away when they realise the levels of commitment and time consuming tasks that are involved. This is made all the more demanding because of the volumes of report writing and general administration work involved.

6. What do you think of communities' ability to stay resilient and keep well?

Communities' ability to stay resilient and keep well is being challenged the more the pandemic restrictions remain in place. People are being told what they "cannot" do and there is very little positive guidance/advice on what they "can / may" do.

The national news reporting has a disproportionate focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, one new bulletin after another. This has a negative impact on the people staying at home all the time. Their fear and anxiety levels are heightened.

The Social Media channels are uncontrolled and unbalanced in what they post – this adds to the anxiety levels among the vulnerable in our community.

The PPN and IMSA initiatives to run wellness and mindfulness sessions on Zoom in recent weeks are very welcome and positive supports for Shed members and their families particularly during the short November days while Level 5 restrictions are in place.

Patchy broadband capacity and non-responsiveness of the Internet Service Providers [ISP] is becoming a major issue as more and more users depend on good quality communications to link up and stay connected while staying apart.

7. Are there gaps in services provided to meet community needs?

Yes. One critical issue that has surfaced in recent weeks in Ratoath is the pollution of the air from the burning of toxins-emitting materials in domestic fires and in a local wood-burning take away. There seems to be no environmental monitoring capacity within the local authority to observe and monitor such polluting occurrences and to bring infringements to the attention of those causing the air pollution.

The litter bins around the village are not emptied at weekends and are often left overflowing. We don't understand why this continues to be the new norm. We need better litter management services.

8. Are there areas where support coordination is needed or should be improved?

Yes. People have become afraid and scared to go to their GP or to attend for hospital appointments and they are choosing to try home "remedies". This has the potential for major health-related issues in the future.

People are asking why there are no non-COVID hospitals that they can attend safely. Nobody knows!

9. How can we improve collaboration amongst organisations/groups/statutory services to support community?

The Local Authority should stop depending exclusively on local County Councillors to deal with all local issues. There are many people who are reluctant to approach them with their concerns.

A list of official contact persons representing the various sectors in the Local Authority should be provided to each community organisation for onward dissemination locally as required.