You offered to take follow up evidence in writing. Below I have taken that opportunity to give more rounded information in regard to Men’s Sheds because they are a fairly new concept to Scotland.

**The background.**

The idea started in Australia 13 years ago. They now have over 1000 sheds in Australia. It spread rapidly to New Zealand and in the last few years to Europe. Ireland have around 120 sheds, the UK over 70 sheds. Westhill was the first in Scotland to follow the Australian model and opened its doors 2 years ago. There are over 40 sheds in the making or operating in Scotland to our knowledge.

There are more but the independent nature of the model means not all have submitted data.
The key to Men’s Sheds is that they are a rare example of a social situation that men are attracted to. We believe this is because it is not a service, the men are in charge of their own attendance and what they get involved in; from full on in the workshop to men who come to talk. Sheds are very flexible- the basics are hands on activities and, of equal importance, a social area. Following that they can be turned to anything the men are interested in.

Men get a feeling of self-worth from assisting in projects for the community (benches for playgrounds, school library shelves, refurbishment of furniture etc.). We also discuss health issues at break times (surprisingly often) and arrange talks from health professionals.

These headings are the committee’s lead on topic areas.

1. **What is the most important issue for the Committee to consider when embarking on this inquiry investigating social isolation?**

   Social isolation can occur in any population because the causes are common to many aspects of society- redundancy, bereavement, retirement etc. The meeting was a good example of many charities pursuing their own passions and meeting different aspects of the topic, there will be overlaps and gaps. The big issue is communication between them and how the gaps can be alleviated (overlaps being a good thing in my opinion) when the system is dependent on independently operating charities.

   For the following topics I will concentrate mainly on Men’s Sheds.

2. **What groups of older people do you think experience isolation and its negative impact? And, what experience do you have of social isolation amongst the groups you work with?**

   Men are notoriously difficult to reach in social situations. Women are naturally more adept. So when an event happens where social contacts are lost it is difficult for men to recover. These events are commonly redundancy, bereavement, retirement, worker mobility.

   But we see another dimension where the elderly population can be mobile, moving to be near family support or because they have always wanted to live in an area but were previously tied to work. In this process they lose friends they have made in their previous residence.

   Some men are physically disabled, have had a stroke or in early stages of dementia come to the shed. All are welcome but we emphasise that we are not trained medics or social workers and are not providing a service. If a man needs support they can bring their carer with them.

   Younger men also experience isolation for which the shed is a respite. Men have used the shed when unable to work for extended periods of time due to injury or illness. Others to improve their English or men raising children. They get a boost even if their injury means they cannot get hands on they can discuss projects or just talk to people about how their health is progressing.
We see great improvements in many men who attend the shed who say they are happier and this can be observed.

“I love coming here- once I get in the workshop I forget all my aches and pains”
“My wife loves me to come to the shed, she says I have a big grin on my face when I return”

In topic 3 following is evidence from Aberdeenshire council on the negative impacts.

3. **What is the impact of social isolation on mental and physical health? Are there any other impacts?**

The Westhill Men’s Shed had its origin as a result of community engagement held in 2009 to draft the Garioch Community Plan 2010-14. The lack of social interaction for retired men, in particular, was initially raised at the ‘With Inclusion in Mind’ events, the results of which were taken as a basis for a Garioch-wide consultation. It became apparent that communities, both of place and interest, shared a common concern over the lack of activities for older men and the resulting deterioration in their health and wellbeing. Men were becoming withdrawn from their community, some were not getting out of their houses and had little social contact and in turn were becoming hard to reach and hard to motivate.

At the same time as the community engagements were being carried out, the NHS Area Manager advised that concern had been raised by the local GPs that there was an increasing number of recently retired men with low level mental wellbeing in the Westhill area. This was attributed to oil workers, due to their working patterns, not being able to form the social networks needed to maintain an active and healthy retirement. Reports were also received from the Citizens Advice Bureau of increasing numbers of marital breakdowns in the recently retired age bracket.

4. **Are there examples of good practice in helping to combat social isolation among groups of older people?**

We appreciate Men’s Sheds address only one ‘group’ of older people. In this group will be men who would not want to be ‘hands on’. While Men’s Sheds can provide non-hands on experience (e.g. Westhill has a bridge club as suggested by a member in this category) they are not likely to be initially attracted to a Men’s Shed.

The experience of promoting Men’s Sheds proves to be an ‘easy sell’. 5 minutes talking to anyone and they ‘get it’. Women are particularly enthusiastic and usually follow it up with their men. See attached study for data to back this up.

5. **What kind of questions should the Committee ask during its inquiry?**

Obviously to collect data from NHS, GPs, CAB, Councils and NGOs on the scope of the problem and its impacts.

Perhaps peculiar to Westhill is the preponderance of retiring oil workers. They arrived
during the boom years after 1970, settled down, raised children. Now they are retiring, they have been working hard (maybe offshore or overseas for extended periods), the children have left home and they have not built up a social network. Any other family are located where they originated from. There may be other effects on the population that may be more comprehensively known by charities such as Silverline.

Finally in this section it will be appreciated that as a small charity some areas would be better served by a national body able to bring together best practice and distribute it for use by start-up Sheds. There is a recently constituted Scottish Men’s Shed association that could take on this role. Other charities may well benefit from similar coordination so discovering where these exist and what can be done to encourage them would be useful going forward.

6. What could the Scottish Government and others do to tackle social isolation?

Speaking for Men’s Sheds they do attract a hard to reach group, and they do work. Westhill was formed following information on problems in the area (from NHS, GPs and CAB plus an Aberdeenshire study). Attached is a survey performed in Westhill shed; it backs up that the Shed is beneficial. By the end of 2015 the PHD student who has been studying the shed since opening will submit his dissertation giving more detailed analysis. The government could encourage Sheds to form. Here are the issues:

- The biggest issue is usually finding premises. The Community Empowerment bill will assist here with local authorities.
- Next is support for creating the constitution, becoming registered as a constituted body, getting approval from OSCR. Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action have a two year full time worker employed to assist at this stage and the results can be seen on the map.
- Assistance with book keeping or at least setting up the system is also key.
- Start-up funding is required. Westhill was fortunate in being first; other sheds will find a diminishing availability of funds.

The big benefit in these austere times of the model we are using, independent sheds with all volunteers, is very cost effective. Each shed will be different but as a guide Westhill needs about £6000 a year to run (£3500 is storage heating bill) and we can make nearly half from donations from doing community projects. More money is fund raised by our own efforts (tool sales, bag packing, raffle) and we could be fully self-funded by charging for attendance at the shed. We wish to avoid this as it would be less inclusive. The premises are on a peppercorn rent from Aberdeenshire council (Community Asset Transfer with social benefit factored in) without which the finances would be very different.

Nick Pilbeam
Chairman
Westhill Men’s Shed
2 February 2015