

LESSONS FROM 25 YEARS OF THE ENGINE SHED

Marian MacDonald

Abstract

Ten years after its closure due to local authority funding cuts, this article looks back at the 25 years of Edinburgh's Engine Shed, an innovative project that helped to transition young people with learning disabilities into secure long-term employment. The Engine Shed, with a popular café, bakery, and tofu-making unit, leaves a legacy of positive impact, but also a 'hole' in service provision in the capital. Here its former CEO reflects on the lessons we can learn from its operation and, indeed, from its loss.

Keywords: Engine Shed; employability; learning disabilities; social enterprise

Introduction

Edinburgh's Engine Shed began life in 1987 as an innovative training project to help young people with learning disabilities make the transition from school or college into paid employment. At that time, it was not generally expected that these young people would or could work in mainstream workplaces. The Engine Shed wanted to move away from the idea that people with learning disabilities required 'care', and towards an approach that was about building up social and practical skills to allow individuals to become as independent as possible, with the ultimate aim of paid employment. Essentially what was created was an 'apprenticeship' model that allowed people to 'learn by doing', over a three-year period. The project took over and refurbished a disused railway repair shed in Edinburgh's Southside and created a vegetarian cafe, organic bakery and tofu

Marian MacDonald has worked in the Third Sector in Edinburgh since 1980. From 1987 she took the lead role in developing, establishing and managing the Engine Shed until it closed in 2015.

production unit that provided the training environment – and a source of around half of the project's income. Meeting rooms on the top floor of the building were available, at a charge, for small conferences and events. Products from the bakery and tofu unit were sold to a variety of shops and restaurants in Edinburgh and beyond.¹

Over time, the Engine Shed became a well-known and much-loved institution in the city, with its own unique atmosphere. When it was threatened with the loss of its council funding in 2013 a petition to save the Engine Shed was signed by 10,000 people. The council relented on that occasion but it was clear that a serious threat to its future remained. A research review was undertaken, initially conceived as a response to the potential loss of council funding, one that would present a strong case to elected members of the Edinburgh City Council about the economic as well as the social value of the Engine Shed's approach. The immediate background was the taking over of responsibility for funding for all employability projects by City of Edinburgh Council's Economic Development Department (EDD). For most of its life the Engine Shed had been funded and supported through the city's Social Work Department, and had built up strong links and relationships with its officials. So, when the changeover took place the Engine Shed was less familiar with, and to, those within the EDD. This applied to all the other employability projects that worked with disabled people. All of these continued to receive funding (albeit cut by 4% and subject to a 12 month review) while a new strategy for this field was developed.

The wider context, of course, was that the Council as a whole was facing major cuts to its own budget and had to balance the books somehow, so this period was full of uncertainty for everyone. By the summer of 2014 the implications of the new funding strategy were clear: the Engine Shed's funding would cease from the new financial year. Its doors closed in March 2015 after more than 25 years. Hopes to relocate and relaunch the café foundered and the organisation was wound up. The research review, originally intended to bolster the case for funding, gradually morphed into a less research-focused piece of work, one telling the history of the organisation and offering lessons to others about how to help young people with learning disabilities move into paid work. In these continued times of austerity, and a decade on from the closure of the Engine Shed, that story bears retelling since it offers many insights into the ongoing experiences of, and opportunities open to, young people with learning disabilities leaving school or college.

Current supported employment provision in Edinburgh offers a 'One Stop' generic service of vocational profiling, job matching and support known as the Supported Employment Model. Whilst this approach will meet many needs, the

The Engine Shed

generic service relies on the ability to have discussions and an understanding of the world of work. Individuals with the level of learning difficulties the Engine Shed worked with would struggle with this model. Their needs were for a planned and gradual transition to develop skills and confidence in the adult world to make a successful move into paid sustainable employment.

Prior to 2015 other organisations, funded by CEC, used the Supported Employment Model – we were all part of the Scottish (Edinburgh) Employability Network which included our unique service. In general the SEN services managed to secure very part time employment (of around 2–6 hours a week) for their learning disability clients. The Engine Shed's aim was for 16+ hours a week such that individuals would be fully emerged in the employment sector. The loss of the Engine Shed has thus left a significant gap in provision of employability services in Edinburgh. The excellent work of other groups can only partially meet this shortfall. The Grassmarket Project, for example, offers a very supportive, learning environment to a range of groups which include individuals with learning disabilities and support them with their plans for the future which can include helping them into work.²

About the Engine Shed

The Engine Shed grew out of, and contributed to, a sea change in the way society viewed people with learning disabilities, changes which shifted the emphasis away from social segregation and towards social integration. This process took a long time: for many years people with learning disabilities were often characterised as 'defective' by society at large and this did not change overnight. Until the middle of the twentieth century much of what lay behind the attitude of the state towards those with learning disabilities was one of fear: they were often demonised, discriminated against, institutionalised and prevented from having children: at its most extreme were movements towards eugenics or, at its most extreme, the mass killings of disabled and vulnerable people in Nazi Germany.

In Britain, the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 created the option of compulsory detention in hospital on the grounds of disability, and referred to such people as 'defectives'. Not all people with learning disabilities were not detained in institutions, however, and the Act enabled local authorities to develop what would be later known as sheltered workshops for the occupation, training and supervision of 'defectives' living in the community, though these only paid 'pocket money'. The aftermath of the Second World War marked an important turning point in attitudes towards disability, with the creation of new

Human Rights Legislation and the idea that basic human rights were universal; they applied to everyone regardless of ability or disability. This helped create an environment that would see the emergence of various 'rights movements', including disability rights groups such as 'People First' and the idea of 'people first, disability second'. The creation of the NHS also saw the emergence of a more humane 'medical model' of disability, where people were no longer seen as 'defectives' but with conditions that required treatment by specialist professionals. The institutions that had previously housed people to keep them away from the rest of society were renamed as hospitals, with the emphasis now on care. This did not always mean good treatment, however, and standards of care were sometimes poor.

The 1960s started to see major changes in terms of theory, legislation, policy and practice towards people with learning disabilities. At the same time, campaigners were bringing to light scandals in hospitals and legislation was introduced that would eventually lead to the closure of these hospitals and the introduction of the idea of 'Care in the Community' where people would live as independently as possible outside of institutions. Meanwhile, a number of changes had taken place to the original idea of the 'occupation centres' established under the 1913 Act. The focus was on training people to move into outside employment and Adult Training Centres with an industrial focus were established in most local authorities in the 1970s. The early 1980s saw the introduction of Sheltered Placement Schemes, where employers could take on a disabled worker and be partly subsidised for the fact their productivity might be lower than a non-disabled worker.

Much had changed and was changing, then, by the late 1980s, with a humane emphasis on people moving out of long-stay hospitals and into the community and increasing day care services, including adult training centres where people could be prepared for employment. However, thinking and legislation can take a long time to translate into service-provision. Someone has to bring together the ideas, the policy and the funding to make something happen locally; the Engine Shed was one of the first to provide tailored employment training for young people with learning disabilities. The Engine Shed was created by those already working at the forefront of developing new services for people with learning disabilities, and who were guided by the philosophical thinking of Rudolph Steiner. This recognises everyone's potential and tries to realise that potential through creativity. Followers of Steiner set up the first Camphill community in Aberdeen: Camphill is now an international movement, with communities in more than 20 countries.

Jack Reed, who was instrumental in the birth of the Engine Shed, was involved in the early development of this movement in Scotland, working both

The Engine Shed

at Camphill and at Garvald School in West Linton. *Garvald Edinburgh* was set up in 1969 as a residential resource with day activities for people with learning disabilities from the age of 16 who had left the existing residential education and care services. Most of these day activities were primarily therapeutic and creative but there was interest in exploring the idea of paid work for the more able. This led to the establishment of a new training facility based in an old factory building in Gorgie, which was refurbished to create a number of workshops. Garvald's role has never been to provide paid work for the individuals attending their services, largely because of the level of disability their attendees have. The idea, way back when the Engine Shed was developing, was that if individuals became able/interested in moving onto paid work they would be referred to the Engine Shed as the next step. This did happen successfully for a small number. Garvald has developed their services in a dynamic way incorporating a flexible individual timetable of activities for their attendees and are very much linked to the wider community.³

By the mid-1980s the changes begun a decade earlier were starting to have a major impact locally, particularly the shift to people moving out of long-stay hospitals to live in the community. The process for closing the main learning disability hospital for Edinburgh, Gogarburn, began in the mid-1980s but accommodation and services had to be created before this could be completed. Garvald Edinburgh was already a key service provider, offering both supported accommodation and day centre places, so was involved in high-level discussions. Reed, taken seriously by the people charged with implementing the new policies, brought forward ideas, and one of these was to look beyond the care and therapeutic aspects of their services and towards employment as an important element in life, for those who were able to work.

These ideas were enthusiastically embraced by Marian MacDonald, a social worker at Garvald Edinburgh (and author of this article). MacDonald's role at Garvald was to offer individual counselling and support to centre users as they made the important transition into adulthood; to liaise with other professionals who could provide help and services, as well as with the families. In this capacity she developed a good understanding of the needs of these young people and what their wishes were for their futures. Many had a clearly-stated desire to work: some had brothers and sisters who worked and they wanted to be the same as them. Trained in social work in the late 1970s MacDonald's work experience had primarily been in community development, working with a wide range of professionals to provide help for clients. This was work that demanded breaking down barriers between professionals. Experience working for a voluntary organisation in poverty-ridden Muirhouse had shown MacDonald the advantage of working in this way: she was involved in

Marian MacDonald

organising self-help groups for young single parents and liaising with social services, health care, further education, etc, to help them get the services they needed. It was a practical and pragmatic approach to helping people move out of difficulties and get on with their lives.

It was in this merging of MacDonald's pragmatism and determination to encourage people to expand their horizons, and Reed's creative and holistic Steiner philosophy, that the unique approach and atmosphere of the *Engine Shed* emerged. The idea of an employment project for young people with learning disabilities attracted support and modest funding locally, but a lot more money was going to be needed in order to set up a fully-functioning service. This came in the form of the new European Social Fund (ESF) and would be the mainstay of the Engine Shed until 2005. The Engine Shed was one of the earliest projects funded in Edinburgh under this new measure, and the first voluntary sector project of its kind. This funding was not only materially crucial – the Engine Shed would never have happened without it – but also helped shape the Engine Shed's own training programme and thus contributed to its success.

The Engine Shed was different to its 'sister' organisations – Camphill, Garvald – in that it dealt with young people who had less severe learning disabilities and had the potential to gain work skills and move into mainstream employment. As such it had a vocational training, rather than a therapeutic, focus. It was, however, built upon the same basic philosophical foundations as these other organisations. The Engine Shed approach was based on the work of Rudolf Steiner's work in curative education and social therapy. In practical terms, what this meant for the Engine Shed was:

- Recognition of the value and uniqueness of every individual with the aim to enable them to realise their potential.
- The value of meaningful work was recognised as very important for the self-esteem and development of an individual into adult life. Work provides a helpful routine and structure to the day and also offers the opportunity to make a contribution to society.
- A sense of being valued and appreciated by others.
- Working to maximum ability, providing as high a quality service/product as possible.
- Cultural life is very important, i.e., seasonal festivals, connection and awareness of the environment, as well as arts/crafts, relationships etc.
- Seeing the individual in a holistic way: the need for rhythm in life, i.e., work and leisure, weekday and weekend, regular working routines and holiday periods etc.

The Engine Shed

The Engine Shed had a very particular atmosphere, the result of this philosophy linking the practical to the personal and social.

It is likely that most customers and trainees at the Engine Shed were never aware of this particular approach but it is what gave the place its unique atmosphere. Customers and other visitors experienced it partly through the building; the décor, the exposed stonework, the wooden floors and furniture, paintings on the walls, flowers on the tables etc. and through their interaction with the trainees and staff. Trainees experienced it through the way their training was structured which was very practical, developed in gradual and incremental steps which involved them in reviewing their own progress continually. Their positive experience of the approach was probably more unconscious than conscious, however, the integrity of purpose and the thoroughness and consistency of its application, which is central to the Social Therapy model, was something the Engine Shed continuously strived for. The strength, sustainability and durability of this underlying philosophy is evident in the fact that the broad approach did not change over 25 years, despite the enormous changes in the wider economic, social and policy background.

The target group for the Engine Shed were those with mild to moderate learning disabilities, i.e., those seen as having the ability to learn vocational skills and cope within mainstream employment. The Engine Shed defined 'mild to moderate' in a pragmatic way. Most, but not all, those who came through the Engine Shed had attended special schools so had been assessed since childhood as having a learning disability. They were then assessed through interview and a trial period to explore whether they were able to benefit from Engine Shed training. This pragmatic and flexible approach was important as the term learning disability covers a wide spectrum and has many different causes. In practical terms, Engine Shed trainees were young people who could not read or write (or could do so to only a very limited extent) and who, in terms of their social development, were operating at a lower age than their chronological age. Many had speech problems that made it difficult for strangers to understand them. All of them needed support to different degrees throughout their lives. What the Engine Shed sought to do is to help them to learn work skills but also to mature socially and develop some degree of independence from their family/carers.

The model adopted by the Engine Shed was based on the principle of 'learning by doing'. People with learning disabilities may find it hard to understand concepts that the majority of people take for granted. A lack of literacy and numeracy skills brought challenges for the trainee as well as for the Engine Shed in devising teaching methods appropriate for each individual.

Members of staff had to be inventive: for example, a trainee who could not count above five was given the task of putting batches of 25 blocks of tofu together by counting out five rows of five. One goal was to help trainees gain basic vocational qualifications. As most trainees could hardly read, however, assessing their knowledge was a challenge: Denise Paterson, the assessor from Telford College, developed a workbook for each trainee based on pictures. Denise came to the Engine Shed every week to work alongside individual trainees, checking their knowledge by seeing how they completed tasks and using the workbook to mark their progress. The workbook had pictures of all the items of equipment in the kitchen and she would point to each, asking what it was and what it was used for. This approach worked extremely well and the trainees looked forward to their sessions with the tutor. Denise was an invaluable part of the training process for many years; she really helped trainees to understand and develop skills and she felt the positive benefits of teaching on site -incorporating theory with practice as a way to support the learning process. Denise would describe coming to the Engine Shed 'as the best day of her week' (McGeoch, 2011).

The overall goal of the Engine Shed was to give people the basic work skills and confidence to go into the workplace, perform simple tasks well and to find their place within the wider workforce. To deliver this a core training process operated as, essentially, an apprenticeship model over (generally) three years. This model was holistic and integrated, incorporating:

- An Emphasis on Trainee Participation
- Learning within a peer group setting
- Planned Progress
- High and Increasing Expectations
- Achieving and Learning by Doing
- Linking to Paid Work
- Time to Develop

The model provided the time and commitment to help individuals to develop a range of skills and capabilities to cope with becoming a young adult ready for paid work, and to help them develop the maturity and confidence to make this transition.

In 2005 an internal business review led to changes and improvements on the operational side of the Engine Shed. The shop, although popular with trainees, staff and customers, was losing money and had to close, leading – unfortunately – to staff redundancies. A new staffing structure was introduced, alongside a new management team. New posts were

The Engine Shed

introduced – marketing assistant, training officer, catering worker and catering assistants. These changes were necessary to ensure financial viability and sustain valuable training opportunities for people with learning disabilities who might not otherwise have been able to find paid employment. Anne-Marie McGeoch, a long-term advisor and friend to the Engine Shed, marked the change away from the 30% funding from the European Social Fund to a more commercial and business-based model in *A Guide to the Engine Shed, The Development of a Social Enterprise* (McGeoch, 2008). The book documented the beginnings of the charitable company, its roots, and successful search for a home, aims, ethos, services and achievements. Trainees were interviewed for the book and all said they had enjoyed their time at the Engine Shed, giving them the opportunity to meet new people, gain new skills and learn the importance of timekeeping and fair discipline. They gained independence by developing skills in using public transport, learned to mix with a wider range of people and take responsibility for their own behaviour. Parents and carers talked of the very positive effect the programme had on their sons and daughters and commented on its supportive environment and positive approach to problem-solving.

A further book (McGeoch, 2011) marked the 21st anniversary of the Engine Shed, giving a selection of recipes and stories from its work. Up to 2011, 80% of the Engine Shed's trainees had successfully moved into paid employment at the end of their three-year training programme, and 20% into further education. At that time, trainees worked in the Engine Shed Café, the bakery, the tofu production unit, the hospitality unit, and prepared for and ran a stall at the Edinburgh Farmers' Market. In 2015, in face of chronic uncertainty over funding, the Engine Shed commissioned a review (Engine Shed, 2016) to outline its contribution to supporting people with learning disabilities into secure and meaningful employment. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to talk with trainees, their parents and carers, employers, funders, staff, and Board members. Focus groups and individual interviews were undertaken in order to find out more about the trainees, their needs, their experience of the Engine Shed and their progress after leaving. Some of the voices from that review will be aired later in this article.

The review/research document was completed in 2016 after the closure of the Engine Shed. Much of it was written by Anne-Marie McGeoch, and it was completed by Kate Skinner. The document was sent to key stakeholders, e.g., contacts within careers departments, special schools, colleges, and third sector organisations. It was also circulated to the growing social enterprise sector since the Engine Shed was acknowledged as a successful social enterprise i.e., 60% of its annual revenue came from its commercial operations (cafe,

conference room hire, bakery, etc). The axed Council funding grant had made up the remaining 40%.

The Trainees

The criteria for acceptance as an Engine Shed Trainee was simple:

- Having a learning disability
- Being unemployed and having experienced (or likely to experience) exclusion from the labour market
- Being between 16 and 60 years of age.

The Engine Shed could offer places to 30 trainees each year, and about 10 trainees completed the three-year training programme each year. Referrals were generally made through voluntary organisations; statutory employment/careers services; social work departments and community health teams; parent and carer groups. There were also self-referrals from individuals who contacted the organisation directly as well as trainees recruited through open days and organised group visits. School pupils with learning disabilities undertook work placements at the Engine Shed to gain a taster of what it would be like to train on a full-time basis.

Trainees who met the criteria for selection came from a range of background and ages, with a wide range of disabilities. Some had been diagnosed with multiple disabilities, some of which were physical and sensory. Some came after experiencing severe problems in their educational careers where they had suffered discrimination, bullying and frequent failure. Some had also attempted to undertake paid employment, only to find that it did not work out. Individual conditions brought specific and significant difficulties for each and every trainee, but in addition, most suffered from a severe lack of confidence as a result of their previous experience of education or work. Many were limited in their ability to adhere to rules or to adopt a schedule, use public transport, take or follow instructions, turn up on time without support, choose and wear appropriate clothes, look after their own personal hygiene, manage interpersonal relations with others. Many lacked the social skills which help them to participate in the wider world and with others. Many have struggled with the impact of the low expectations of those around them on the quality of their lives. These low expectations often resulted in their being passive and overly grateful for the services they were offered. Over the years, as educational services improved, their – and their parents’ – expectations increased so that they looked for greater access to training and support leading to paid

The Engine Shed

employment. Understandably, they were not content to be excluded from opportunities.

The training opportunities available at the Engine Shed arose from a variety of enterprises in which the organisation engaged. There were meeting and conference facilities serviced and supported by trainees in cleaning, equipping and catering for users. The café served a range of meals to the general public, many of whom were loyal and regular patrons, often bringing their guests. The tofu production unit prepared and sold tofu to a list of demanding and prestigious customers. The bakery provided organic breads and cakes to a wide range of outlets. Engine Shed trainees gained formal qualifications, such as the National Certificate in Food Hygiene and SVQ's in Counter Service, Food Preparation and Bakery. The number and type of qualifications depended very much on the ability and interests of each trainee. Training took place in a lively, public environment, helping trainees to develop social as well as work skills. Clear rules and boundaries were set, and high standards of behaviour and work expected. Trainees responded well to this clarity, which helped them gain the focus and discipline necessary to achieve their goals. The Engine Shed was also very much concerned with the personal and social development of its trainees. Regular social events were organised outside working hours, including summer outings, a Christmas meal and trips to the theatre, as well as other events during the year. Trainees were supported and encouraged to establish a social life outside the Engine Shed and be more independent from parents/carers.

Between July 2000 and June 2003 there were 66 trainees at the Engine Shed, fairly evenly split between males and females. During this period almost half of trainees were aged between 16–24 years and almost one third were aged between 25–39; about one in five were aged 40+ (see Table 1).

In the 2015 Review it was estimated that around 80% of the Engine Shed trainees had moved into paid employment. All of the former trainees interviewed in 2015 had moved into paid employment or voluntary work on leaving the Engine Shed, and all but one remained so at the point of interview (See Table 2). The individual who had found himself unemployed had encountered worsening physical disabilities which had – after 15 years in the same job – meant that he was unable to continue to work. Such overall outcomes seemed substantially ahead of other 'employability' programmes in Scotland (see Engine Shed, 2016). Remarkably, of those trainees in the 2015 review who had entered paid employment upon leaving the Engine Shed, over half (14 of 22) remained in the same job. That period of stable employment ranged from those who had fairly recently left the Engine Shed (four respondents had stayed in the same job for 1–2 years), to those who had left a decade or so before (six respondents had been in the same job

Table 1:
Trainee profile by age/sex, 2000–2003

Age	Male	Female	Total
16–24	15	16	31
25–39	10	11	21
40–49	7	3	10
59–59	2	2	4
Total	34	32	66

Source: Blake Stevenson Ltd. (2004)

Table 2:
Trainee employment, 2015

	On leaving Engine Shed	In 2015
Paid Employment (16 hrs or more per week)	19	16
Paid Employment (less than 16 hrs per week)	3	3
Voluntary Work	2	4
Unemployed	–	1
Total	24	24

Source: Engine Shed (2016)

for 9–12 years). Such stability is all the more remarkable, as the Review notes, since many trainees had entered the hospitality sector, where staff turnover is generally high (Engine Shed, 2016).

Voices from the Engine Shed

The *Engine Shed's* 2015 review allows us to articulate the voices of former trainees and their parents/carers. This section will explore and amplify those voices. A number of people were involved in the Review. Anne-Marie McGeoch collected much of the data and contributed to its drafting; Kate Skinner edited and completed the final report. Ron McQuaid (University of Stirling) provided

The Engine Shed

invaluable advice in shaping the structure of the report and also in the design and analysis of the schedules which were used in interviews with former trainees. The section drawing on these, and other interviews, forms the heart of the report. Stephen McMurray helped design the interview schedule, undertook several of the interviews with trainees, and analysed the findings under Ron's guidance. Julie Ridley, Reader in Applied Social Services at the University of Central Lancashire, provided a background paper on the key changes in social policy in relation to employment support for people with learning disabilities as a resource for the *Engine Shed*. Other useful information was provided by Robert Davie from The Family Advice and Information Resource in relation to the changes in benefits for people with learning disabilities. Rosie Barclay, member of the Board of the *Engine Shed*, and previously its Chair, provided information on the relevant changes to educational policy and employment support for young people with learning disabilities. Marian MacDonald – CEO of the *Engine Shed* throughout its existence – supported all aspects of the report, organising the practical side such as interviews with former trainees and parents, and providing much of the history and background information. The report was only possible, of course, with the contribution of the former trainees and their parents who consented to be interviewed.

The heart of the review was interviews with 24 former trainees, following up the employment history of those who had come through the Engine Shed training. Some of these respondents were then in their 40s having worked for more than 20 years; they provided a unique insight into the long-term employment experiences of people with learning disabilities. The interviews also captured detailed information about respondents' personal lives as well. It included questions about their disability and educational background; what they gained from their time at the Engine Shed; what they have done since in terms of employment; what support they get for their work and in their lives and what they hope for their future. The aim was to gain an overall picture of their lives, how employment fits into them and to assess the long-term impact of the Engine Shed.

All those interviewed had considerable learning disabilities and were sometimes not able to give full answers to direct questions. Many interviewees were unable to give full details of their disabilities, or how they were affected by them in practical terms at work and in dealing with day-to-day issues. Some also had speech problems and in these cases staff at the Engine Shed helped interpret responses. Sometimes parents were also present at the interviews to assist. In-depth interviews were also undertaken with the parents of five of these former trainees. These provide poignant insight into the reality – with its

Marian MacDonald

triumphs and challenges – of looking after and living with a learning-disabled child and adolescent and how these continue into adulthood. Several parents were elderly and their sons or daughters middle-aged. They all point to the Engine Shed as having played a key role in their child's development, and how having a job, in the words of one parent 'means everything'.

The father of 'R', a woman with a number of physical, sensory and learning difficulties spoke of the difference *Engine Shed* training had made to his daughter's life:

We were just delighted to get her in; we were delighted it was a charity and it was doing what it said on the tin. It was excellent what they did because they trained her and in the shop she was meeting people; every minute of the day people were coming in and there was a wee area in the shop you could sit and have a coffee.

The whole idea of the training was to get youngsters into that kind of environment so that at the end they would be okay to go into some kind of work environment. We certainly wanted her to try to be independent that way, which certainly she is.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 60-61)

P's mother reported how the training had built her son's confidence and resilience:

Well, it was good to see that he had a place to go, that was the first thing, and he enjoyed it – he liked the people he was working with – we got a whole story every day when he came back. P is quite a sociable person and he really enjoyed it when the people came in and spoke with him.

It's all been progressive – P's gained something everywhere he's been – but he certainly gained an awful lot at the Engine Shed. He gained in confidence and is able to do things. I think it made a difference in him travelling in a bus – he came in here with no bother in the mornings, so that was good.

I think too it made a difference when he came here that he had men to interact with. P's pretty wary of men – we were a very female home. That has made an awful lot of difference that we had the confidence that he would be ok, that he wouldn't be bullied because so many had been bullies in the past with him. So that helped him as well and made him more relaxed in men's company.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 61)

The Engine Shed

In these two cases – as with others described in the Review – it is clear that parents/carers saw the lives of their children transformed by the Engine Shed. Meaningful work allowed them to both develop some independence in their lives, but also make a valuable (and valued) contribution to society. They also could act as ‘ambassadors’ for people with learning disabilities, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions, hopefully raising expectations, opportunities and life-chances for this disadvantaged group.

Post-training employment was not necessarily easy: one parent recounted how his daughter’s employer had lost a catering contract leading to uncertainty as to whether she would keep her job. Thankfully, she did:

It was scary for a while as we didn’t know if they were going to keep her on or not, and she was worried about it. It’s everything to her. That’s her role in life, this job, and she loves it.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 56)

Resilience and confidence were revealed by one former trainee who asked for variety in his working tasks at his employer’s annual appraisal:

I think I was getting a bit bored ... being in [the same place] all the time ... I want a bit of a change.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 57)

The review found good support to former trainees by their new employers which reinforced confidence and resilience:

When I have to do big jobs like putting deliveries away, because I’m a slow learner they give me that wee bit extra time because they understand that I’m a slow learner. I feel they are really good.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 58)

Yes, I do get support sometimes from my colleagues ... and if I get told what to do and then I’ll do it, without grumbling, we help each other.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 58)

It was good there because even the boss I had there, he was good. He showed me the ropes and once he showed me he just liked you to get on with it ... and if I wasn’t sure of anything I knew I could go up and ask him and he would keep me right. I did speak to my boss because I was getting bullied by a couple of people. I just knew if I had any problems I could speak to someone.

(Engine Shed, 2016: 58-59)

Learning from the Engine Shed: What We Lose

By the point it was wound up, the Engine Shed had seen more than 300 people go through its training programme, the vast majority of whom transitioned into paid employment. It is clear that it provided transformative support and training for a life in paid employment and was dearly valued by both its trainees and their parents/carers. A decade on from the closure of the Engine Shed in March 2015 this article hopes to have shed some light on how it developed and what it delivered. In doing so it will also sketch out what we lose when funds are cut, when services close.

It is now 10 years since the Engine Shed closed its doors for the last time, after twenty five years of providing a unique service to individuals with learning disabilities. The space to look back at the highs and lows of being fully engaged in this enterprise can still feel overwhelming. The main theme running throughout this time was of having the energy to meet the ongoing challenges that arose to ensure the stability and development of the service. The trust, motivation and energy of the young people we worked with to help achieve their personal goals, inspired the staff team on a daily basis to keep going.

First and foremost, the closure in 2015 had a devastating impact on everyone at the Engine Shed. The young people and their families had to face that the service would no longer exist and were in a state of shock and distress over their futures. The staff also shared these feelings not simply of loss of employment, but also the purpose and direction that the Engine Shed gave them. In general, there was a disbelief that this could possibly be allowed to happen. At a meeting of parents to share the news, one family said they were angry and sad, not because of themselves or their son who had benefitted from the training and had just started his new job, but for young people and their families in the future who would no longer have access to this unique service that had succeeded in transforming so many people's lives.

The loss of the Engine Shed also had ramifications throughout a wider network of groups and individuals it had contact with. Over many years it had been a focus point for a wide range of people. It was a building that offered services to the public (i.e., cafe, conference room hire services). A key aim had been that the young people would learn their skills in a very public setting by getting used to interacting with a range of people. The vegetarian cafe became a social meeting place for people for all ages and many friendships and links were forged. It attracted customers from near and far. For some people living on their own in the area, it was a warm and friendly social setting for them to be part of. Regular customers took an interest in the young people serving them, being aware of them growing in confidence and developing skills,

The Engine Shed

encouraging them all the way. Naturally the closure was felt as a huge personal loss for these customers. Our conference/meeting room facilities similarly attracted a wide range of diverse groups and organisations that engaged with the young people servicing the event. At a professional level our established networks with school, colleges, careers officers, social work departments, health services, third sector organisations, and last but definitely not least, employers also lost a vital resource they could access.

Overall, looking back, I picture the Engine Shed as a natural social hub that operated and connected at so many levels within a wide and varied network. I think its members shared a common aim, that of seeing the potential in each individual we were working for, to raise their expectations and confidence towards achieving their goal. In doing this we were all also changed, for the better, in the process.

A healthy social life is found only when, in the mirror of each soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the community, the virtue of each one is living.

Rudolf Steiner, 'the social ethic'.

Notes

1. A flavour of the Engine Shed can be gleaned from a short video about its work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfz8A5qRvLk>.
2. See <https://grassmarket.org/>.
3. See www.garvaldedinburgh.org.uk.

References

- Blake Stevenson Ltd. (2004), *An Evaluation and Historical Review of the Engine Shed*, Report for Garvald Community Enterprises. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oQevi8weJZwukHlbpH2i0-qDQ9SNXkQN/view?usp=sharing>.
- Engine Shed (2016), *Training and Employment for Young People with Learning Difficulties: Lessons From 25 Years of The Engine Shed*. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1r1gh_qstRledqfK4-nOjbmo7XMn2YNyf/view?usp=sharing.
- McGeoch, Anne-Marie (2008), *A Guide to the Engine Shed, The Development of a Social Enterprise*, Garvald Community Enterprises. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pPHcOLrQSeYKYiFiUdpLq6waVM29KzUo/view?usp=sharing>.
- McGeoch, Anne-Marie (2011), *The Engine Shed: Lovely Recipes and People's Stories*, Edinburgh: Garvald Community Enterprises. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1va3xemLbooOuOVUrTVOcVSKerBj9MwTo/view?usp=sharing> (See also a related video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfz8A5qRvLk>).