Developing age friendly communities in rural Australia

Prof Jeni Warburton
La Trobe University
Today’s presentation

• Why is it important to focus on ageing in rural communities?

• What are age friendly communities? Why are they an important way to look at rural ageing?

• What are the challenges associated with developing age friendly communities in rural Australia?

• Are there also benefits and potential?

• What can we do to maximise these advantages and minimise challenges? -> Some policy challenges.
Some starting points

• This is a story, a narrative, but like any story is not true for all older people nor all rural communities
• Clearly diversity is enormous and needs to be recognised
• Important to adopt an evidence based approach – the best evidence available
• Includes some studies we have conducted in North-East Victoria around benefits / disadvantages of ageing in a rural community
• We need to start with the demographics
Rapidly growing grey

- Demographic change – rural communities are rapidly ageing
- Global trend in urban / rural migration
- Older people remain behind as young move away
- Older people are choosing to move for retirement lifestyle reasons (tree / sea change)
- Including farmers moving into town
Rapidly growing grey 2

• The proportion of older people is projected to increase over time

• By 2026 it is predicted that over 24% of Australian rural population will be aged over 65 years

• However, the picture is uneven – many rural communities are already over 30% older people

• E.g. Hindmarsh, Vic (34.3%) or Mount Morgan, Qld (37.2%)
But is it a problem...?

• Rural population ageing is clearly a trend – but is it a problem??
• Of course, older people vary in their capacities, abilities, health status
• However, the evidence shows that they are more likely to be individuals who need services / have complex health needs / experience socially isolation
• Who often live in declining, disadvantaged communities
• Can be a case of **Ageing in rural communities: Vulnerable people in vulnerable places** (Joseph. 2005)
It is certainly significant

• To regions...Growing numbers of older people in disadvantaged regions
• To individuals ... body of literature that highlights the importance of place as we age
• Place affects mobility, independence and quality of life
• Research shows close relationship between neighbourhood environment and self reported health
• Quality of neighbourhood important in later life as both walking and driving ability may decline
Leads us to the question....

- How can we build and create healthy places to live?
- What are the characteristics of such places?
- Need to understand the relationship between rural living and healthy places for older people
- ie create positive age friendly communities
Age friendly communities

• Supporting older people to remain living in their communities
• Requires planning, provision of support services, removal of barriers
• Environmental gerontology – recognises importance of place as we age
• Important nationally – state / local plans eg “a community for all ages”
• And internationally eg WHO Global Age Friendly Cities Project - moving into rural settings
Figure 1  Dimensions of the Age-Friendly Community Discoursed

[Source: Lui, Everingham, Warburton et al. 2009]
Facets of age friendly communities

Physical infrastructure:
• Built environment
• Housing, transportation
• Outdoor spaces

Social infrastructure:
• Social cohesion, sense of place
• Social inclusion & respect
• Social and civic engagement
Challenges to building age friendly rural communities

Physical infrastructure
Access to health & aged care services

• Decline in health and service infrastructure in many rural towns
• Shortage of health and aged care services / workers
• Difficulties of delivering services efficiently in a large geographical area
• Exacerbated by resource crisis of many small local governments
Access to services

• Lack of local shops including services eg banks, P.O.s have closed

• Problems of access – footpaths & built environment
Access, mobility, transport

- Transport one of most significant issues
- Lack of public transport, difficulties of access
- Driving capacity critical
- Loss of partner can mean loss of access
- However, quieter roads, safer and more secure areas
Physical infrastructure

• Lack of physical infrastructure:
  – Housing & built environment
  – Access to information and services

• Impacts on capacity of rural communities to be age friendly.

• Physical dimensions lacking in resource-strapped rural environments
Opportunities to build age friendly rural communities

Social infrastructure
A positive place to live

• Many older people report high quality of life and highly supportive of their local environment
• Both problems *and* opportunities
• Diversity among locals – particularly long term rural residents and tree / sea change seeking lifestyle change – diversity of needs
Social capital and friendships

• Local opportunities to be involved
• Rural communities sought for their environmental amenities but also for high levels of social capital
• No. of studies highlight high levels of social networking, civic participation and strong neighbourhood connections
Nearness of family

• Social trends led to many people being apart from family
• No family for social interaction and support
• Implications for families too in terms of generational interaction
• Many older people may rely on neighbours and friends in absence of family
A role to play

• High level of social capital -> volunteers
• Greater opportunities to volunteer and play a role in the local community
• Easier to join in
• Also other roles available which can maximise health and social outcomes (physical activity, meaningful action)
Opportunities to build age friendly rural communities

Governance
Potential for governance

• To be age friendly, communities need to also offer choice and local involvement
• Easier to have a say
• More local opportunities to be involved / make a difference
• Having a local identity, understanding local conditions & people, being networked into community can help this dimension
Summary

• Age friendly communities: mix of physical and social infrastructure
• Rural communities may be strong on social dimension
• Loss and risk is not evenly spread – some are more at risk eg socially isolated, retirement migrants, those without local family support
• Loss can be more acute for those in rural communities eg loss of driving licence, loss of partner, loss of health
Summary (2)

• Irony is that this might increase need for services but fewer services available
• Key question: can social capital compensate for lack of physical infrastructure
• E.g. One study of ‘dying’ rural town (McKenzie & Frencken 2001) found that social capital countered lack of services – but is this enough?
Summary 3

• People need places to go to meet – accessible transport / buildings
• Need strong local information and communication strategies
• Need supportive agencies and activities – health promotion activities – community development – information sources
• Can these all be offered in small locations with resource constraints?
Policy challenges

• How can you build, support and maintain age friendly rural communities?
• What can we do to maximise benefits and minimise disadvantages of rural ageing?
• How can we best support individuals and communities?
Finally...

• The time is ripe
• The policy window is ajar
• And the stakes are high...
Thank you!

Prof Jeni Warburton
John Richards Initiative, La Trobe University
j.warburton@latrobe.edu.au