

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....

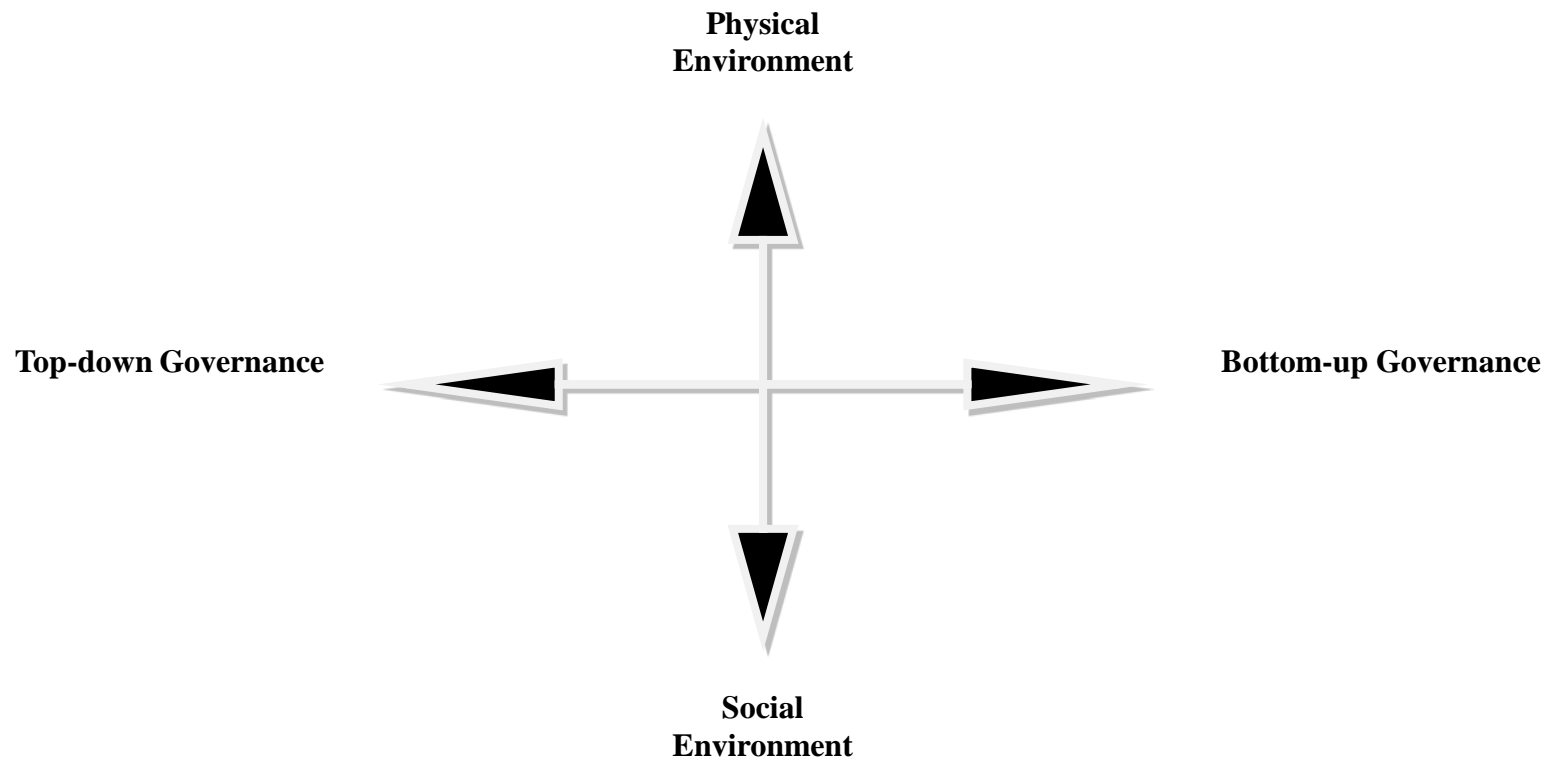
- How can we build and create healthy places to live?
- What are the characteristics of such places?
- Need to understand the relationship between rural living and healthy places for older people
- le create positive age friendly communities

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