

Opinion

Ageing in rural Australia

Provision of services to rural communities raises important challenges for all levels of government, providers and local communities, writes **Dr Helen Feist**.

AS A DEMOGRAPHER and geographer by trade I have a great interest in the interactions between people and place.

As a country-born individual, one of my ongoing passions is ageing in place in rural Australia. Globally we are not only experiencing an ageing of our populations but also greater urbanisation. For the first time in human history there are more people across the world living in cities than in rural areas. This means we have lower population numbers in rural areas, but also that there tends to be much higher proportions of older people, particularly in small rural communities.

This is the result of three things: normal population ageing processes (fewer births and increased life expectancies); the out-migration of younger people from rural communities (for work and education opportunities) and an older population that is less likely to move (due to strong place attachment and home ownership but also because rural property prices may constrain choices around moving).

In some circumstances this is compounded by the in-migration of older people, particularly of 'young-old' retirees, moving to high-amenity rural regions for a sea change or tree change lifestyle. I often tell people that if you want to see what Australia's ageing population may look like in 20 years' time just head to any rural community where the local population is usually already made up of 20, 30 or even 50 per cent of people aged 50 years and over.

Where we live often defines how we live and how well we age. One important aspect of where we live that shapes an older person's experience of ageing is the availability of resources; both basic services such as shops,



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transport and medical care, but also life enriching resources such as family, friends and social opportunities.

For older people living in rural communities, access to key elements for a good ageing experience, such as these, can be more problematic. There are four key policy areas that need to be addressed to enable older rural people to age well in the environment of their choice:

Provision of services at the local level: We need to acknowledge and address the issues with staffing and distance associated with rural aged care service provision. Both of these issues require innovative thinking such as repurposing existing services, expanding the use of new technologies, as seen with new e-health initiatives or mapping population data to ensure service delivery has good coverage.

Provision of suitable housing at the very local level: More appropriate housing choices are needed at the very local level; there are some good examples of this in communities with populations as small as a few hundred people that could be replicated. In addition to this, we need to consider affordable housing solutions in regional and urban areas for those rural older people who need to move closer to more complex services, or loved ones in nursing homes or other family members for extra support, but are currently priced out of the urban/regional housing markets.

Transport: This is an eternal catchcry issue in rural communities but we need to be more creative about how we provide flexible, appropriate transport. For example, common transport registers that enable several aged care providers and health providers to combine

transport resources to meet whole of community or regional needs may be a viable option in some areas.

Enabling social connectedness across distances: We need to enable older people in rural areas to remain connected to their social and support networks and to community information, no matter where those connections may be located. Research shows that encouraging, enabling and supporting older people to utilise new technologies and the internet enables them to strengthen connections to their social networks, to community information and to services.

Provision of services to rural communities raise important challenges for all levels of government, for local communities, families and individuals alike as the balance is addressed between efficient and effective service delivery and equitable, relevant services to enable older rural people to age well regardless of their location. ■
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