Healthy ageing in Australia’s rural places: the contribution of older volunteers

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Drawing on case studies of two ageing rural communities in north-east Victoria, Australia, this article explores how older volunteers both contribute to, and are supported by, third sector activities and services within rural environments. As such, volunteer activities build healthy ageing in rural settings, and contribute to community viability. However, further analyses suggest that reliance on third sector voluntarism also presents serious challenges for the future. This is particularly the case in relation to the sustainability of healthy ageing in rural settings where public sector resources are being rationalised. Our findings show that there are risks associated with an over-reliance on volunteers in rural communities and with the excessive regulation of volunteers unless appropriate infrastructure and support are provided.

key words Australia • older volunteers • rural • community sustainability

Introduction

Australia is a nation of volunteers, with 38% of women and 34% of men making a contribution to civil society, which is valued at some AUS$14.6 billion annually (ABS, 2009). Volunteers often provide services that would otherwise have to be paid for or withdrawn, and as a result enrich our cultural, social, political and economic lives (Oppenheimer, 2008). As in other countries, the voluntary sector in Australia has been subject to definitional disputes and contested notions (Alcock, 2010). However, there is now an emerging consensus, with the term ‘third sector’ representing the myriad of non-profit organisations that support civil society, which are increasingly squeezed between the government on the one side and the market on the other (Lyons, 2001; Alcock, 2010). In a neoliberal welfare environment, volunteers in Australia are often utilised to deliver community and other services, and in some cases to replace services previously run by government, which presents a variety of challenges (Warburton and Jeppsson Grassman, 2011). These challenges are particularly acute in Australia’s rural areas, where it is not considered cost effective for the public sector to deliver services, the market is not interested and the local third sector is expected to take up the slack.

Rural communities are increasingly reliant on volunteers, particularly in neoliberal welfare regimes vulnerable to retrenchment within public services (Hardill and Dwyer,
Volunteers also play a significant role in maintaining the community organisations and groups that contribute to the development of social capital in rural regions, as Tonts (2005) has noted in his research on rural sporting organisations. This reliance is tested by growing rates of population ageing occurring in rural locations (Milne et al., 2007; Keating, 2008; Winterton and Warburton, 2011). Rural older people are in an interesting position, in that they are more likely to require services while also constituting the principal source of volunteers. Research has focused on the former, with authors such as Heenan (2010) noting that far less is known about the latter, that is, how older people contribute to their rural places. This lacuna is particularly important given that there are differences across rural communities that impact on the forms of volunteering undertaken within them (Rozanova et al., 2008).

It is also important to recognise that older people’s engagement as volunteers is a key dimension of healthy ageing, which challenges assumptions about later life as a time of vulnerability and decline (Warburton et al., 2007). Furthermore, it allows us to explore and acknowledge ways in which older people contribute to the delivery of services and supports to other older people through rural third sector organisations. This article aims to address a gap in knowledge in the Australian rural context relating to voluntarism and healthy ageing. Specifically, the study aims to:

- identify ways in which older people currently contribute to their rural places;
- explore how, in the current policy environment, reliance on third sector voluntarism is challenging for rural older people.

Background

The academic literature is increasingly recognising the importance of volunteers and the third sector in ensuring the health and wellbeing of ageing community residents. This occurs across two dimensions. First, there is considerable evidence highlighting the importance of third sector organisations and volunteers in providing care and support for older people (Hoad, 2002; Skinner, 2008). Second, there is a large volume of international literature from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States highlighting the benefits of volunteering in later life, with the social benefits generating improved health outcomes (for a review, see Cattan et al., 2011; Morrow-Howell and Mui, 2012). However, despite these advantages for healthy ageing, there are other more critical place-based implications.

Recent studies emanating from the UK have emphasised the impact of spatial and geographical factors on third sector activity and organisations, with Edwards and Woods (2006) indicating that the role and scope of the third sector within communities are contingent on their scale, setting and socioeconomic context (see also McCulloch et al., 2012). Third sector development and activity can be affected by issues such as the uneven distribution of organisations, neighbourhood or regional differences in voluntary activity, and place-related characteristics (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004). For example, in ‘deprived’ localities volunteering plays an important role in revitalising communities and building resources (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Hardill and Baines, 2009). This is particularly pronounced in rural areas, which are simultaneously experiencing increased population ageing and the closure of government services.
‘Rurality’ is a contested concept, and often there is no clear delineation between urban and rural (Woods, 2006). In Australia, ‘rural’ can be viewed as both a locality and a social representation, the latter highlighting the culture and experience of rural living (Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2006). From a policy perspective, Australia’s rural areas are frequently defined according to the Remoteness Areas index, which divides the nation into five primary classifications – major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote – based on distance from urban centres (ABS, 2010). Areas outside of major cities are understood to be ‘rural’, with the two areas classified as remote usually inhabited by Australia’s Indigenous populations. In general, rural regions are more vulnerable to socioeconomic disadvantage, are often located at significant distance from large population centres and are increasingly likely to be populated by older people (Davis and Bartlett, 2008; Winterton and Warburton, 2011).

Further, rural communities are often geographically dispersed, resulting in comparatively high costs for delivering government services (Davis and Bartlett, 2008; Keating, 2008; Winterton and Warburton, 2011). As a result of neoliberal policies in Australia, there has been a retreat of state intervention from rural development, leading to closure or downsizing in rural areas of services and facilities considered uneconomic (Woods, 2006). The continued centralisation and withdrawal of public services as a result of neoliberal policies and service rationalisation are having a serious impact on many rural locations, as well as on the health and social outcomes of rural residents (Ryser and Halseth, 2006; Alston, 2007; Milne et al, 2007). They are also creating an increased reliance on local third sector organisations and volunteers, including volunteers to support reduced state services (Yarwood and Edwards, 1995; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Philip and Shucksmith, 2003). In the UK, Fyfe and Milligan (2003) argue that such organisations are viewed as a panacea for many of the problems faced by neoliberal states.

Yet this is by no means without problems for the third sector, which already struggles to deal with resource constraints and increased regulation, as well as suffering from lack of attention in Australian government policy (Baines et al, 2011; Bowlby and Lloyd Evans, 2011; Oppeheimer et al, in press). Governance arrangements for voluntary organisations have become more formalised, and pressure on the third sector is increasing in relation to volunteer management and coordination. These developments are impacting on volunteer recruitment and retention, particularly within community services, where voluntary organisations have a growing need for, and expectations of, volunteers (Warburton et al, 2013). They are also impacting on the willingness of many volunteers, particularly older ones, to give their time (Warburton et al, 2007).

Despite these challenges, there is a body of international research highlighting the importance of volunteering and the third sector to rural communities. As Hardill and Dwyer (2011) have noted, in the English context, demographic ageing, rurality, voluntarism and the third sector are inextricably linked, with the third sector assuming greater importance for older people residing in rural regions (ACRE, 2013). In developed countries, rural areas are ageing much faster than urban ones (Milne et al, 2007; Keating and Phillips, 2008). This applies in Australian rural areas, where demographic ageing is occurring as a result of two concurrent trends: young people relocating out of rural areas for education and employment; and older people in-migrating to rural areas on retirement (Hugo, 2005). To date, over a third (36%) of all Australians aged over 65 live in rural communities, a figure projected to rise significantly over subsequent decades (AIHW, 2007). As a result of these demographic
shifts, demand on local services is expected to increase at a time when many rural communities struggle to provide the types of health and elder care services needed to sustain older people (Alston, 2007). This suggests a greater role for third sector activity in providing support for older people to live independently within their rural communities, as found in Canadian research (Hanlon and Halseth, 2005). Similarly, a British study has noted that rural community supports for ageing populations would be unsustainable without the continued goodwill and commitment of the sector and its volunteers (Hardill and Dwyer, 2011).

Across international contexts, rural communities generally report higher levels of volunteering than urban areas (Choi, 2003; Warburton and Stirling, 2007) and tend to exhibit higher levels of social networking, civic participation and neighbourhood connections (Alston, 2002; Ziersch et al, 2009). While the contribution of volunteers is well known in rural places, as we have noted earlier, rather less is known about the role of older people in rural communities. Recently, two large-scale Australian studies have shown that older people make a significant contribution to the development of rural social capital (which includes volunteering in the third sector as well as informal supports) (Davis et al, 2012; Hodgkin, 2012). Similarly, it is known that rural older people make important contributions to the places where they live (McKenzie and Frencken, 2001; Warburton and McLaughlin, 2005; Wiles and Jayasinha, 2013). Yet, in the context of rural service decline and rural ageing, it is important that we understand how sustainable the relationship between volunteering and healthy ageing will be in the contemporary era of resource constraints.

Volunteering and the third sector provide opportunities for social participation of older people, a key contributor to individual health and wellbeing. One recent study suggests that the general health benefits associated with volunteering are more important for disadvantaged rural populations (Hurtado et al, 2011). Volunteering has potential to combat some of the other health disparities associated with rural living (Keating et al, 2011; Winterton and Warburton, 2011), as well as helping to meet the challenges of social isolation among older people (Morrow-Howell et al, 2003; Walsh and O’Shea, 2008). There are higher reported levels of volunteering in rural areas for three reasons. First, rural communities can provide positive opportunities for older people to participate, as people are more likely to know each other (Rozanova et al, 2008). Second, higher levels may reflect a greater need for volunteers, as they tend to step in to provide some compensation for the lack of formal services. Thus, Australian volunteers provide essential services such as rural firefighting, ambulance services and crime prevention, activities that are provided by the public sector in urban areas (Fahey and Walker, 2002, cited in Warburton and Stirling, 2007). Lastly, it may reflect trends associated with rural demographic ageing, with older people who relocate to rural locations in retirement often contributing key skills and experience, and becoming a driving force within community activities (Brown et al, 2008; Rozanova et al, 2008).

These trends all demonstrate the strong connection between demographic ageing, rurality and the third sector. The interaction between older people and their rural communities is described by Joseph and Skinner (2012) as having transformative potential, for both the individuals involved as well as their places. However, they also highlight risks associated with ageing in place in already underserviced rural towns. In rural Canada, it is suggested that there may be a growing gap as the population ages between those needing help and the volunteers available, particularly as services are transferred from the public to the third sector (Rozanova et al, 2008; Joseph and
Skinner, 2012). Thus, static rural communities without an influx of young people or retirement migrants may struggle to provide the services and supports needed (Rozanova et al, 2008). This all suggests that despite the importance of volunteering and the third sector to rural communities and healthy ageing, there may be significant problems for the future.

To summarise, volunteering is an important dimension of ageing rural communities across international contexts, providing social and community supports at a time when public services are being rationalised and are under threat. However, as both Heenan (2010) and Hodgkin (2012) note, older people are not only recipients of services and support, but are also likely to be volunteers, representing a substantial economic and social resource in rural settings. However, rural communities are experiencing demographic ageing as well as increased reliance on volunteers, and little is known about how this combination will impact on the communities’ future sustainability. It is this gap in knowledge in the Australian context that this study sets out to explore.

Method

Our data are taken from a larger study that explored how rural communities enable social participation by older residents through the provision of local services and supports, with the aim of identifying barriers and enablers to participation. For the purposes of this study, social participation was defined as the level to which a person takes part in the activities of both formal and informal groups, as well as other community activities (Lindström, 2005), inclusive of political and civic participation. To explore this, two rural communities in north-east Victoria (Australia’s most southern mainland state) were utilised as case study sites.

Case study communities

Two communities were selected for inclusion on the premise that they were broadly representative of two key types of rural Victorian communities – traditional agricultural and amenity migration. The former reflect those communities that are still heavily reliant on agriculture for employment, or act as service centres for agricultural regions, while the latter are indicative of communities that are attracting in-migration from other regions due to amenity-related factors. In many cases, this is driven by the retiree cohort, which is referred to as ‘retirement migration’. Inclusion of two community types in the study allowed us to explore similarities and differences across both sites, and while the two communities were similar in that they were both classed as inner regional, they were very different in terms of other characteristics.

Haven (a pseudonym) is a popular retirement migration community located within a viticulture region, approximately 120km from the state’s capital city (Melbourne), and 40km from the closest regional town. While once in decline, its population – currently 1,655 people – has gradually increased over recent decades as a result of retirement migration due to its proximity to urban and regional centres. Consequently, its population is ageing rapidly, with 33% of residents currently aged 65 and older (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2013). However, it is also relatively disadvantaged, with the town ranked 49th out of 270 small Victorian communities in the national Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD), which ranks communities based on the proportion of households with low income,
residents with no qualifications or people in low-skill occupations (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2011). In 2011, 21% of Haven’s population was engaged in volunteering through a community organisation or group, with this number declining from 23.6% in 2006 (ABS, 2013).

Norton (a pseudonym) is a traditional agricultural service centre, located 223km from Melbourne and 35km from its closest regional city. As well as providing a service hub for smaller farming communities in the area, it is also recognised as a Second World War soldier settlement community. Its population of 3,745 people is also ageing, with 24% of residents currently aged 65 years and older, but this is occurring much more gradually than in Haven (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2013). Compared with Haven, Norton is relatively advantaged, with the town ranked 159th within the Victorian IRSD (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2011). While Norton’s volunteer rates were a little higher than Haven’s in 2011, with 24.5% of the population undertaking volunteering, its rates had also dropped slightly from 25.5% in 2006 (ABS, 2013).

Drawing on these two diverse communities will allow us to explore how the distinctive characteristics of place impact on trends and issues related to volunteering. Both communities comprised small towns with a locally run hospital and health service. They had similar third sector groups, including:

- local branches of major charitable organisations (eg, Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, Legacy);
- several community organisations (eg, church organisations, sporting clubs, neighbourhood houses, service organisations, progress associations);
- informal community groups (eg, carer support groups, widow/widower groups, chronic disease and illness support groups).

Data collection

Data collection was conducted in October 2012 using a two-stage process. First, 26 semi-structured interviews (Haven n = 14, Norton n = 12) were undertaken with stakeholders from local government, community hospitals and health services, community organisations (eg, neighbourhood houses, social organisations, sporting clubs) and informal social groups (see Table 1). These participants were selected based on a comprehensive community scoping exercise, which identified them as key community stakeholders in terms of providing community-dwelling older people with opportunities for social participation. This scoping study encompassed a comprehensive search of local newspapers, directories, telephone books and websites, in addition to conversations with community informants, and its efficacy in identifying all relevant groups and organisations was verified through cross-checking with key informants from local government and healthcare organisations.

The interviews were complemented by eight focus groups with 47 older residents (Haven n = 26, Norton n = 21) aged between 52 and 90, which were hosted in community health or council offices. This number reflects both our ability to involve as many participants as possible without undue coercion, and the point at which we reached saturation in the data. No age range was specified for inclusion in the study; instead, anyone who self-identified as ‘older’ was invited to participate. The recruitment methods utilised in order to gain a cross-section of the community
included advertising, snowball sampling and assistance from community stakeholders within the health setting. The last approach was crucial in targeting older adults who were more frail or isolated, and in targeting older men, in order to ensure that a diverse range of people were included in the study.

Utilising a semi-structured interview schedule, interviews and focus groups covered the following key topics:

- services and support within the community that provided opportunities for older people’s social participation;
- models, services and supports that worked well or did not work well in facilitating social participation by older people in the community, and why this was the case;
- barriers to participation;
- gaps within community services and supports that would enable participation.

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Note: H = Haven, N = Norton, SH = stakeholder.
In the stakeholder interviews, these issues were also discussed from the perspective of organisational capacity to provide services and support that facilitated participation.

Data analysis

Stakeholder interviews lasted approximately one hour, with focus groups running for 90 minutes; both were conducted by the second author. They were tape-recorded (upon obtaining participant permission), transcribed and entered into a qualitative data analysis program (QSR NVivo), where pseudonyms were utilised to protect identities. Data were then analysed in a two-step process (Patton, 2002). In the initial stage, the data were evaluated using an interpretive approach to identify emergent themes. In this analysis, and after subsequent checking by other researchers, ‘volunteering’ was established as a key concept within several themes relating to the experience of, and opportunities for, social participation among older rural adults, and the ability of stakeholders to provide social activities and supports. To meet the aims of the current study, a second, higher-order deductive analysis (Patton, 2002) of two key themes was then conducted. The first theme explored how older volunteers contribute to their rural communities; and the second theme explored how the challenges they face impact on the sustainability – in the current policy environment – of reliance on third sector voluntarism.

Sandelowski (1986) has indicated that rigour in qualitative data analysis is achieved through ensuring auditability, credibility and fittingness. Auditability reflects the specific techniques and logic used to determine the truth-value and applicability of data. Credibility and fittingness reflect the ability of the data to maintain representativeness and to be recognisable in their recoded form by the participants who provided them. Within this study, auditability was ensured through the use of a semi-structured interview schedule to ensure consistency, while also allowing us to capture valuable information outside of this structure. Also, the use of the data analysis program generated a clear ‘decision trail’, tracking how the data were interpreted at various stages. Credibility and fittingness were achieved through the use of direct quotes to represent key themes. The use of confirmatory and opposing views, both within and across the case study sites, also contributed to credibility.

Findings

The voluntary contributions of older adults within the case study communities

Within both communities, the importance of the third sector in providing services and supports for older community members was acknowledged, with one focus group participant noting that “volunteerism is an important partner to seniors issues” (N-FG6) (FG = focus group). Specifically, participants discussed the importance of third sector organisations and the voluntary contributions of rural residents within these organisations in creating environments that support older adults, with findings in this regard quite similar across both communities. Local third sector organisations offered:
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• **Functional** support for ageing residents through the provision of home care, gardening and home maintenance, volunteer transport and meals on wheels services;
• **Social support** through the provision of social groups and activities, and friendly visiting.

Some of the smaller third sector groups targeting vulnerable older adults had been established by community members who had seen a gap within existing community service provision, as one stakeholder indicated: “I’d read about Men’s Sheds and went and had a few informal discussions and I thought, that’d be a good project for this little town, because there’s a lot of retired farmers and people who live by themselves and haven’t got much to do” (N-SH7). Larger third sector organisations, as well as providing a range of supports to older residents, also provided support to these smaller community groups that catered for older residents, in the form of funding and equipment:

‘We run an art show every year and that’s huge now. We make probably $20,000, sometimes $30,000 from the art show. That is then distributed out to schools and the old folks’ homes and things like that, Men’s Shed … they say “oh we need some power tools” or something like, so someone will go out and price off some power tools and we will get them some tools.’ (N-SH11)

In discussing the value of the third sector and volunteer activity in creating environments that enabled older rural residents to age well, the role of older people’s voluntary engagement was pronounced. It was evident that such involvement was instrumental in contributing to general community sustainability and benefiting the lives of other older people. Furthermore, older volunteers themselves acknowledged that volunteering plays an important role in determining their own quality of life, through providing opportunities for social engagement, skill utilisation and the development of self-esteem through the ability to contribute to their communities. One focus group participant stated:

‘I sort of like the hands-on, feel-good sort of thing. I mean I don’t really do anything for accolades or awards or anything … if you ask me to volunteer and I get somewhere and there’s nothing for me to do I go home because I get really annoyed because if I’m going to go I want to do something…. You get a lot back from helping.’ (N-FG3)

Older people’s contributions to community through ‘helping’ were critical to creating the environments that provided them with opportunities for social engagement, as well as in enhancing the lives of other older residents within their communities. Current volunteers also recognised that they might benefit from voluntarism in future, as one older volunteer suggested in reference to her role in working with older people with dementia: “You might hear the same story a dozen times but you just go along with it, they’ll tell you two or three times…. And as I say, who’s to know that we mightn’t be the same too?” (H-FG3).

Examples where older volunteers contributed to third sector organisations catering for older people included the construction of activity spaces within elder care
facilities, undertaking meals on wheels deliveries and volunteering within elder care facilities and day activity programmes for the frail older people, as one focus group participant described:

‘I work in the day room three days a week volunteering and I’m mixed up with a lot of oldies, you know, and we have great days over there. Sometimes we take them to [regional centre] shopping, we can take them out somewhere, we have great days over there.’ (H-FG3)

Older residents also provided staffing and governance within local community organisations that targeted ageing populations. Significantly, some of the smaller, informal support groups for older people within both communities had been established by older people themselves, as one informal group leader suggested when talking about his motivation to start a widowers’ group: “I sort of felt, there’s got to be other guys around the town here which I knew of that had lost their wives. What do they do with themselves all day?” (N-SH7). Moreover, while older residents were involved in governing their own social groups, they also contributed in other ways when they no longer had the capacity to take part in active governance, as one focus group participant described: “Some that aren’t on the committee, that feel that they are too old now to be doing that, are always willing at a function to work and do something or bring food” (N-FG4). These contributions extended to making sure that smaller groups catering for older people remained financially sustainable, as one focus group participant from a recently established Men’s Shed indicated when discussing the contributions of older members:

‘Bit by bit each group contributes to the running of the Shed. The gardeners, they sold their pumpkins to the local supermarket, the woodworkers, you can see stuff we’ve got out in the front area there for sale. The recyclers with the computers sold some scrap metal recently, that’s $150 that went into the kitty. So they all contribute, they all do something.’ (N-FG2)

Older people within both communities were also instrumental in providing transport to other older people who were less mobile, which enabled them to attend these social groups and activities, in addition to medical appointments. Often, these older volunteers were engaged by healthcare organisations to provide transport for older community residents in receipt of their services and supports. The contributions of older volunteers in this regard were highly sought after, as one focus group participant described:

‘I saw an advert in the paper about they wanted a bit of help up at the hospital doing the meals on wheels, so I started there, and when they found out I had an endorsed licence to drive a bus they grabbed me to do the bus. So I do the hostel once a month on a Tuesday and day room Wednesday, hydrotherapy into [regional centre] of a Thursday, meals on Friday.’ (H-FG1)

Provision of volunteer transport was also important in getting frail older people to social activities and events, and more active older people who were members of religious or social community organisations often provided this transport, as one
stakeholder noted: “The Men’s Shed visits the lodge, there’s people in there that are actually volunteers that will take men from the lodge for the half-day that they’re open, or there’s something special on” (N-SH2). Through their involvement in local Men’s Sheds, older men in particular were also engaged in providing home help for other older adults within the community who were less mobile, through doing their gardening and home maintenance: “I look upon this as a real community service, there’s a lot of widows in the town so we make little things for them, we trot around and fix their curtains and all that” (N-FG2).

Older people’s voluntary contributions were also noteworthy in contributing to the sustainability of other community services and in facilitating wider community activities. Focus group participants across both communities spoke extensively of the voluntary roles they played in the governance of third sector organisations that served the whole community, as one older man described:

‘I’ve lived here since ’94, retired here of course, and then I was asked to join the Lions Club4 here, I’ve been in it for approximately 15 years, we’ve done a lot of projects, we’re a good unit and we do a lot of things for the community and that sort of thing.’ (H-FG1)

Within both communities, older volunteers also played a particular role in fundraising to benefit local key services, and in staffing local charitable organisations and stores:

‘I’ve managed the Red Cross shop, and I would say that 80% of our volunteers are over 65. And we’ve got people who come in and work every Thursday morning, sorting, pricing, setting up the shop, as well as the people that are on the shop rosters so when the shop’s open they’re serving people … and there’s a couple of them that I think, oh, what are we going to do if they….’ (N-SH5)

Older volunteers were also instrumental in maintaining the community landscape, as one stakeholder noted:

‘There’s probably about seven or eight of them that come and they do garden maintenance, like they’ve done down the front at the minute where they’ve put all the new plants in, all the seedlings, so they do that once a week and they do that in the mornings and yeah, all of them would be sort of retired, semi-retired.’ (H-SH2)

The contributions of older people were also significant in staffing key rural community events that attracted a large number of residents, such as agricultural shows, funerals and sporting events: “Yeah, there’s elders on most committees that organise the afternoon teas when the cricket and football and that is on, that’s for sure” (N-SH2). Older volunteers also played an active role in developing activities that engaged a wide spectrum of the population, and provided opportunities for involvement, as one stakeholder indicated:

‘In November we have a Christmas pageant, which brings the [smaller community] as well as the Haven children together and they have a pageant
in town. A lot of people get involved in that one … because it’s organised by older people for the schools, with the schools’ encouragement.’ (H-SH11)

Thus, our findings reveal that older volunteers make a significant contribution to the third sector within their rural communities. Their activities are highly diverse and they have widespread benefits in both communities, as well as having a recognised benefit for the volunteers themselves. While this suggests that the third sector, through volunteers, offers critical opportunities for healthy ageing, the data also demonstrated that this could be problematic in the future.

**Challenges for the future**

Although in both communities, volunteers were active in building opportunities for healthy ageing while contributing to local community sustainability, we found that several issues were having a negative impact on the current and future viability of services provided by third sector organisations and older volunteers. Specifically, there were four distinct challenges:

- the impact of resource rationalisation in rural areas;
- arrangements imposed on third sector organisations;
- management of volunteers within organisations;
- future rural volunteer availability.

**Resource rationalisation in rural areas**

The first challenge was associated with neoliberal policies of rural rationalisation, which were leading to a withdrawal of local services and support, despite the growing needs associated with rural demographic ageing. Thus, while third sector stakeholders (particularly those from healthcare organisations) acknowledged the importance of older volunteers in sustaining the activities of their organisations, they also recognised that this was not built on strong foundations. They noted that their ability to provide support to older community residents would be severely restricted without the volunteer contributions. As one stakeholder admitted: “The reliance on volunteers could actually become a big issue because we haven’t built an infrastructure underneath to compensate for that” (N-SH1).

There was some evidence that volunteers were feeling uncomfortable about the loss of paid staff within services. As one focus group participant: “We’re not paid to do this job, we volunteer to do it” (H-SH7). Some stakeholders also highlighted examples where older people had felt obligated to volunteer due to funding cutbacks in their rural communities: “They decided that wasn’t a home help person’s job anymore, so no they weren’t going to pay anyone to do that, so the girl was actually retiring so she kept doing it anyway, so she now is a volunteer like the rest of us” (N-SH5). The loss of paid jobs is highly problematic in rural communities and challenges the viability of rural services. It also places undue burden on local volunteers.
Arrangements imposed on third sector organisations

Second, focus group participants highlighted that they suggested were having a huge impact on volunteering, and particularly on people’s willingness to volunteer. These included a more regulatory environment and increased administrative requirements across the sector, which older people found frustrating and off-putting. The administrative requirements and laws associated with contemporary volunteering dissuaded older people from being involved with governance or volunteering within third sector community organisations. In Norton, older volunteers mentioned that the increased rules and regulations governing third sector organisations and volunteering had become too onerous, and they felt they had inadequate skills to navigate these requirements: “There are a lot of people who feel inadequate, it’s not that they don’t want to, they just feel so inadequate, they just don’t want the responsibility … they don’t want the commitment” (N-FG3).

While this lack of capacity did not appear to be as great a problem in Haven, perhaps on account of the professional skills brought into the community through retirement in-migration, older volunteers running community groups in Norton did allude to the tedious nature of community governance.

The onerous nature of the background checks required of volunteers, in addition to stringent privacy laws, also precluded older volunteer groups from targeting their services to vulnerable, at-risk community groups. This was a particular issue in Norton, where it was felt that these issues prevented volunteers from accessing the populations that needed assistance. This was incongruent with their desire to help the community and gain self-fulfilment through doing so, as one older volunteer within a community group explained: “One of the ideas was to involve younger people in a mentoring role. The problem there is that we need police checks and working with children, that’s a big disincentive so there are regulations that seem to restrict opportunities rather than encourage them” (N-FG2).

Moreover, decisions imposed by state or federal governments on volunteering, or made by local third sector organisations to cut costs or maintain indemnity, had left older volunteers feeling devalued, and this had occurred across both communities. Issues arose from the introduction of police checks for long-term volunteers, and changing directives within meals on wheels services whereby older volunteers had to use their own vehicles, as focus group participants noted:

“A lot of people are giving up doing meals on wheels; because they are insulted about having to do a police check.’ (N-FG6)

‘Now that’s making us feel rotten, like I say I’ve done it [meals on wheels] for 40 years and I have never felt so badly about the fact that they don’t care about us, that they don’t care that we’re using our own cars.’ (H-FG1)

Moreover, the increasing risk of litigation was deterring older people from providing other older residents with transport, as one older woman suggested: “Some of us who are a little bit fitter are dubious of taking people who are disabled because we don’t know how to handle it, and our cars are not always suitable for people’s getting in and out, and it’s a big responsibility to try to put somebody in your car and take them somewhere … and the fact is the insurance” (H-FG3).
Management of volunteers within organisations

The third category of challenges arose because of changes of expectations within third sector organisations, specifically their ability to provide conditions that were conducive to volunteering, or to utilise volunteers in a way that provided positive outcomes for older adults within their services. Stakeholders discussed their ability to meet older people’s specific motivations for volunteering, and this was a key issue for meals on wheels across both communities, where older volunteers wanted more social contact with their delivery recipients: “It’s quick, you haven’t got time, you’re in and you’ve got to deliver … you put the meal in and you can only just say ‘hello, how are you?’, you’re only there for bare five minutes because you’ve got another dozen or 20 people to serve” (H-FG3). In discussing this issue, stakeholders acknowledged that ideally there were better ways to use volunteers: “I don’t think it’s the best model. And use of the volunteers is maybe better with that friendly visiting” (N-SH1). As a result, one stakeholder suggested that there was a need to diversify the range of volunteer roles available within communities: “It’s just a matter of building those to give people different opportunities. Because it’s got to be stuff which is relevant to the person” (H-SH2).

Within Haven in particular, both stakeholders and older volunteers suggested that there was a need for greater coordination and management of volunteers by organisations if new volunteers were to be recruited and third sector organisations and groups serving older people were to survive. As one stakeholder indicated: “The volunteers say traditionally we just want to be told what to do. They don’t want to have to come up with the ideas” (H-SH4). Conversely, in Norton, while supports had been put in place to assist volunteers, such as grief and loss training for meals on wheels delivery volunteers, and thank-you events, it was suggested that, given the volunteers’ long-term involvement with these services, they were quite resistant to change: “They think why would you need to have that; I’ve been doing it for years. I think they’re quite resistant and think they know it all really and that they don’t need any more information” (N-SH3).

Future rural volunteer availability

The fourth set of challenges relates to the broader issue of demographic and social change within rural communities. While the focus of this study is on volunteering within the third sector, focus group participants noted that many older people are involved in less formal support and helping activities in their rural communities. Changing contemporary trends in retirement and family dynamics had resulted in fewer older people volunteering, as one stakeholder indicated: “A lot of people who retire normally would go and volunteer. But now they’ve responsibilities, their kids are going out to work and they’ve got to look after the grandkids. So there’s a whole generational change” (N-SH3). This was stopping the flow of volunteers coming through to replace the current cohort of older volunteers. This was problematic because, as one stakeholder suggested, there was an assumption within the community that they would continue to provide this support: “The Haven Show – all of the people who do it are probably over 70 … they just do it because they always have and then everyone thinks, ‘oh, they just do it because they always have’” (H-SH4).
This placed considerable pressure on this small cohort of older volunteers, and it also created problems for the sustainability of supports and events that older people valued:

‘There are people in their seventies and eighties running around in a kitchen providing food and trying to run a huge programme for hundreds of people. It’s just not going to continue. I suppose I have a real concern about this one week of the year that seniors look forward to in Norton continuing.’ (N-SH6)

**Discussion**

This study has provided an Australian perspective on older people and their contributions to rural communities in an era of rural service decline. However, given that similar issues are being experienced in other countries, particularly within Canada and the UK, it is suggested that these findings will be relevant beyond Australia. As in many other regions of the world, in Australia rural areas are more likely to be populated by older people (AIHW, 2007). Within the rural ageing context, building healthy ageing is crucial. Several large-scale studies have shown that older people contribute to their communities in multiple ways (Davis et al. 2012; Hodgkin 2012). Here, we build on this evidence by providing case studies that show how these contributions occur and what their outcomes are within two rural communities.

First, our findings highlight the importance of the third sector and older volunteers in contributing to the sustainability of their rural places. Second, these contributions have a dual aspect: older people’s volunteer activities provide important supports for the benefit of other older people, particularly the more frail; while at the same time, as volunteers acknowledge, they themselves gain health and social benefits from their volunteering. In combination, these findings thus contribute to knowledge about the relationship between voluntarism, place and healthy ageing.

However, as well as demonstrating the benefits of third sector voluntarism for older rural residents, we also present findings that suggest that this situation is not without risks for the future. As McCulloch et al (2012) found in their multivariate British study of volunteering and social capital, there are concerns about the capacity of volunteering to impact on deprived regions. Our study builds on these broad findings to suggest that the ability of the third sector to provide conditions that will facilitate wellbeing for older community residents through volunteering is contingent on addressing serious challenges for the future. Thus, the present study raises important concerns about the future sustainability of volunteer-based services in the Australian context, reflecting Joseph and Skinner’s (2012: 384) Canadian research where they describe rural service provision as ‘a threadbare system coming apart at the seams’. Our findings show that service restructuring and lack of input into infrastructure are highly risky for the future viability of these communities in the context of demographic ageing.

The ongoing rationalisation of services as the outcome of neoliberal policy in rural locations (Woods, 2006) continues to impact on third sector organisations, particularly those with a remit to deliver key elder and community care services, and volunteers are increasingly being drawn upon to deliver these services. As the present study notes, this can help to build social inclusion for older people in their rural communities. This is a positive outcome, particularly given that other studies have identified problems of exclusion and disadvantage experienced by older people in rural communities (eg, Philip and Shucksmith, 2003; Scharf and Bartlam, 2008). Our
findings suggest that older volunteers may be in a good position to develop supports and respond appropriately to the unique requirements of their specific communities. In other words, they can enable ‘best fit’ for local older people, ensuring that rural places can support older people to age in place (Keating et al, 2013). As other studies have noted, small, local-level community interventions are most effective in engaging older people, and these are traditionally provided by the third sector (Milne et al, 2007; Walsh and O’Shea, 2008). Third sector organisations offer a good opportunity for building rural partnerships, essential for promoting inclusion and empowerment (Edwards et al, 2001; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Derksen and Bock, 2009).

However, inclusion and partnerships are contingent on the capacity of rural third sector organisations to deliver such opportunities and this becomes increasingly difficult under conditions of service rationalisation. In these circumstances, it is likely that older rural adults will be confronted with a growing local need for volunteers and growing feelings of obligation to volunteer to fill this need. Yet agency and choice are key factors in enabling older rural adults to experience healthy ageing (Keating et al, 2013). Increased obligation can lead to volunteer burnout and, to avoid this, older rural volunteers might become more selective and choose only the volunteer roles that they feel suit them best. In this latter scenario, third sector organisations might be forced to compete for the services of older volunteers in order to sustain their services, and we found evidence of this. As a result, organisations will need to develop innovative ways of recruiting and retaining sufficient volunteers. Our findings confirm that volunteer opportunities in rural communities may be highly positive for healthy ageing, but not where volunteers feel obliged to offer more time than they want to give, available volunteer roles are not congruent with their personal objectives or where older volunteers are not managed appropriately.

Furthermore, with population ageing there is a growing proportion of people in the oldest cohorts, those more likely to require services. As we found, some existing volunteers are simply getting too old, and require management and support to ensure that they are not expected to undertake tasks beyond their capabilities. However, without resources this becomes problematic for third sector organisations. Together, these various issues suggest that reliance on the third sector and volunteers presents serious challenges for the future in conditions where public sector resources are being rationalised. Our findings show that there are risks associated with an over-reliance on volunteers in rural communities unless appropriate infrastructure and support are provided. Thus, there is a need for local governments and third sector organisations to consult closely with older rural volunteers on a regular basis to establish how they would like to volunteer and what they would like to undertake. Gaps must then be filled by looking to other age cohorts and looking at more innovative methods of volunteer recruitment in rural regions. However, a simultaneous commitment is required from local and higher levels of government to assist with resourcing the services that rural communities cannot or are not willing to provide through their own voluntary efforts.

The second key area of concern relates to the capacity of the third sector both to deliver appropriate services and supports, and to resource the necessary level of volunteering. Our findings illustrate the concerns expressed by focus group participants about increased regulation and bureaucracy. This fits with other Australian research that shows that increased bureaucratisation of contemporary third sector activity is having a detrimental effect on volunteer involvement, particularly among
older people (Warburton et al, 2007, 2013). Concerns move beyond issues such as a lack of capacity or desire to be involved in voluntary activity to concerns about risk management and regulations such as police checks or occupational health and safety requirements, which respondents found restrictive.

In international rural contexts where older people have been engaged in volunteer activities and have strong connections within their communities, imposing regulatory constraints to cut costs or to secure indemnity will limit the older volunteers’ capacity to engage with their communities in ways in which they wish to, and may lead to them feeling devalued. This is increasingly problematic when considered in conjunction with macro-level social changes that affect the potential pool of rural volunteers, such as childcare responsibilities and longer working lives. In these circumstances, it must be questioned whether older rural adults will continue to support the third sector in the numbers needed. If not, there is a possibility of burnout among the older adults who feel obliged to maintain or increase their voluntary responsibilities. This will negatively impact their ability for healthy ageing, as the literature demonstrates that over-commitment can lead to poor health outcomes (Wilson and Musick, 1999). Thus, local governments and third sector organisations must look closely at how voluntary organisations can minimise the barriers to volunteering and especially the inconvenience associated with increased statutory requirements.

Our study has also revealed that different communities face different issues regarding the engagement of older volunteers, which vary with levels of community capacity. While Norton’s primary issue at a community level was regulatory constraint on third sector innovation and engagement with vulnerable populations, Haven’s primary concern was a lack of autonomy among volunteers and their need to be managed, which may be linked to their lower socioeconomic status. Thus, rural communities are not homogenous (Eales et al, 2008) and approaches to building third sector capacity need to reflect the distinctions between them.

In closing, it is important to recognise that this study has both strengths and limitations. It represents a case study of just two rural communities in one region of one Australian state, and as a qualitative study only provides the insights of a small sample of stakeholders and older residents. Results are place-limited and hence not generalisable. However, in the absence of other similar Australian research, the study offers an important Australian perspective on the growing body of knowledge about the influence of geographical factors on the third sector, particularly in light of the ageing that is occurring globally and is particularly marked in rural places. Our findings highlight how volunteers, and specifically older people as volunteers, are making a major contribution to their rural environments. Their volunteering activities are important for local community sustainability, as well as being a critical component of healthy ageing, providing opportunities for older people to age well. As we have seen, place becomes critical as we age, and many older people have a substantial investment in their rural communities. But will they continue to be good places to grow old (Keating, 2008)? While our evidence suggests that older volunteers are currently contributing to the sustainability of their local environment, this may not be a long-term option in the future unless governments at all levels renew their commitment to providing resources to the third sector that enable them to support rural places by encouraging appropriate voluntary activity among older adults.
Notes
1 Neighbourhood houses are community organisations that provide social and educational activities and programs for local residents.
2 Progress associations are local resident associations that meet to discuss and resolve issues within the local community.
3 Men’s Sheds are community-based structures that provide environments for community members, usually men, to undertake woodwork and other physical activities in a social environment. For further information, see Ballinger et al (2009).
4 Lions Clubs are local service organisations that undertake community improvement activities.

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