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Leveraging on population mobility to generate local solutions to community needs and issues

Abstract

Population mobility has produced both positive and negative consequences throughout regional and rural Western Australia. Among such developments, those concerning essential functions and services delivery have demanded innovative responses and strategies, both at the higher policy level and locally in many communities. This is considered necessary both in promoting the continued viability of the communities, coupled with an enhanced capacity to address future challenges.

Previous research involving case study rural communities in Western Australia suggests that solutions to problems such as those involving essential functions and services delivery are commonly sought through strategies that revolve around local government and its use of informal relationships and the voluntary networks operating at a grass roots level. Three of these case study communities are cited in this paper. Recently published Australian Bureau of Statistics data identifies one community as having recorded a population increase while the other two have experienced some decline.

This paper draws upon the earlier research findings to explain the potential implications for the roles and responsibilities of the local governments, service groups and voluntary organizations operating within the three case study communities. Changes in the population dynamic of these communities however, also presents invaluable opportunities by which stakeholders can seek to capitalize on local level relationships as a means of addressing essential functions and services delivery issues. In doing so, these communities can generate the social capital needed to create an identity that is not only relevant to their circumstances, but is also adaptable and responsive in the contemporary environment.

Keywords: population mobility, community sustainability, local government, volunteerism, community-driven solutions, empowerment.

Introduction

Populations have provided the lifeblood for rural Australia, and by shaping the economies, traditions, and the social fabric of these communities have contributed significantly to their ongoing viability and wellbeing. Population mobility, although featuring prominently as an issue of discussion in recent years, is not a new phenomenon and it has been a long standing feature of the Australian landscape (Davison 2005; Hugo 2005; Salt 2001).

The steady depopulation of rural Australia over time is reflected in the exodus from communities of a broad demographic that includes young people, families and retirees in the pursuit of career and lifestyle opportunities available in coastal areas and in urban centres. With depopulation having been a source of ongoing concern, successive commonwealth and state governments sought to mitigate its effects on rural communities through policies of stabilization and subsidization. For a period during the mid-twentieth century, these policies were centred upon Keynesian philosophy. However, since the early 1980s, policies of successive commonwealth and state governments have been driven by economic rationalism. These contemporary policy approaches have prompted debate about the link between decisions regarding the delivery of essential functions and services and rural depopulation.

For rural communities in Western Australia, the ascendency of economic rationalism in government policy frameworks has in many cases, been evidenced by the reduction or total withdrawal of essential functions and services to rural communities. At the same time however, these developments have encouraged circumstances whereby responsibility for the delivery of many of these functions and services are devolved to community-based volunteer organizations. Strategies for attracting and retaining populations can serve as a basis for achieving long term community sustainability. Local government has stewardship of key physical and intellectual resources within communities and it plays a pivotal role in delivering functions and services at the local level (Local Government Advisory Board 2006; Western Australian Local Government Association 2006). The aim of this paper is to show how rural local governments Australia-wide can influence both the development and the implementation of these sustainability strategies.

Methodology

This paper places the issue of population mobility in the context of research involving the essential functions and services delivery circumstances of three case study rural communities. The communities are of varying population size and character and are located in the Great Southern and Central Wheatbelt regions of Western Australia. Each case study revolves around the outlining of a different scenario whereby the community under review has identified threats to its ongoing sustainability and accordingly, has acknowledged the need for action to address these issues.

Focus groups conducted in the case study communities in 2005 and 2006 asked representatives of local governments and organizations to describe what constituted 'essential functions and services' that are crucial to a community's ongoing viability. These processes also sought to ascertain from participants, information about the local level actions that are needed to ensure that policy makers and essential functions and services providers hear and understand concerns regarding these issues and needs.

Using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) publications covering the Censuses in 2001 and 2006, and those released more recently, this paper focuses on changes in the population numbers and the demographic mix of these communities to illustrate the impact on essential functions and services delivery. It is from here that the paper proposes to make recommendations for the implementation within each case study community, of innovative solutions centred upon population mobility.

Case study 1: Wagin – Population mobility and rural health

This case study examines population mobility and its implications for the health services requirements of residents within a rural community setting. Of particular interest is the role that community-based voluntary organizations play in delivering support programs to vulnerable groups (e.g. the elderly) and which encourages independent living. Using a review of existing literature on community-driven health services delivery and findings of my recent research, this case study seeks to demonstrate that the recruitment of new residents to community-based voluntary organizations will inject new energies and skills to these pursuits leading to enhanced community well being.

Situated some 230 kilometres south east of Perth in the Great Southern Region of the state, Wagin's history is steeped in agriculture. Since its establishment in the 1880s Wagin and its surrounding districts have progressed to the point of being renowned as a centre for the production of fine merino wool. By the same token, a diversity of agricultural activity has contributed significantly to Wagin's economic prosperity[1]. It is possible to obtain some perspective about the influence of demographics on essential functions and services delivery in Wagin through by examining the population levels in the community during the relatively recent past. The ABS Estimated Resident Population data for the years 2001 to 2008 indicates that there was a population decline in the Wagin (SLA) of -2.8% over that period (ABS 2009).

									CHANGE 2007r–2008p
ERP AT 30 JUNE ……..									
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007r	2008p	
STATISTICAL DIVISION, Statistical Subdivision and Statistical Local Area	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	%
……........									
UPPER GREAT SOUTHERN									
Hotham									
Wagin (S)	1 871	1 883	1 910	1 924	1 902	1 959	1 945	1 891	-2.8

The ABS in its 2006 Census, reported that the usual population of Wagin as an Urban centre/Locality comprised 1,427 persons, of which 48.1% were males and 51.9% were females. A more detailed scrutiny of this ABS data shows population broken down into the following age ranges:

Wagin (Urban centre/Locality)

AGE	Selected Region	% of total persons persons in Region	Australia	% of total Australia
Age groups:				
0-4 years	91	6.4%	1,260,405	6.3%
5-14 years	203	14.2%	2,676,807	13.5%
15-24 years	127	8.9%	2,704,276	13.6%
25-54 years	508	35.6%	8,376,751	42.2%
55-64 years	206	14.4%	2,192,675	11.0%
65 years and over	291	20.4%	2,644,374	13.3%
Median age of persons	43	-	37	-

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[1] Total value of agriculture: $ 37.3 million for the year ended 30 June 2001. (ABS National Regional Profile 2000 to 2004).

As the ABS figures show, 508 residents or 35.6% of the total population fell within the 25-54 years age range. Importantly, and in terms of any discussion about health services delivery implications, although 421 residents or 29.5% comprised the 0-24 years cohort, a further 497 residents or 34.8% made up the 55 years and over category.

A focus group of representatives of local government and community-based organizations was conducted in Wagin in September 2005. Anecdotal information arising from this process was that decisions by mature aged and elderly individuals to reside in Wagin have contributed to an ageing of the population.

> Participant:
> I haven't got the figures but I would say that Wagin's population has aged over the last 10 years, the people coming into Wagin. Not the population here, but the people coming into Wagin.

> Participant:
> We've got more people retiring, we've got more elderly people retiring in Wagin…

When combined with the population decline reported by the ABS, such developments have placed considerable pressure on the community-based organizations involved in health care services delivery. These organizations rely heavily upon volunteers in providing home-based health care to elderly residents of Wagin. Significantly however, the limited availability of volunteer resources leads to these same individuals having to serve as members of a number of community-based groups.

The participation in voluntary work by residents within a community can often be attributed to a commitment to social responsibility and a shared sense of ownership of objectives such as the maintenance of community viability. Moreover, frameworks that promote community participation in health are said to be consistent with concepts of democracy and empowerment (Kilpatrick 2009; Orpin *et al* 2009; Siegloff and Weir 2005). Support for such assertions might be reflected in views expressed during the Wagin focus group as follows:

> Participant:
> I think that the only way it's all working at the moment is because it is a very close-knit community and everybody is sort of aiming for the same point. I mean everybody in the town realises that these problems are there, so they generally work together.

> Participant:
> If one organization can't do it, another one seems to pick it up, and
> everybody looks out for the next person, anyway. If there is any crisis
> the whole town pulls together.

One of the significant issues emerging from the focus group process is that of longevity and sustainability of community-based organizations, with many volunteer members themselves being of mature age (i.e. within the 55-64 years age range). That seniors themselves are typically enlisted as volunteers in support programs for the frail and elderly is evidenced by their: (a) effectiveness in peer mentoring, (b) ability to call upon a wealth experience and (c) tendency to display high levels of commitment to tasks (Peel and Warburton 2009). In Wagin, examples of such frameworks can be seen in the programs and activities undertaken by the local branches of *Stay On Your Feet WA* and *Retirees WA*.

State government policies and rural health services delivery
In the neoliberal era, rural health services delivery models implemented by successive Western Australian state governments have sought to achieve optimal outcomes through the effective use of scarce funding and highly specialized health skills. In many cases, this has necessarily involved a centralization of some functions and services to larger more populated communities. On the other hand, for the communities which have been adversely affected by the withdrawal or relocation of health services, such policy decisions are often viewed as amounting to rationalization. This also became apparent during the Wagin focus group discussions, which identified as follows:

> Participant:
> You'd almost find if they downgrade the hospital any more, the old
> people wouldn't come to live in Wagin they would go elsewhere. And
> it would then affect the town tremendously, I'm sure.

> Participant:
> Yeah. I think the fact that now with - - they're reducing their services,
> say the hospital, you know, we've got a perfectly good hospital up
> there and we are having to travel further now to get medical treatment
> because of the reduced services.

> Participant:
> … It happened before the influx of older people, and they stopped the
> theatre services and the maternity services and X-ray; a lot of X-rays
> you've got to go to Narrogin. I think that's the, the biggest hurdle in
> Wagin.

Local government and rural health services delivery

It is widely known that rural communities face considerable difficulties in attracting and retaining the services of qualified general practitioners (Peterson 2000, Rural Doctors Association of Australia 2009). Local government has in many cases, been asked to play a crucial role in overcoming these issues and in the delivery of rural health services generally. The Shire of Wagin has responsibility for the fulfilment of the relevant Commonwealth regulatory and administrative criteria that relates to the engagement of a general practitioner. The Shire also provides housing accommodation and surgery premises and it allocates ongoing funding to support the medical practice.[2] The leading role played by the Shire in securing the ongoing services of the general practitioner is also important in that it promotes integration with other associated services within the wider community, notably the pharmacy and the aged persons' accommodation facilities (i.e. Wagin Cottage Homes and Waratah Lodge).

In terms of the delivery of rural health services in the community, the Shire of Wagin supports vulnerable residents through its administration of the Home and Community Care (HACC) program. HACC is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and Western Australian Governments. The Shire's website outlines in detail, the range of services provided under the auspices of HACC (Shire of Wagin 2009).

Possible future strategies

Contemporary governance frameworks emphasize the imperative of promoting effective relationships within regional and rural communities (Morrison and Lane 2006; Sorenson, Marshall and Dollery 2007). From a community sustainability perspective, the stark reality of this fact is evident in the increasing array of functions and services that local governments are now being asked to provide.

Acknowledging the inevitability of local government's role in rural health services delivery, some strategies that the Shire of Wagin could consider in supporting the work of community-based organizations include:

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[2] Community-based focus group proceedings Wagin: 19 September 2005.

- Consulting with community-based organizations in the development of a skills survey of residents to: (a) obtain data on available skills sets among the community; and (b) identify any skills gaps;

- Conducting a periodic survey of residents to: (a) gauge preparedness to participate in volunteering activities; and (b) identify the level of training needed to accommodate contemporary thought and to comply with legislative requirements (Healy *et al* 2009).

- Establishing relationships with head office level policy-makers of the community-based organizations operating in Wagin and peak body organizations such as *Volunteering Western Australia* with a view to: (a) implementing outcomes of the survey process and (b) identifying funding and resourcing opportunities to facilitate the skills uptake.

- Working with the HACC Management Committee and community-based organizations to mobilize long term and new residents within the 25-54 years and 55-64 years age ranges. These strategies should be aimed at achieving a greater level of volunteer involvement in delivering health services to vulnerable residents and thereby enabling the burden of such support roles to be spread more evenly throughout the Wagin community.

Case study 2:   Mount Barker – The community's role in promoting environmental sustainability

This case study addresses population mobility from the perspective of its potential to support environmental sustainability within a rural community. In particular, the discussion will seek to identify whether sustainability can be pursued by taking advantage of any interconnection that might exist between the tree change phenomenon experienced in the community and Landcare programs.

Mount Barker is a community located within the Shire of Plantagenet 359 kilometres south east of Perth in the Great Southern region. With its origins dating back to the early 1800s, Mount Barker has prospered through agricultural diversity, including fruit growing. Since the mid 1970s, viticulture has assumed considerable prominence as an industry in Mount Barker and in the Shire of Plantagenet generally. From the early 1990s, the conversion of significant tracks of 'traditional' agricultural land for

use in bluegum timber production has injected a new social and economic dynamic into the community (*Plantations 2020* 2008). But there have also been some negative outcomes of these land use changes[3] (Great Southern Development Commission 2009; LGInfo 2003, 2004).   The ABS Estimated Resident Population data for the years 2001 to 2008 indicates that there was a population increase in the Plantagenet (SLA) of 2.7% over that period (ABS 2009).

									CHANGE 2007r–2008p
ERP AT 30 JUNE ……..									
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007r	2008p	
STATISTICAL DIVISION, Statistical Subdivision and Statistical Local Area	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	no.	%
………........									
LOWER GREAT SOUTHERN									
King									
Plantagenet (S)	4 688	4 656	4 631	4 623	4 672	4 733	4 820	4 950	2.7

ABS data released as part of the 2006 Census identified the population of Mount Barker (Urban centre/Locality) as being 1,761 persons out of a total population of 4,484 within the Plantagenet Statistical Local Area (SLA). The ABS data further shows that Mount Barker's population was distributed throughout the following age categories:

Mount Barker (Urban centre/Locality)

AGE	Selected Region	% of total persons persons in Region	Australia	% of total Australia
Age groups:				
0-4 years	114	6.5%	1,260,405	6.3%
5-14 years	267	15.2%	2,676,807	13.5%
15-24 years	208	11.8%	2,704,276	13.6%
25-54 years	644	36.6%	8,376,751	42.2%
55-64 years	191	10.8%	2,192,675	11.0%
65 years and over	338	19.2%	2,644,374	13.3%
Median age of persons	39	-	37	-

Residents in the 65 years and over age range comprised 338 out of a total population of 1,761 or 19.2%, which was significantly higher than the figure reported nationally (13.3%). These outcomes might be explained partly by the fact that residents are

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[3] Community-based focus group proceedings Mount Barker: 20 September 2005.

opting in greater numbers to remain in Mount Barker post-retirement age, instead of relocating to other communities. Secondly, new residents within this age group may have been encouraged to relocate to Mount Barker as part of the tree change phenomenon that is occurring throughout the nation. Academic literature and information disseminated by governments and the media have raised community awareness of the tree change phenomenon and have also highlighted those areas of the nation where developments are occurring (ABS 2006; Costello 2007; Williams 2008). The Perth metropolitan area and the major regional centres in Western Australia continue to experience significant population growth and the associated increased pressures for infrastructure and services (ABS 2009; Wright 2009). Opportunities have therefore emerged for a community such as Mount Barker to offer a point of difference – that being of an idyllic rural lifestyle built around unique social and environmental factors.

Within the context of the tree change phenomenon, the importance that potential residents might place on aligning lifestyle aspirations with environmental goals is perhaps demonstrated by the 2006 ABS population figures for the satellite community of Kendenup in the Shire of Plantagenet. Situated only some 21 kilometres north of Mount Barker, Kendenup has a growing residential base but only limited access to many essential functions and services. Kendenup residents therefore, rely upon Mount Barker as the primary centre for commercial and cultural activity within the Shire, and to access medical and other professional services. This dependence also helps foster a sense of community that is relational and geographically-based.

Kendenup (Urban centre/Locality)

AGE	Selected Region	% of total persons persons in Region	Australia	% of total Australia
Age groups:				
0-4 years	66	5.1%	1,260,405	6.3%
5-14 years	213	16.5%	2,676,807	13.5%
15-24 years	109	8.4%	2,704,276	13.6%
25-54 years	563	43.6%	8,376,751	42.2%
55-64 years	203	15.7%	2,192,675	11.0%
65 years and over	136	10.5%	2,644,374	13.3%
Median age of persons	42	-	37	-

Population changes that have occurred in the Mount Barker and Kendenup communities appear to be consistent with the nationwide developments reported by the Australian Government Statistician in 2009 about the relocation to 'country inland areas' of persons of early retirement age (55-64 years age range) and: "perhaps representing rural 'tree changers', similar to coastal 'sea changes' " (ABS 2009).

> Participant
> Well, just look at --- since 1975 I've lived in about twenty five different places, so I can't say I've been here that long and I'm qualified to answer that. But, um, from all the different places I've lived in, you know, cities like Perth and Melbourne and Shanghai and … or some places, that one of the reasons we came down here, because the services were so good.

> Participant
> I wouldn't go back to Perth or Melbourne for all the tea in China now. It, it-it's lovely down here. Um, my wife came down here because she was ill. I had to work all over the place and we've managed to settle here; my wife is a lot better because of what we've come to; like - - I'm very happy with the services here but what I do see is that it's - - and I think we have all said the same thing, it's really not matched very well. Coming back to this, you know "We're a community", um, you used to do a good job for the community and that seems to be - - been taken away from us.

This case study argues that there are potentially very positive outcomes to be achieved in pursuing the environmental sustainability of tree change communities by leveraging on the rural lifestyle aspirations of new residents.
The success achieved by the Natural Resource Management and Landcare programs has been accredited to participating rural communities engaging a wide range of stakeholders and to the extension of the scope of such programs to embrace broader community environmental initiatives (Wilson 2004). In the case of Landcare (Sobels *et al* 2001) suggest that programs have identified leadership skills among members of local groups. The activities of community-based groups have encouraged social interaction and an increased learning and communication between individual volunteers.

The empowerment achieved by local groups by participating in these programs has also helped them to deal more effectively with program managers and the bureaucracy generally (Sobels *et al* 2001). These outcomes have possibly assumed considerably greater importance in the neoliberal era, where the impact of economic rationalism has been felt in the cutbacks made by successive state governments to many rural

programs and associated resources. A focus group of representatives of local government and community-based organizations conducted in Mount Barker in September 2005 identified the implications of such changes on the services that had traditionally been provided to the agricultural sector by government agencies.

> Participant:
> Well, it has always been something that we've traditionally we've had; a lot of support through the Agricultural Department. It purely downsized - -
>
> And also, a lot to do with how it's funded. I mean a lot of their projects are funded by other corporations and so on from the business etc. and I think that affects how they work.

In the contemporary climate, rural communities are being called upon to demonstrate greater independence and leadership at the local level in implementing Landcare programs (Baker 1997; Wilson 2004; Wallington and Lawrence 2008). As the proceedings of the Mount Barker focus group would tend to suggest, independence can be somewhat of a 'double-edged' sword, with many similar communities having to rely on volunteerism due to the absence of formal governance structures and a limited availability of resources.

> Participant:
> (We are) (s)ort of, very independent at the moment. We are very lucky. We've had sort of, an allocation of funds that the Landcare and sort of that kind of concept and that's been - - in one sense it has been a growing area; unilateral emphasis has been put on that. And all of that's left to volunteers---
>
> I guess it goes back to some of the things I was saying before about the changes in the Agriculture Department and the other government departments that affect landholders---
>
> Participant:
> And less, less people on the ground to do, to support the work that we do---
> --- in the ways that it was in the past. They (departments and agencies) are under more control, and we are under more control. And in terms of, uh, and the, that would also include things to do with Landcare issues as well.

The pursuit of environmental goals as part of the longer term aim of achieving community sustainability might be possible by encouraging greater social interaction among new and long term residents. The empowerment of communities through their participation in Landcare programs could be achieved by introducing capacity-building as part of new governance models that recognize the inevitable convergence

between social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability (Morrison and Lane 2006). This would be preferable to simply devolving responsibility for such activities to community-based organizations without providing the appropriate mechanisms and resources required to negotiate existing guidelines, compliance and regulatory regimes and thereby increasing the risk of failure. Discussion at the Mount Barker focus group identified a need for more effective, community-wide coordination of such as issues, as follows:

> Participant:
> (I)n terms of community groups that I have been involved with, uh, going back to the question how do we affect the ways of essential functions and services are provided, I think, uh, it would, uh, come back to the, uh, insurance, the public liability has just gone out of control. Uh, if we want to put on public events and so on we have to comply with so many different… and it is costly for all the communities to do so. And although there is a lot of - - I'm not sure that this comes under this question or not, but although there seems to be a lot of funding available to community groups and regional groups and so on, it's very fragmented and Departments who all have their own little hoops that you've got to jump through to get to it and so on so, yeah, it takes - - there is a lot of funding but it's hard to get hold of the right funding for the things that you want to do in the community.

The environment and rural community sustainability

Environmental factors are acknowledged as being important in influencing rural community sustainability (Cocklin and Dibden 2005). Black (2005) describes 'the three pillars or dimensions' of sustainability as comprising economic, social and ecological (or environmental) elements. This framework accords with the 'triple-bottom line' approach that is used by governments and private sector organizations alike in assessing the potential sustainability implications of decisions, and in monitoring performance outcomes against expressed targets during the post implementation phase (Government of Western Australia 2003; Tonts 2005).

Local government and Landcare

Pini (2009) identifies research by a number of writers that views local government in Australia as being potentially well placed to make a significant contribution to environmental management. This advantageous positioning arises because of local government's flexibility compared to the other levels of government and the relative proximity of local government to residents and communities. At the same time however, local government must overcome obstacles to its effective engagement in

environmental management, which include financial constraints, pro-development influences and limits to legislative power.

Local governments throughout rural Australia and in Western Australia specifically, occupy a central role in the pursuit of environmental management goals through their involvement in Landcare programs (Wilson 2004). Relative to other sections of the community, a local government is typically the only entity that has access to the physical and financial resources and the intellectual property required to undertake such tasks. Critics point to this involvement of local government in Landcare as being part of a wider ongoing phenomenon of responsibility and cost shifting that has occurred among the different levels of government in Australia.

Local government can therefore play a central and inevitable role in empowering rural communities through capacity-building, and by providing the formal structure, continuity and knowledge-base for what are essentially volunteer-driven, community organizations (Sobels *et al* 2001; Wilson 2004). This enables communities to participate in the environmental component of the sustainability by interacting with local government as part of contemporary governance frameworks that have been fashioned upon devolved responsibility and grass roots level decision-making (Wallington and Lawrence 2008).

Possible future strategies

Recognizing that local government plays a pivotal role in assisting community-based organizations to undertake environmental activities, this case study suggests that the Shire of Plantagenet could consider:

- Disseminating throughout the wider Mount Barker community, information about the Landcare program and its various components, with a view to: (a) explaining the purpose and scope of the contemporary Landcare program, notably: (i) that its focus is not limited to agricultural land-related issues (such as degradation, salinity, flood mitigation etc..); and (ii) its benefits as a mechanism for promoting social interaction among residents; and (b) leveraging on this enhanced understanding of Landcare to recruit new residents to join longer term community members as volunteers.

- Consulting with the Landcare group and the wider Mount Barker community to: (a) identify the priority environmental activities that could be subject to application(s) for funding under the Landcare program; (b) ensure that any identified potential Landcare activities are consistent with the Council's existing townscape enhancement strategies, adopted town planning schemes and future land use proposals.

- Preparing applications for Commonwealth and State government funding grants on behalf of the Landcare group and acting as the custodian of any monies received for Landcare group activities.

- Providing the administrative resources needed to facilitate the Landcare group's adherence to legislation (e.g. indemnities and insurances) and its fulfilment of grant funding conditions (e.g. expenditure according to program guidelines; and acquittal report at conclusion of projects).

Case study 3: *Wongan Hills – collaboration between local government and private organizations in supporting essential functions and services delivery.*

This case study discusses a proactive partnership approach involving local government and a community-driven private enterprise. Taking advantage of a business opportunity, this venture has facilitated the establishment of infrastructure that is crucial to the community in attracting new residents engaged in delivering essential functions and services.

Situated in the Western Australia's central wheatbelt region some 180 kilometres north-east of Perth, the Wongan Hills is centred upon a diversity in agriculture and its associated support industries. These industries serve as the key economic drivers, both in terms maintaining a relatively stable population and in attracting the new residents that contribute to long term community sustainability.

According to ABS Estimated Resident Population data for the years 2001 to 2008 however, the broader Wongan-Ballidu (SLA) experienced a population slight decrease of -0.1% during that period.

								CHANGE 2007r– 2008p
ERP AT 30 JUNE ………..								
STATISTICAL DIVISION, Statistical Subdivision and Statistical Local Area	2001 no.	2002 no.	2003 no.	2004 no.	2005 no.	2006 no.	2007r no.	2008p no.	%
……........								
MIDLANDS								
Avon								
Wongan-Ballidu (S)	1 593	1 562	1 565	1 528	1 504	1 473	1 441	1 440	-0.1

ABS data released as part of the 2006 Census identified the population of Wongan Hills (Urban centre/Locality) as being 745 persons out of a total population of 1,473 within the Wongan-Ballidu Statistical Local Area (SLA).

Wongan Hills (Urban centre/Locality)

AGE	Selected Region	% of total persons persons in Region	Australia	% of total Australia
Age groups:				
0-4 years	62	8.3%	1,260,405	6.3%
5-14 years	108	14.5%	2,676,807	13.5%
15-24 years	93	12.5%	2,704,276	13.6%
25-54 years	335	45.0%	8,376,751	42.2%
55-64 years	66	8.9%	2,192,675	11.0%
65 years and over	83	11.1%	2,644,374	13.3%
Median age of persons	39	-	37	-

As this statistical breakdown might suggest, the importance of industry and the employment opportunities in providing a population drawcard for Wongan Hills is supported by the fact that the single largest number of persons (i.e. 335 or 45.0%) are found in the 25-54 years age range.

The ABS, in data released as part of the 2006 Census revealed the following information about the most common industries of employment for those persons normally resident Wongan Hills (Urban centre/Locality) aged 15 years and over.

Wongan Hills (Urban centre/Locality)

INDUSRY OF EMPLOYMENT (Employed persons aged 15 years and over) MAIN RESPONSES IN SELECTED REGION	Selected Region	% of employed persons aged 15 years and over in Region	Australia	% employed persons aged 15 years and over in Australia
Specialised Industrial Machinery and Equipment Wholesaling	35	9.4%	20,813	0.2%
School Education	29	7.8%	414,214	4.5%
Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming	26	7.0%	133,275	1.5%
Hospitals	17	4.6%	303,923	3.3%
Local Government Administration	16	4.3%	128,838	1.4%

The agricultural-based areas of *specialised industrial machinery wholesaling* and *sheep, beef cattle and grain farming* contributed to the employment of just over 16 per cent of persons in this ABS survey. As the data also suggests however, "essential functions and services" delivery (i.e. *school education*, *hospitals* and *local government administration*) accounted for the employment of almost 17 per cent of persons aged 15 years and over.

Recent research suggests that essential functions and services delivery issues are themselves, inseparable from a community sustainability strategy being pursued by the Shire of Wongan-Ballidu and the wider community. This strategy is centred upon population diversity and has included the promotion of Wongan Hills as a viable rural lifestyle choice ('bush-change') option for people of retirement age (Shire of Wongan-Ballidu 2009).

Council recognized that it would be difficult to entice new populations to Wongan Hills without an adequate standard of community infrastructure and basic services. It therefore, set about negotiating with government agencies and government business enterprises to secure the release of subdivisions for commercial and residential land and the upgrade of essential infrastructure (i.e. electricity, water and roads). The details of these activities were recounted at a focus group of representatives of local government and community-based organizations held in Wongan Hills in March 2006.[4] Participants in this process identified that the ongoing withdrawal of government (notably state government) from its role in the delivery of some essential

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[4] Community-based focus group proceedings Wongan Hills: 22 March 2006.

functions and services to rural communities had led to these communities calling upon local government to 'fill the gaps'.

> Participant:
> There's a lot of assumption that as a community, that the local government will just do it. Talking about it, we as an advisory body too, (we) just push the problems onto the local government.
>
> Participant:
> The lack of services has seen people move out of rural communities, because they can't get the services in rural communities, so they move to bigger communities. And, and that's got to be a, a big issue.
>
> Participant:
> You can almost make the sweeping statement, that what service, essential service is not being provided, volunteers end up providing in some shape or form.
>
> Participant:
> Well, we see the need for it, so we, we actually, you know, if some, some need, then volunteers or others, we meet that service.
>
> Participant:
> But shouldn't we as a community be lobbying the government more to provide some of these services that the community has to take on? And that's what we don't do. We go out – instead of making a stink and getting help do these things – we say: "To hell with them, we'll do it ourselves."

In the contemporary governance environment, vertical relationships between government agencies and local actors have been aimed at devolving responsibility and resources to local actors (Eversole and Scholfield 2006). These relationships are widely promoted as facilitating empowerment through local participation. However questions also arise as to how much autonomy is actually achieved by local actors (e.g. local governments and their communities). In the wake of such 'gaps', the new thinking on rural and community development calls for the injection of local knowledge and 'grass roots' solutions to community problems.

Local government and community-driven development
The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a wide-ranging debate about local government's geographic placement relative to local communities and its potential to assist in the strengthening of these communities through sustainability. It is also asserted however, that the achievement of such outcomes has been hampered by local government being beholden to legislative and financial constraints imposed by federal and state governments (Martin 2005). In the neoliberal era, economic rationalism has

characterized public management and has shaped essential functions and service delivery models. Considerable focus is being directed towards rural local governments to assume responsibility for delivering some essential functions and services as a pathway to achieving community strengthening and sustainability. Local government may be both incapable and unprepared to assume responsibility for such matters however, because of limited and declining resources (Martin 2005).

Relating findings of Victorian research into the involvement of local government at the community level, Martin (2005: 2) describes a Victorian government view that community strengthening:

> is not about more funding but about better use of existing resources. Community strengthening:
>
> - Engages local people in a shared vision for revitalizing their communities
>
> - Develops a range of community initiatives and projects to achieve long-term positive change
>
> - Builds local skills and knowledge to increase participation in community life and improved services delivery locally
>
> - Increases opportunities for positive social interaction within communities
>
> - Improves understand(ing), value of, and utilization (of) community strengths.

For the Shire of Wongan-Ballidu, community-driven development of this nature came in the form of initiatives aimed at overcoming deficiencies in the housing infrastructure associated with commercial activity, professional services and essential functions and services delivery. The local government has utilized a partnership approach involving a private entity known as the Wongan-Ballidu Development Group. The Group comprises local entrepreneurs operating under a not-for-profit charter to:

> coordinate and generate local economic development initiatives that promote growth and sustainability and to help create an environment that fosters the expansion of new and existing businesses in the community.
>
> (Shire of Wongan-Ballidu 2009)

The Group is considered as having the advantage of being unconstrained by many of the conditions and legislative requirements that apply to organizations within

government. Utilizing a joint contractual arrangement with the State Government and the Shire of Wongan-Ballidu as its platform and financing from both the WA Treasury and the Council, the Development Group has already constructed a number of residential dwellings. A primary aim of the Development Group's work is to ensure that the community can continue to attract professional staff in both the business and government sectors. The Development Group's business plan involves constructing 15 houses within a 10 year time frame (i.e. by 2010). The Development Group seeks to achieve its objectives of supporting commercial activity in the community by ensuring that at least one house is at any time made available (on a full commercial rent basis) for employees of businesses.

In terms of infrastructure activities that are related to "essential functions and services" delivery, the Development Group in 2005 constructed a new residence to accommodate the town's general practitioner, and has also subsequently built a Government Employees' Housing Authority (GEHA) residence for use by WA Police Service personnel. The Development Group's involvement in infrastructure development in Wongan Hills has also extended to the planning and construction of grouped aged persons accommodation, with housing units being sold on a commercial basis.

Possible future strategies
The scope of the partnership arrangement involving the Shire of Wongan-Ballidu and the Wongan-Ballidu Development Group is not limited to the construction of housing infrastructure. The Group has also been instrumental in establishing much needed mobile telecommunications facilities in Wongan Hills, along with an upgrade of the town's airstrip, which is pivotal to the community maintaining contact with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Local government might therefore consider applying this local community entrepreneurship model to as a basis for securing a range of infrastructure projects and essential services, as the community needs arise.

Conclusion
This paper has focused on the phenomenon of population mobility and its implications from the perspective of three selected case study rural communities in Western Australia.

Ongoing data collected by government through the ABS and literature findings of academic studies have identified population mobility as exerting significant influence on the economy, character and social fabric of a rural community. These factors ultimately impact upon community sustainability. In the contemporary environment where economic rationalism provides the underlying theme for the policy approaches employed by commonwealth and state governments, decisions involving essential functions and services delivery have often set population mobility in a negative context.

For the three case studies rural communities examined in this paper, an exposure to population issues in varying forms has highlighted the need for the particular local governments to embrace contemporary governance models that involve wide-ranging community engagement. With such frameworks now being firmly entrenched in the Australian governance and policy setting, it is imperative that rural communities seek innovative strategies aimed at leveraging population mobility as a safeguard for community sustainability. Given the devolution of roles and responsibilities that has occurred from the commonwealth and state governments to local government over time, the focus is turning to local government in rural communities to provide the vehicle by which these strategies can be pursued.

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