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Local government perspectives on rural retirement migration and social sustainability

Rachel Winterton a, Andrew Butt b, Bradley Jorgensen c and John Martin d

aJohn Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research, La Trobe Rural Health School, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia; bCommunity Planning and Development Program, Department of Social Inquiry, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia; cBehaviourWorks, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Australia; dCollege of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

ABSTRACT
Within the policy and academic literature, the impact of rural retirement migration (RRM) on community sustainability has been questioned. This qualitative study investigated the perceived impact of retirement migration on rural social sustainability from a local government perspective. Focus groups were conducted with local government senior managers and community services staff (n = 39) across six rural local government areas in one Australian state. Data were analysed against the three components of rural social sustainability (equity, community and rurality) proposed by Jones and Tonts [1995. “Rural Restructuring and Social Sustainability: Some Reflections on the Western Australian Wheatbelt.” Australian Geographer 26: 133–140]. While RRM is perceived to benefit rural community capacity to facilitate or maintain equity, community and rurality, it also presents challenges for local government. Participants suggested that capacity to facilitate equity, community and rurality in contexts of RRM was impacted by uncertainty around future impacts of RRM on population ageing, increasing advocacy and expectations of older in-migrants, and the impact of RRM on rural heterogeneity. These issues required local governments to think critically about how to accommodate and manage the needs and expectations of older in-migrants, while mediating potential impacts associated with RRM.

KEYWORDS
Rural; ageing; local governance; sustainability; equity; community

Introduction
This paper investigates the perceived impact of retirement migration on rural social sustainability from a local government perspective, utilising Jones and Tonts’ (1995) rural social sustainability framework as an analytical device. In so doing, this work contributes a new perspective to emergent debates on the impact of ageing and migration trends on rural social sustainability (Jones and Tonts 1995; Stockdale and Macleod 2013; Winterton and Warburton 2016), with rural social sustainability identified as a neglected area of enquiry (Sumner 2005; Whitten et al. 2015). It also provides new insight into the challenges faced by rural local governments in resourcing ageing populations (Argent et al.
Numerical and structural population ageing are presented as key challenges for government, in terms of their ability to resource the health and social needs of increasing numbers of older adults (Atkins and Tonts 2016; Han and Corcoran 2014; O’Brien 2016; Piggott 2016). This trend is experienced acutely in rural Australia, with older adults proportionally more likely to reside outside of metropolitan centres (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017a). While this is attributed to ageing-in-place and youth out-migration, migration of older adults into rural towns also contributes to numerical and structural ageing processes and impacts on community composition (Argent, Griffin, and Smailes 2016; Davies 2014; Smailes, Griffin, and Argent 2014). This trend, referred to as rural retirement migration (RRM) encompasses in-migration of retirees from outlying farming areas, and retirees from locations external to the region (Argent, Griffin, and Smailes 2016). Drivers include a desire for amenity lifestyles, or a need to access cheaper housing, family support, or services (Brown et al. 2008b; Davies and James 2011; Stockdale and Macleod 2013). While coastal localities within 300 km of capital cities are popular retirement destinations (Davies 2014), RRM is not restricted to amenity-rich settings, with research noting the emergence of ‘unconventional’ agricultural retirement communities as a result of increased movement to access health service supports (Bolender and Kulcsar 2013).

While RRM can be an asset, through increasing social capital and the local skills base (Brown et al. 2008a; Davies 2014; Skelley 2004), it can also pose challenges. While findings are mixed in relation to the absolute role of RRM in driving structural or numerical population ageing, RRM contributes to changes in the spatial distribution of older adults, prompting differentiated regional patterns of population ageing (Argent, Griffin, and Smailes 2016; Han and Corcoran 2014). Where affluent retirees move from metropolitan to rural regions, this can increase rural heterogeneity and inequality (Argent et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2008a; Davies 2014; Stockdale and Macleod 2013), and non-permanent aged migration flows can pose challenges in regard to social cohesion and service provision (Davies 2011). Consequently, there has been much debate about how RRM impacts on rural social sustainability (Brown et al. 2008a; Davies 2014; Stockdale and Macleod 2013; Winterton and Warburton 2016). Black (2005, 25) defines social sustainability as ‘the extent to which social values, social identities, social relationships and social institutions are capable of being maintained’. In the context of rural-specific challenges, such as service restructuring, land-use change, and increased economic stratification (Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Jones and Tonts 1995; Mcmanus et al. 2012; Scott, Park, and Cocklin 2000), researchers have developed a rurally focused definition of social sustainability. Early definitions reflected ‘the ability of rural communities to retain their demographic and socio-economic functions’ (Troughton 1993, 2), linking social sustainability with economic viability, conservation of cultural subgroups, ecosystems and localities, and capacity to withstand external pressures, while ensuring adaptability (Chambers and Conway 1991; Pepperdine 2001; Scott, Park, and Cocklin 2000; Smailes 1995).

Reflecting these issues, Jones and Tonts (1995) developed a tripartite framework for rural social sustainability, representative of equity (equitable access to basic services); community (viable systems of human/cultural interaction) and rurality (maintenance of rural ways of life). Developed within the Australian context, it is one of the few existing rurally-specific social sustainability frameworks (see Whitton et al. 2015), and has been used
widely to contextualise international debates around rural social sustainability (e.g. Spel-
dewinde et al. 2009; Sumner 2005). However, it has not yet been used as an investigative
device to explore how specific trends might impact on social sustainability in rural regions.
This largely reflects a conceptual shift to resilience frameworks, which detail the ability of
rural systems to respond to decline through adaptive behaviours (Mcmanus et al. 2012).
Yet sustainability and resilience are not interchangeable, and where sustainability reflects
desired outcomes, resilience is the process that enables this to occur (Lew et al. 2016; Magis
2010; Redman 2014). Thus, it is important to understand threats to rural social sustain-
ability in order to inform debates around resilience. Social sustainability is still a key
area of enquiry (Slade and Carter 2017), with issues associated with rural social sustain-
ability (e.g. sense of belonging and community participation), still acknowledged as key
challenges (Mcmanus et al. 2012; Plummer, Tonts, and Argent 2018). Consequently,
use of this framework will provide new insight in relation to how certain demographic
trends impact on rural settings.

Further, there has been limited investigation of how RRM impacts on rural social sustain-
ability from a local government perspective. Early research highlights the need to plan for and
understand the implications of RRM (Glasgow and Reeder 1990; Skelley 2004). As the only
local body responsible for decision making (Roseland 2000), local government plays a central
role in maintaining rural social sustainability, through balancing needs of people and com-
unities (Bell 2007; Scott, Park, and Cocklin 2000). Australian rural local governments
are already facing challenges resourcing ageing populations (O'Brien 2016), and challenges
associated with RRM further implicate local government (Argent et al. 2010; Brown et al.
2008a; Skelley 2004). Differentiated regional patterns of population ageing impact on the
equity of local government funding models, influencing local resource allocation (Han and
Corcoran 2014; Jackson 2004), and increasing heterogeneity of older people presents chal-
 lenges for local governance (Argent et al. 2010; Stockdale and Macleod 2013). While one
early review from the USA hypothesises how rural retiree-attraction policies may impact
on local government (Skelley 2004), there has been no empirical research specifically explor-
ing local government perceptions of RRM. Consequently, using a rural social sustainability
framework to explore how local governments view the impacts of RRM will provide
greater clarity around perceived threats and opportunities, or potential responses. Under-
standing the perceived impacts of RRM is also critical in determining where further research
is needed to confirm, or challenge, the actual impact of this trend.

Method

Data are taken from a study conducted in 2013–14, exploring how local governments are
responding to RRM. The study was conducted in Victoria, where 19 per cent of the rural/
regional population is aged over 65+ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017a). Six local gov-
ernment areas (LGAs) were selected as case study sites based on a principal component
analysis (PCA) and cluster analysis of census data for 384 Victorian small towns (<10
000 residents). This process was not intended to identify only those communities experi-
encing high levels of RRM—rather, the objective was to capture rural demographic and
economic diversity in order to explore diverse RRM trends, in light of difficulties tracking
rural migration rates associated with non-permanent, unreported migration (Bolender
and Kulcsar 2013; Hugo and Harris 2013).
Data from 2011 were obtained from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2018), and the Census of Population and Housing (2017b) (see Table 1). Consistent with previous typologies (Bogdanov, Meredith, and Efstratoglou 2008; Butt 2014), the process involved two stages: variable reduction and classification. Initial variables were reduced to 12 components using PCA (Abdi and Williams 2010), accounting for 70.67 per cent of the variance. Factor scores were generated for each component and standardised to have means equal to 0 and standard deviations equal to 1.

These standardised components were included in a cluster analysis, which grouped towns based on goodness of fit in comparison with other clusters (based on the Euclidean distance between each case and its classification centre). Components were subject to a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) (Hair et al. 2006) to identify outliers and determine the number of clusters. Agglomeration coefficients were examined for the last 10 stages of the clustering process in order to determine the number of clusters. The solution was refined using non-hierarchical, K-means cluster analysis (K-means CA). To do this, the final seed points from the HCA served as initial cluster centroids in the K-means CA. All 12 components contributed significantly to the cluster solution with $F$-tests being significant at 0.01 or better. The solutions from the two CA procedures were significantly related ($\chi^2 = 747.35$, df = 9, $p < 0.000$), indicating consistency between the outcome of each method.

Three geographically and demographically distinct clusters were identified by mapping all towns within each cluster using Geographic Information Systems, and by considering the association between each principal component within each cluster. As seen in Table 2, clusters were assigned a descriptor based on the alignment of their spatial and demographic characteristics with rural classifications and trends observed in the literature relating to rural occupancy (peri-urban, agricultural and amenity). This labelling of towns was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Data used for variable reduction/classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resident characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age (0–4; 5–17; 18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55–64; 65–74; 75 years or older)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% speaking English as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% born outside Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% not in the labour force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% travel mode to work (bicycle; bus; car as driver; car as passenger; motorbike/scooter; train; walked only; multiple modes of travel; work at home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% household size (1 person; 2; 3; 4; 5 or more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% number of vehicles owned (none; 1; 2; 3 or more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% dwelling type (separate house; flat/terrace; other dwelling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% rental status (owned outright; being purchased; government rental; other rental)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% living at same address as 5 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% population in non-private dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% unoccupied dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% visitors on census night (including overseas visitors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intended to provide context to data, and it must be noted that the aim was not to define what peri-urban, agricultural and amenity regions in Victoria look like.

A list of towns most representative of the clusters (based on cluster distance scores) was produced, with the LGAs selected possessing the highest proportion of towns most representative of the cluster (based on the Euclidean distance between each town and its respective cluster centre).

- **2 × amenity dominant LGAs**: LGAs with the highest representation of towns from Cluster 1.
- **2 × peri-urban dominant LGAs**: LGAs with the highest representation of towns from Cluster 2.
- **2 × agricultural dominant LGAs**: LGAs with the highest representation of towns from Cluster 3.

However, all LGAs also had towns represented in other clusters, demonstrating the complexity of Victorian LGAs. LGA characteristics are highlighted in Table 3, with all selected examples experiencing inward migration of retirees and pre-retiree age groups. This was

### Table 2. Cluster characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster 1 (amenity)</th>
<th>Spatial characteristics</th>
<th>Demographic characteristics</th>
<th>Alignment of variables with relevant cluster label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High proportions of towns located on the amenity-rich southern coast with easy access to Melbourne</td>
<td>Higher percentage of residents who had moved in in last 5 years Higher percentage of people of retirement age, people without children Greater percentage of unoccupied dwellings</td>
<td>Amenity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High levels of coastal in-migration, high levels of people of retirement age (Argent et al. 2010) Major zones around cities, prime tourist destinations (Holmes 2006) Increasing number of unoccupied dwellings within amenity and coastal regions (Costello 2009; Hugo and Harris 2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 2 (peri-urban)</td>
<td>High proportion of towns located in regions surrounding Melbourne’s urban fringe</td>
<td>Higher percentage of school-aged children and larger households Lower percentage of residents with no children High levels of employment in wholesale industries, retail, administration and support High percentage of households more likely to own several motor vehicles, drive to work, and to be paying off a mortgage</td>
<td>Peri-urban or peri-metropolitan: Usually within 30 min travel time from the city’s fringe (Holmes 2006) Increasing number of young families who are commuting into major cities for work (Burnley, Murphy, and Jenner 1997) Service industry a driving force (Holmes 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 3 (agricultural)</td>
<td>Agricultural Local economy and society dependent on agriculture</td>
<td>High proportion of towns within and on the fringes of agricultural regions in northern and western Victoria</td>
<td>Higher percentage of people employed in manufacturing, agriculture Lower percentage of those aged 18–24 or over 75 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower percentage of culturally diverse residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHER
most evident in amenity areas, and was diluted by overall inward migration in peri-urban areas. Even agricultural areas experiencing overall population loss reported positive net migration among older age groups. While the proportion of 55+ in-migrants as a percentage of general in-migration was increasing in some LGAs and decreasing in others, the proportion of in-migrants as a percentage of the general 55+ cohort had decreased across all LGAs.

Two focus groups were held with staff in each LGA—one with the senior management group (SMG), and one with community services staff (STA). The management group included chief executive officers and portfolio directors \((n = 22)\), and the community services group included team leaders working within community services, ageing, disability, health promotion and social planning portfolios \((n = 17)\). Two LGAs still had responsibility for provision of HACC (Home and Community Care) services to older people,\(^1\) with the remaining four outsourcing these to external providers, and all LGAs possessed a healthy ageing portfolio. LGAs were asked to ensure all relevant portfolios were represented within focus groups, and this was confirmed through comparison with organisational structures.

Focus groups lasted for 1 hour, with discussions centred on (1) evidence of RRM, (2) perceived impacts on community sustainability and local governments, and (3) responses to these impacts. Focus group moderators (Winterton and Martin) ensured that all participants had the opportunity to respond to each question, and to others’ interpretations, so that groups were not monopolised and contradictory views could be discussed. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, with speaker identification conducted by the first author (Winterton). Transcripts were analysed thematically using QSR-NVIVO, with an initial deductive analysis undertaken by the first author utilising the tripartite model of sustainability (economic, social and environmental). Within the social sustainability theme, a higher-order analysis was undertaken using Jones and Tonts’ (1995) rural tripartite model, where these data were sub-coded in relation to the components of the framework (equity, community and rurality). Data within each theme were then inductively sub-coded to identify key issues. In accordance with best-practice focus group research

| Table 3. Population and retirement migration characteristics of selected LGAs (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017b) |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Amenity cluster | Agricultural cluster | Peri-urban cluster |
| AME1 | AME2 | AGR1 | AGR2 | PER1 | PER2 |
| Approximate distance from capital city (km) | 270 | 120 | 400 | 400 | 55 | 70 |
| Area (km\(^2\)) | 4788 | 865 | 20 942 | 9108 | 1282 | 1748 |
| Total population (2011) | 11 881 | 30 367 | 43 103 | 4217 | 79 786 | 43 371 |
| Total population (2016) | 12 337 | 32 804 | 45 040 | 3903 | 94 128 | 46 100 |
| Average annual population change (2006–16) (%) | 0.3 | 2.1 | 1.2 | -1.4 | 5.1 | 1.9 |
| Population density 2016 (per km\(^2\)) | 2.7 | 37.1 | 2.1 | 0.5 | 60.5 | 24.7 |
| % aged 65+ (2011) | 21.8 | 23.6 | 23.3 | 22.1 | 10.7 | 13.4 |
| % aged 65+ (2016) | 24.5 | 27.8 | 28.2 | 24.7 | 11.9 | 17.1 |
| % change 2006–11 | 2.9 | 0.6 | 1.3 | 1.9 | -2.1 | -2.9 |
| Inward 55+ 2001–06 (% of all inward) | 31.4 | 41.4 | 39.6 | 24.2 | 19.2 | 22.8 |
| Inward 55+ 2006–11 (% of all inward) | 29.6 | 31.3 | 34.5 | 21.5 | 17.5 | 21.4 |
| Inward 55+ 2011–16 (% of all inward) | 26.1 | 39.8 | 38.4 | 25.8 | 16.6 | 20.2 |
| Inward 55+ 2001–06 (% of total population 55+) | 17.6 | 23.1 | 18.8 | 11.4 | 26.7 | 18.5 |
| Inward 55+ 2006–11 (% of total population 55+) | 15.3 | 22.4 | 17.3 | 10.1 | 29.5 | 17.9 |
| Inward 55+ 2011–16 (% of total population 55+) | 11.1 | 20.0 | 12.7 | 8.9 | 20.6 | 12.1 |
(Smithson 2000), attention was paid to contradictory data within focus groups, and across LGAs. Analysis was then verified by the research team, with the resultant coding schema provided in Table 4. Member-checking was also undertaken (Creswell and Miller 2000), where findings from each LGA were presented to a subset of representative participants for confirmation.

**Findings**

As per Argent, Griffin, and Smailes’s (2016) definition, RRM was discussed in two forms by focus group participants across all LGAs—migration from outside, and within LGAs. Migration from outside the LGA was seen as more prevalent in amenity and peri-urban LGAs; as one participant described: ‘professional people … that have worked in Melbourne or wherever for a number of years and come up here quite often’ (peri-urban LGA representative—SMG). Migration within LGAs, where older people moved from farms or townships into larger centres (more prevalent in agricultural LGAs), was also observed. Consequently, perceived migration drivers were diverse, and encompassed amenity, economic, social, historical and service-related factors. According to focus group participants, these trends had implications for maintenance of equity, community and rurality (see Table 3).

**Equity**

Equity reflects the ability of rural communities to ensure access to basic services, particularly when compared with urban settings (Jones and Tonts 1995). Participants across all focus groups discussed the perceived influence of RRM on local government capacity to ensure service equity in relation to two key themes—their ability to equitably resource rural retirement migrants’ needs and preferences, and their ability to equitably resource other rural cohorts.

Participants across all LGAs expressed concern in relation to how particular trends associated with RRM would impact their ability to equitably resource this cohort.

**Table 4. Coding structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Representation in data</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of LGAs</th>
<th>Number of focus groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived impacts of RRM on equity</td>
<td>6/6 12/12</td>
<td>Ability of local government to equitably resource rural retirement migrants’ needs and preferences</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>12/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived impacts of RRM on community</td>
<td>6/6 12/12</td>
<td>Ability of local government to equitably resource other rural cohorts</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>11/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived impacts of RRM on rurality</td>
<td>6/6 12/12</td>
<td>Impact on sustainability of local businesses</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>7/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact on sustainability of local groups and organisations</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>6/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact on trends associated with rural production</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>6/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact on the consumption of rural space</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>10/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact on rural social cohesion</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>5/12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Uncertainty around future rates of RRM was a key concern, in relation to their perceived ability to provide aged care services to this cohort:

Participant #1: it’s the unpredictability of the impact it will have on our service delivery. We already know, I think, that this big tsunami is coming towards us with the baby boomers in terms of the demand and service delivery. So we’ve got that already because we know our population, but what we don’t know is who’s coming in and how…

Participant #4: what they’re going to be actually wanting, hence why we worry about the quality of service. (Peri-urban LGA representatives—STA)

This was exacerbated by a lack of clarity about whether current migrants would age in place, with one participant questioning: ‘these really active seniors that have just come into the town are the 50s, 60s group. What happens when they get to 75 or 80 is anyone’s guess’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). Some participants also reported little understanding of the specific needs of rural retirement migrants:

Are they people that are less reliant on support, or are they less likely to create strong connections in the community, are they more likely to have money in their pocket? Yeah, I’m not sure. Until we actually understand that demographic—at the moment they probably just get lumped in with old people. (Agricultural LGA representative—SMG)

However, some participants highlighted a number of current trends associated with RRM that they felt would impact their ability to facilitate equitable levels of service for this cohort. These included the tendency of amenity migrants to move into holiday homes (which required significant retrofitting to make them age-appropriate), and an increased need for social programs, as one participant noted: ‘they don’t have that connection and that group of contacts that they would have had’ (peri-urban LGA representative—SMG). While lack of family support among retirement migrants was also perceived to place greater demand on local government services, one participant suggested that this was no different to rural long-term residents: ‘we still do deal quite a bit with people who don’t have family—regardless of whether they’ve moved here or whether they’ve grown up here’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). The tendency of lower-income older migrants to move to remote rural regions was also seen as problematic:

If you’re coming from the metro area, wanting to find cheaper housing and the tree-change then they’re the areas that you might go and they’re areas that are somewhat more isolated. You know the health services are not there and so I think that’s an area I guess that we need to also be mindful of. (Peri-urban LGA representative—STA)

There’s some Office of Housing units here and there’s some in [smaller town] … so they’ll ring up and say oh, I’ve got this [older person] who wants to get a unit out there, they’re coming to see a unit in [small town]. They don’t drive, they need public transport and I said well, no point. (Agricultural LGA representative—STA)

Participants suggested that retirement migrants often assumed that levels of rural service provision would be equivalent to those provided in urban settings, and this was a key concern. As one participant indicated, longer-term older residents and retirement migrants often differed in their interpretations of what constituted a basic service in a rural context:
People who come in are much more likely to advocate for something they haven’t got already that they want, that they’ve seen elsewhere and that they believe should be replicated here. It’s not that the older people don’t—a lot of the older people that live in this area already are very satisfied with the town, they don’t have expectations that it—or the services—that they will be any different. They’re used to dealing with the fact that we’re a little bit—that transport can be an issue and that sort of thing, and they can often call on neighbours and all of that. (Peri-urban LGA representative—STA)

These heightened expectations were prominent among urban–rural migrants, as one participant noted: ‘They’re used to having all of this suite of services in Melbourne and they come here and they expect the same’ (amenity LGA representative—SMG). Where retirement migrants moved from more rural to less rural places, these expectations were often lessened, with one participant suggesting ‘[Small rural] to [larger township] opens up a whole lot of opportunities without you asking for anything more’ (agricultural LGA representative—SMG). Participants suggested that these expectations increased pressure on local government to deliver services at a similar level to those provided in urban settings, despite their lower rate base and larger areas of geographic coverage, with one participant questioning: ‘how do you manage that expectation when we’ve got—the expectation and demand and what we can actually provide?’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA).

However, one participant noted that this expectation could be beneficial, in that ‘[it] forces council to obviously improve their service delivery and their facilities’ (amenity LGA representative—STA).

Participants also suggested that RRM could impact their ability to equitably resource wider rural community cohorts. These impacts could be positive, where retirement migrants enhanced wider rural service capacity through volunteering, part-time employment or use of services; as one participant noted: ‘you’ve got an influx of people, that helps maintain the facilities through the use and provision of services’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). However, participants indicated that rural retirement migrants, particularly those from wealthier, professional backgrounds, were highly competent in advocating for their own needs. This could exclude longer-term residents, as one participant described:

There’s a community planning group … Most of the people who belong to that group are actually people who have moved up from Melbourne. I’ve spoken to them about how representative they are as a community group and how much they’ve engaged the long term residents. They haven’t done much in the way of engaging long term residents, and long term residents haven’t been joining in. (Peri-urban LGA representative—STA)

This capacity of rural retirement migrants to advocate for their rights, coupled with the need for local government to engage more actively with this group as a consequence, often meant that other cohorts’ voices were not being heard and therefore considered in resource allocation. Some participants suggested that that the needs of retirement migrants (and older cohorts, by extension) were privileged, as one participant summarised: ‘there are more of them, and they make demands’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). This had implications for other cohorts, with one participant stating: ‘we’re not hearing from our families who have got a big part to play in the development of our communities’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA). Participants also suggested that wealthier in-migrants were more able to pay for desired services and supports, which provided them with greater choice and quality. However, this could disadvantage less wealthy, longer-term residents:
A lot of the older people who live here already are not necessarily well off. So the demand for that group of people will be higher because they have less opportunity to pay. So we have to try and cross-subsidize the migrating retirees who have money and try and somehow gather up some of what they have the ability to pay for and cross subsidize it into programs for people who are poorer. (Agricultural LGA representative—SMG)

Consequently, participants also suggested that RRM was contributing to inequity across different rural communities within LGAs. Communities with higher levels of RRM were viewed as more advantaged in relation to resource allocation, as one participant indicated: ‘there’s a lot of investment in the growth corridor for obvious reasons’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA). Conversely, communities that were not attracting retirement migrants, and/or experiencing high levels of aged out-migration, were less able to deliver equitable services; as one participant suggested: ‘their [community] sustainability is becoming more and more questionable as the farming community ages and shifts out of there’ (agricultural LGA representative—SMG).

**Community**

Social institutions, such as local businesses and organisations, assume a critical role in rural communities due to the limited ability of formal services to fulfil older residents’ needs (Skinner and Hanlon 2016). Participants within all focus groups discussed the perceived impact of RRM on community capacity to sustain viable social infrastructure across two key areas—local businesses, and community groups and organisations. Perceived impacts of RRM on local businesses were discussed by focus group participants in all LGAs, particularly in relation to impacts on the retail sector. While RRM was seen to have prompted positive changes in some LGAs, such as increased numbers of stores and longer opening hours, others had observed little benefit, as one participant reported: ‘we’re not hearing of any stories of, gee my business is doing better because we’ve got all these retirees moving in’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA). This lack of benefit was associated with a perceived reduction in demand associated with the spending patterns of older people, and the tendency of many rural retirement migrants to shop outside of their small towns. Seasonal migration patterns were also seen as problematic, as one amenity participant suggested: ‘in winters you see an exodus of people go north. So in terms of local businesses, particularly being able to sustain a local business, a cafe over the winter is quite difficult’ (amenity LGA representative—SMG). Mixed outcomes were also reported in relation to perceived impacts on local services and tourism. It was seen that the predilection of rural retirement migrants to volunteer within local tourism organisations was advantageous in facilitating tourism, and benefits were obtained where semi-retired older in-migrants started or took over businesses. However, RRM did not solve the issue of succession planning, with one participant noting ‘as people retire out of businesses, there isn’t people generally to take them over’ (agricultural LGA representative—SMG). Even where they did take over businesses as a transition to retirement strategy, this was not always seen as advantageous, with one participant suggesting: ‘they tend to take it over as a parking vehicle for their super [annuation] and, in fact, the business often deteriorates because of that lack of time and lack of total commitment’ (amenity LGA representative—SMG).

The perceived impact of RRM on the sustainability of local groups and organisations was also highlighted by participants in all LGAs. While RRM was seen as beneficial for
the survival of local groups and organisations, due to high levels of engagement among this cohort, the consensus was that it was changing some of the preferences for engagement. Retirement migrants were seen as less likely to engage with traditional groups, as one participant noted: ‘I work with the Senior Citizens groups … they’re saying that there’s definitely older people moving down, but they’re not getting them to the Senior Citizens centres’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). Retirement migrants were more likely to attend physical activity groups, social groups, and educational organisations such as the University of the Third Age (U3A). Family-centred groups were also facing expectations to cater more effectively for older adults in regions with high levels of family-driven migration:

I’ve quite a few that have shifted in just to be closer to their kids and grandkids. To add to that there’s also evidence that those grandparents are playing the role in childcare as well, and some increasing demand for us to consider how we can have play groups for grandparents. (Peri-urban LGA representative—SMG)

Rural retirement migration was perceived to have mixed benefits in relation to governance of groups and organisations. Rural retirement migrants were active volunteers, and their professional expertise could enhance community governance structures. However, it could similarly facilitate conflict with longer-term volunteers, as one participant noted: ‘it’s professionalised the volunteering, if you like. There’s old school volunteers who think that they’ve always done it this way so they’ll continue to do it this way’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA). The preferences of many retirement migrants for short-term, sporadic forms of volunteering was also perceived to have implications for staffing and governance of community groups, prompting reflection by local government:

We’re very consciously looking at how can we support and foster volunteerism in our newer estates where we’ve got people moving in, and right across the shire obviously because we get the tree changers up in the hills as well, people moving in. It may be about ultimately, as we’re probably all aware too, different models of volunteerism, so more confined roles, shorter term roles in volunteerism. (Peri-urban LGA representative—STA)

Rural retirement migrants sometimes started groups to meet their own needs, which was seen as beneficial from a resourcing perspective, as one participant noted in relation to an older in-migrant who had started an art group: ‘you get those sort of people who come in and take the bull by the horns rather than come in and say oh what are you going to—I’m here, what are you going to do for me?’ (agricultural LGA representative—STA). However, this could have resource implications for local government, with these groups then demanding meeting space and governance assistance, with another participant noting: ‘They have ideas. Yeah. They’re all good. The council should help deliver them’ (agricultural LGA representative—SMG). Similarly, participants reported that conflicts were arising between traditional groups, such as senior citizens, and emergent groups patronised by, or started by rural retirement migrants, such as U3A. This posed challenges for local government in maintaining equitable provision of social infrastructure for both cohorts, with one participant noting: ‘I’ve got senior citizens almost at war with U3A. We tried to get them to amalgamate’ (agricultural LGA representative—STA). As another participant noted: ‘there’s questions around equity and that sort of thing. They’ve [senior citizens] long had very privileged access to council facilities and this
might be one of those examples where you take something away’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA).

**Rurality**

While rurality is a contested concept, there are certain cultural ideologies associated with occupancy of rural space (Gosnell and Abrams 2011). In many cases, these relate to constructions of the rural as spaces of agricultural and economic production, social interaction and ecological sustainability. However, these constructions are continually under threat due to rural restructuring, globalisation, and the emergence of the rural as a ‘lifestyle’, or space to be consumed (Holmes 2006; Jones and Tonts 1995). Participants within all focus groups suggested that RRM was impacting on the maintenance of traditional notions of rurality across three key areas—trends associated with production of the rural, consumption of the rural, and rural social cohesion. Participants across five LGAs suggested that RRM would impact significantly on traditional forms of rural production. Much of this was attributed to the perceived impact of increasing numbers of older people on existing rural economies, as one participant suggested: ‘there’s no scenario planning around an older community, what does that mean for the economy? Because our economy is mostly sort of manufacturing, retail, there’s some agricultural stuff’ (agricultural LGA representative—STA). However, RRM could potentially create new economies, with one participant noting:

the other thing about retirement migration is it actually has people not totally independent. It actually generates employment. So as you get older people—part of that over a period of time is they need a bit more support or they’re dependent on certain services. (Peri-urban LGA representative—SMG)

Alternatively, where long-term farmers retired into towns, this often resulted in farm amalgamations which could actually increase economic efficiency, as one participant described: ‘a lot of those farms were purchased by the adjoining owners eventually. They’re now much more viable’ (agricultural LGA representative—STA).

Focus group participants across five LGAs also suggested that RRM was contributing to the notion of rural communities as spaces of lifestyle consumption. In popular RRM destinations, this was highlighted by the emergence of attention from retirement lifestyle developers, which could challenge the rural social and environmental landscape:

They [developer] were producing something that was, under the planning scheme, appropriate. So it had all of the right infrastructure or it fit into the planning scheme. But it didn’t actually have that other dimension which is so if you build this thing, what’s going to change? If you’re bringing in a whole group of people or you’re trying to attract a certain group of people, what’s that going to do to the current community? So we actually have developed a contribution plan. (Agricultural LGA representative—STA)

Consequently, the consumption preferences of rural retirement migrants were also altering how rural spaces were regulated and developed. Among a number of LGAs, land-use strategies were being developed to address the impacts of RRM, including rezoning to accommodate or compensate for higher-density housing and growth within popular RRM destinations; as one participant noted: ‘our land use strategies are now encouraging more of the growth into [larger centre], and that’s essentially to protect and put less pressure on the coastal towns’ (amenity LGA representative—SMG). Rural retirement
migration was also associated with a greater desire for mobility infrastructure, such as street lighting and footpaths. However, these preferences were sometimes at odds with the views of longer-term residents:

People that clearly that have lived here for a long time go no, this is my coastal area and I don’t want to see concrete, I don’t want to see paths, I don’t want to see this, I want to keep it nice. Whereas there are (retirement migrants) going hang on a sec, I can’t walk out my door because everything’s too uneven and there’s no paths. (Amenity LGA representative—SMG)

Similar conflicts were observed in relation to clashes between rural consumption and production values, such as noise and pollution associated with agricultural activity, as one participant noted: ‘you can have some of that conflict with rural activity from time to time … we’ve moved into this lovely green country area where the farmer next door is still running his tractor and putting out the hay’ (peri-urban LGA representative—SMG). Participants also suggested that retirement migrants were often opposed to housing and commercial development, particularly in areas that were undeveloped. These consumption preferences had implications for local government in terms of how they balanced these with environmental or economic sustainability goals, and the equity needs of other residents:

People make a decision that they’re going to retire somewhere for the lifestyle stuff, they’re then very reluctant to see that place change. So then there’s this—I’m here, it’s how I like it. So let’s not have a whole heap of other people come here or have other ideas about what the place could be. So it raises some challenges. Because places change, places need to change. (Agricultural LGA representative—SMG)

The notion of close-knit rural communities is an essential, though contested, part of rural folklore (Wenger 2001), and participants across five LGAs also discussed the perceived impacts of RRM on rural community cohesion. While retirement migrants generally fitted into the community, it was suggested that RRM could reinforce rural insider/outsider stereotypes, as one participant noted: ‘it forces people that have come into the town in a new way, like recently, to stick together because there can be a little bit of feeling like you’ve got to live here all your life to be considered a local’ (peri-urban LGA representative—STA). In addition to conflicts over rural space, financial differences between wealthy retirement migrants and long-term residents were seen to impact on community cohesion, with one participant noting: ‘there used to be resentment that so many older people own the places, and because they’re well-funded they’ve got money. So they keep the prices of those houses up’ (amenity LGA representative—STA). Differences in attitudes were also perceived to pose a threat, with one participant suggesting, ‘the older community in place will struggle a little with this new paradigm of what an older community looks like. I think we’re fairly conservative and I think that that’s going to be an issue’ (agricultural LGA representative—SMG).

Discussion and conclusions

This research identifies a series of challenges relating to the perceived impact of RRM on the ability of local governments and communities to meet needs relating to equity, community and rurality. Rural retirement migration will bring many benefits, as acknowledged in other studies (Brown et al. 2008a). It can increase rural critical mass, which provides greater justification for service provision and capacity for equitable service
provision, in addition to enriching community groups and maintaining elements of the rural. However, RRM, in conjunction with broader socio-demographic trends (population ageing and the retirement of the baby-boomer cohort), is seen to be prompting a certain degree of change. Given the importance of responsiveness to change within broader rural social sustainability (Pepperdine 2001; Scott, Park, and Cocklin 2000), continued RRM will require rural communities to accommodate, or compensate for social change. As Jones and Tonts (1995) have identified, the question is not whether rural places will be sustainable, but for whom. By focusing on the perspectives of local government employees across six diverse rural LGAs, this paper provides new insight into who may benefit in the context of RRM, and who will be disenfranchised.

Rural retirement migration may actually increase social sustainability for ageing populations, as a consequence of increased advocacy from newcomers for age-friendly environments. However, these benefits will occur only with consensus over what ‘age-friendly’ means, and for whom. This study highlights perceived tensions among new and long-term older residents about the services required for equity, meaningful community spaces, and salient elements of rurality. As Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon (2011) note, social sustainability is challenged by conflict between what people need and want, and within this study, local governments perceived that rural retirement migrants and long-term residents have different perspectives on what is needed. This raises questions about the relationship between rurality, social sustainability and age-friendliness in the context of increasing population heterogeneity. Research highlighting the emergence of contested spaces of rural ageing suggests that RRM is a key contributor (Skinner and Winterton 2017), and debate will emerge over which elements of the rural are worthy for which groups—and which are feasible to maintain while meeting wider equity needs. Otherwise, it may be that rural communities become sustainable (and age-friendly) for certain cohorts, leaving others disadvantaged. This applies also to non-voluntary and resource-poor rural retirement migrants, who may have greater needs than the resident older population (Bolender and Kulcsar 2013). Moreover, with increased emphasis on the needs of older cohorts, younger populations may become disenfranchised from decision making, which has implications for rural economic trajectories.

These perceived impacts present challenges for local government, with many of these associated with broader concerns around servicing an ageing cohort. However, it is interesting to note that these findings are drawn from LGAs where the proportion of retirement migrants within the wider 55+ cohort is actually decreasing. Consequently, the actual numerical impact of RRM on future aged care service demand, in comparison with the resident ageing population, will potentially be lessened. More comprehensive data are required to determine how wider aged migration trends are actually impacting on rural population ageing. Regardless of the extent of its impact on the age structure of communities, pressure on rural services and supports associated with RRM will arise as a consequence of two factors. First, the increasing advocacy and expectations of rural retirement migrants will challenge existing rural cultural norms around what equity means in rural contexts, the provision and structure of rural social infrastructure, and the use and governance of rural space. Second, the increased heterogeneity of rural populations associated with RRM will require more nuanced, diverse service responses within an environment of continuing fiscal restraint. These challenges require local governments to think critically about how to accommodate and manage both the needs and expectations of diverse rural retirement migrants,
while mediating the impacts of increased rural advocacy and heterogeneity associated with RRM. These local governments recognise that their capacity is limited and that balancing these two factors will be critical in maintaining social sustainability in contexts of RRM, in order to maintain equity, community and rurality for diverse residents across and within communities. While more nuanced planning and service responses will be required, local governments also identified issues they face in planning more proactively for RRM, which Skelley (2004) notes is important in managing change. These issues were related to uncertainty around RRM trends and intentions, and a lack of knowledge of how this cohort differed from broader ageing rural populations. Further research is needed to explore these issues, in order to inform local government planning responses.

In conclusion, these findings reflect the views of only six rural LGAs in one Australian state. While these LGAs were selected as representative of identified locational types, they are not illustrative of the diversity of rural regions, or of the broader views of rural LGAs. It is necessary to engage with other LGAs, health and community organisations, and with retirement migrants themselves, to interrogate the issues presented here. Despite these limitations, this research provides a nuanced view of how RRM is impacting on rural social sustainability from a local government perspective. In so doing, it highlights a need for policy and research to understand and reflect the variegated experience of rural ageing, including tensions presented by retirement migration and population growth.

Notes
1. Home and Community Care (HACC) provides basic support services for older people who are frail or have a disability to assist them to continue living independently at home. In 2015, the HACC program was transitioned to the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) in all states except Western Australia, due to the Commonwealth government taking back funding responsibility from the state governments. However, many LGAs continue to provide direct CHSP services under this new funding agreement.
2. U3As are community, volunteer-led organisations that provide educational and special-interest activities for older adults.

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