

Strengthening Communities: the Contribution of Housing Policy and Planning,

Narrogin Case Study

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REGIONAL CHANGE AND RURAL HOUSING

The economic, social and infrastructure changes affecting rural Australia have been given considerable attention over recent years. These include detailed studies of agricultural restructuring (e.g. Burch *et al.* 1999), counterurbanisation (e.g. Curry *et al.* 2001), service provision (e.g. Argent & Rolley 2000), infrastructure provision (e.g. Haslam-McKenzie 1999), population change (e.g. Salt 1998), and socio-economic well-being (e.g. Walmsley & Weinand 1997).

Surprisingly few studies, however, provide important insights into the characteristics and dynamics of housing markets in rural Australia. In 1989, a study by Econsult *et al.*, conducted for the Australian Housing Research Council, described five common features of rural housing markets. Firstly, the quality of rural housing often reflects the position of a settlement in the urban hierarchy, with the standard of housing generally lower in smaller towns than in larger settlements (see also Beer *et al.* 1994). Secondly, although the cost of land is often lower in rural than in metropolitan areas, the cost of construction is considerably higher. Thirdly, cheaper, older housing is often available in rural areas, but there is a trade-off in terms of quality and accessibility. Fourthly, maintenance costs are significantly higher in rural areas. Finally, the availability of rental accommodation in rural areas is often quite low.

A later study by Budge *et al.* (1992) confirmed many of these findings. In addition, they drew attention to the 'entrapment' of households in areas heavily dependent on broadacre agriculture. Often the family home is a household's major asset. If it is located in a declining country town, then an inadequate supply of buyers, together with falling prices, may make it difficult to realise the capital that is invested in the family home. This can act as an impediment to migration to larger centres with greater economic and social opportunities. Retirees in declining centres can also often find it difficult to sell their home in order to buy a smaller dwelling or to move elsewhere (Black *et al.* 2000). Given the extent of economic and population change across much of rural Australia, it is somewhat surprising that further research attention has not been devoted to the interaction between housing markets and migration.

Research by Burbridge and Winter (1995), conducted in the Riverland of South Australia and in South West Queensland, suggested that there are three critical issues in rural housing markets: i) overcrowding of dwellings; ii) the poor physical condition of the housing stock; and iii) the high cost of housing in relation to local incomes. By contrast, a study by Beer (1998), based on data from the 1994 Rental Tenants Survey, suggested that private rental housing in rural Australia is generally no more crowded, or of lower quality, than in metropolitan regions. However, Beer did note that the affordability of private rental housing in rural areas was of concern, particularly given the relatively low incomes that often characterise non-metropolitan Australia.

Research also suggests that housing in rural areas is less likely to be appropriate and obtainable to meet the specific needs of persons such as the aged, single persons, lone parents, people in itinerant occupations, the disabled, low income families, the unemployed, women and children seeking refuge from domestic violence, and young people who have left home for work, education or other reasons (Budge *et al.* 1992; Coorey 1990; Gray & Tompkins 1997). These inadequacies are accompanied by growing evidence of homelessness in rural Australia (Baker 1996; Gray & Tompkins 1997). The economic difficulties facing many rural areas, together with rising levels of poverty in these non-metropolitan regions, are generally

recognised as important contributing factors to the problem of rural homelessness. This problem is not restricted to Australia, and has been noted in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada (Cloke *et al.*, 2000; Aaron 1996; Bramley 1993; Lambert *et al.*, 1992; Fitchen 1991). This prompts questions about the availability, allocation and affordability of public housing in rural areas.

A small number of studies have drawn attention to the links between housing and regional and local economic development. A recent paper by Beer (1998) noted that economic growth in the Upper and Mid South East of South Australia was under threat as a result of shortages in rental accommodation. Similar problems were noted by Clements (1995) in a study of housing needs in the small Western Australian town of Wongan Hills, where the rapid expansion of manufacturing activities led to a chronic shortage of housing for both rent and purchase. Clements also noted that the poor quality of the public housing stock in some rural areas was acting as a disincentive to in-migration and population growth.

A number of recent North American studies provide further insights into the links between housing and economic development (Ziebarth 1997; Broadway 2000). Over the past decade or so, a growing number of small communities in North America have attempted to promote economic development by attracting companies engaged in industries such as food processing and packaging (Stull *et al.* 1995). However, very few of these communities planned for the housing needs of the low-paid workers that such industries require (Broadway, 2000). The expansion of employment and population has often led to shortages in local housing rental and purchase markets. As a consequence, the cost of rental and purchase accommodation has increased rapidly, pricing many workers out of the housing market (Broadway 2000). The outcome has been the proliferation of low cost 'trailer park' accommodation on the fringes of many small towns (Ziebarth 2000).

Similar issues relating to housing affordability have been noted in the United Kingdom. Processes of counterurbanisation have contributed to a reduction in the availability of housing in some rural areas and led to a rapid increase in dwelling costs, usually to the disadvantage of lower income earners and first home buyers (Milbourne 1998; Rogers 1987; Shucksmith 1981; Shucksmith 1990). There is some evidence to suggest that this is also an issue in rural Australia. For example, Greive & Alexander (1995) found that urban-rural migration was contributing to rising land values in the small Western Australian settlement of Bridgetown. The outcome was the exclusion of some local residents from the housing market.

NARROGIN IN ITS REGIONAL CONTEXT

The town of Narrogin in Western Australia provides a useful case study through which to examine these changing regional housing characteristics and dynamics. Located 190 kilometres south-east of Perth, with a current population of around 4,500, it is one of the larger regional service centres in Western Australia's wheat-sheep belt. The town's origins were linked to the construction of the Great Southern (Perth-Albany) Railway during the late 1880s and the local abundance of fresh water which made Narrogin an important stopover midway along the line (Pustkuchen 1981).

Following the opening of the railway in 1889, investment in public infrastructure contributed to substantial growth in the town. The State government's decision in 1905 to construct a network of railways in those areas with potential for wheat production saw Narrogin become an important railway junction for new lines serving the expanding wheatbelt to the east. Not only did Narrogin benefit from a growing population of railway workers, but

its accessibility also ensured its role as a regional service centre. State government investment in education, health, police and railway services contributed to significant economic and population growth (White, 1992). At the same time, many of the smaller towns surrounding Narrogin, such as Wickiepin, Wagin, Pingelly and Williams, benefited from the rapid development of agriculture and the expansion of government services in rural areas.

While the Great Depression and World War II slowed development considerably, post-war investment in rural development contributed to a second phase of growth in Narrogin and surrounding towns. In the case of Narrogin itself, this included further investment in railway workshops, improvements in the public water supply, connection with the state electricity grid, upgrading arterial roads, the expansion of regional health care services, and the opening of a senior high school. The town also became the regional base for government agencies such as the Education Department, the Health Department, the State Housing Commission, the Forestry Department, Western Australian Government Railways, and the Main Roads Department.

In many respects, the post-war public investment in Narrogin reflected the contemporary policy approaches of the Western Australian and Australian governments. As in many other parts of the world, governments pursued policies that aimed to ensure economic and social stability through investment in public services and infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (see Walmsley, 1993; Tonts & Jones, 1997; Beer, 2000). Narrogin also benefited from the prosperous post-war agricultural conditions. High returns for wool and wheat contributed to considerable levels of local spending by the region's farmers. The outcome of this, together with the expansion of the public sector, was considerable growth in retailing, transport, manufacturing and public administration.

This expansion of Narrogin during the post-war period was inevitably accompanied by considerable investment in housing and, in particular, in public housing. During the 1950s and 1960s, large public housing estates were established on the fringes of the town to accommodate the expanding labour force. Public housing in the town was provided predominately by the State Housing Authority, the Government Employees Housing Authority and the Western Australian Government Railways. While a number of these houses were subsequently purchased by tenants, public rental accommodation remained an important component of the housing market. In 1971, for example, the State Housing Authority owned 212 rental properties; 17 per cent of the total housing stock in the town. Another 22 per cent of dwellings were owned by other government agencies (notably the railways) or private landlords.

While the population of Narrogin has remained relatively stable over the past three decades, the town has experienced considerable economic and social restructuring. Much of this change has been linked to changing government approaches to service and infrastructure provision. Perhaps the most significant upheaval to affect Narrogin was a series of decisions in the 1980s to rationalise government rail services. This resulted in the closure of many smaller branch lines and the centralisation of activities to larger centres, such as Albany and Northam. In the case of Narrogin this resulted in a decrease in direct employment on the railways from over 400 in the late 1960s (White, 1992) to less than 10 in 2001. The associated negative multiplier effects had a severe impact on the town's prosperity and well-being. To some extent, however, the demise of the railways has been compensated for the Narrogin's role as a local 'sponge city' (Salt, 1998). A combination of improvements in transport technology and the attraction of a relatively large retailing sector has enabled

Narrogin to draw economic activity away from nearby smaller towns such as Wickepin, Pingelly, Wagin and Williams. Furthermore, the rationalisation of public services in these small towns and the trend towards the centralisation of these services in Narrogin has tended to benefit the town. The outcome has been population decline in these smaller local government areas and growth in the Town of Narrogin, as well as in the immediately surrounding Shire of Narrogin (which includes the hobby-farm belt surrounding the town), and the nearby Shire of Cuballing which has also become a popular location for hobby farms.

Representatives of the Narrogin Town Council indicated that the population of the town has remained relatively stable since the 1996 Census. However, the population of the Town of Narrogin is relatively transient, with only 44 percent of residents living at the same address as in the 1991 Census. This may be due to the relatively high levels of employment in public sector organisations, schools, hospitals, and the police force. Previous studies of rural migration indicate that employment in country towns is often seen as a stepping-stone to more senior positions (Montague, 1978; Dempsey, 1990). Interviews conducted in Narrogin tended to confirm this view.

The town's role as a regional service centre is also reflected in the relatively high proportion of the labour force engaged in retailing (15.7 per cent) and wholesale trade (6.9 per cent). The significance of the education, health and community services is also evident, with nearly a quarter of the workforce employed in these sectors. The declining significance of the railways is reflected in the relatively low level of employment in the transport and storage sector (3.4 per cent). At the 1971 Census more than 15 per cent of the workforce were employed in transport and storage industries. At the 1996 Census, Narrogin's unemployment rate was 5.1 per cent, which was considerably lower than the Western Australian rate of 8.1 per cent.

THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL HOUSING MARKET

Despite the difficulties affecting agriculture in the region, and the general process of economic and demographic decline affecting a number of smaller neighbouring towns, Narrogin's housing market tends to have remained relatively buoyant. In terms of rental accommodation, interviews in Narrogin, and an analysis of local newspaper advertisements, indicated strong demand and high prices. Rental prices for a 1960s three bedroom brick and tile house varied from around \$120 per week to \$150 per week. By contrast, similar accommodation in the nearby town of Wickepin, 30 kilometres to the east, ranged in price from \$95 per week to \$125 per week.

The strength of the rental accommodation sector is driven by Narrogin's growing service sector. Rising employment in education, health, the police service, and other public sector institutions has contributed to growing demand for rental accommodation. A number of interviewees pointed out that many people working in these sectors view Narrogin as a town where they might spend two or three years before moving on to more senior positions. These 'spiralists' rarely invested in the local property market, preferring the flexibility of rental accommodation. It was also suggested that many of these temporary residents brought few benefits to either the local economy or the social life of the town. Often referred to as 'Monday to Friday' residents, it was argued that they spent the week working in Narrogin before returning to Perth for the weekends.

This spiralist population was having a significant impact on housing by contributing to rising rental prices. It was felt that, as a consequence, many low income earners were being disadvantaged by a relative shortage of affordable rental accommodation. While Homeswest (Western Australia's public housing provider) plays an important role in catering for low income earners, public rental accommodation was in relatively short supply. This left some residents (particularly young people) with no option but to rent poor quality low cost private housing or, alternatively, to stretch household budgets by leasing more expensive accommodation. This latter option, in particular, appeared to have implications for community interaction and well-being. With a high proportion of their incomes devoted to rent, the capacity of these residents to participate in the social life of the community is, to some extent, reduced. For example, residents who find themselves in this situation may not have the cash needed to participate in sport and other leisure activities that generally recognised as being critical in promoting a sense of belonging in small country towns (see Wild, 1978; Dempsey, 1990; Gray, 1991).

Another of the driving factors in Narrogin's rental market is the town's role as a 'sponge city', drawing economic activity, services and population out of nearby smaller centres. This has also been a critical element in creating demand for the housing purchase market. While land and housing values in many parts of rural Western Australia and Australia are relatively depressed (or even in decline)(Black *et al.*, 2000), Narrogin has experienced a steady growth in property values. One, apparently typical, example provided by a local resident was of a 1970s three bedroom brick and tile home that sold for \$95,000 in 1993 and \$132,000 in January 2001. The prices being paid for housing in Narrogin are now comparable with, and in some cases higher than, those in a number of Perth's suburbs. By contrast, similar houses in Williams, Pingelly, Wagin and Wickepin tend to sell for between \$75,000 and \$95,000 (*The Observer*, 14/03/2001).

As with rental accommodation, one of the key issues raised by local residents was the disparity between incomes and housing prices. The relatively low incomes received by many people in Narrogin were seen as a barrier to entry into the owner-occupier housing market. It was often suggested that first homebuyers and low-income earners were only able to purchase poor quality, expensive to maintain, former government houses built in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite this, the low cost of this housing (a three bedroom fibro home generally costs between \$45,000 and \$60,000) is generally seen as preferable to renting accommodation, particularly when repayments on a small mortgage are can be lower than rental costs.

There was also evidence to suggest that many residents are gradually upgrading this low cost accommodation, with the longer term outcome being an improvement in the overall quality of the town's housing stock. It was also felt by some residents that home ownership represents a stronger commitment to the local community. Indeed, home ownership was sometimes seen as a prerequisite to being regarded as a 'local' as opposed to an 'outsider'.

The vibrancy of Narrogin's housing market also appears to have contributed to a consolidation of the nearby settlements of Cuballing (15 kms north of Narrogin) and Highbury (15kms south). These settlements had experienced a steady pattern of economic, social and demographic decline since the 1950s and, by the late 1980s, consisted of little more than a pub, a meeting hall and a handful of houses. Over the past decade, however, they have experienced a revival as households move out of Narrogin in search of a more 'rural' living environment, since the town is now regarded by some as resembling a metropolitan suburb. Thus, the revitalisation of Highbury and Cuballing has been largely by the development of

small hobby farms on land that is cheaper than that available around Narrogin. Both of these towns now have recently reopened general stores (both had been closed since the late 1970s) and a growing number of voluntary organisations and sporting clubs. In many respects, however, these communities are suburbs of Narrogin, since most residents work and socialise in the larger centre.

PUBLIC HOUSING REDEVELOPEMNT

The radical changes that have occurred in Narrogin's economic and demographic structure in recent decades have inevitably produced comparable shifts in the demand for different housing types. In general terms, national trends, such as the ageing of the population, the falling birth rate and the instability of marriage/family relationships have fuelled a growing demand for alternatives to the three bedroom detached home on a quarter acre block that is typical of the town. However, Narrogin is also experiencing a number of more local social trends which are intensifying the shifts in demand for both different numbers and different types of housing options. These include: the inward movement of retired farmers/farm families, as well as of urban retirees, including those with considerable amounts of capital; the continued local expansion of the spiralist population of mobile workers (increasingly in white collar, usually in government, employment and increasingly employed on a project, rather than a continuing, basis); the ongoing and contested integration of the Noongar population into the broader housing economy; and the decline in blue collar employment contingent on the withdrawal of local state government operations in sectors such as railways and Main Roads.

A common characteristic of all these trends is that they lessen the demand for what might be termed "standard" detached houses constructed at conventional Australian country town densities i.e. in demand for what is overwhelmingly the modal form of housing currently available in Narrogin. While this disjuncture may be a cause of both demographic and socio-economic pressures for change, there is also a countervailing pressure which can only be defined as rhetorical. Recent debates on housing issues in the Town Council (*The Observer*, 20/12/00) echo wider community perceptions/values relating to a "country lifestyle" and, thus, to what this means in housing terms.

Plans by the state Ministry of Housing to develop even small (nine household) complexes of grouped units in the town have been opposed by councillors and residents who have used big city terminology to label such a development as a "ghetto" (*The Observer*, 25/5/2000). Ironically, such reactions inhibit attempts by Homeswest to minimise any tendencies towards ghettoisation at a slightly larger scale. In Narrogin, as in other country towns and in the Metropolitan region, Homeswest is endeavouring to implement a New Living Program to decrease the proportion of public housing in the town overall, but more specifically to reduce the proportions of public housing in certain sectors of the town, notably to the west, where their levels are currently high.

Homeswest sees the New Living Program as having the potential to free up land in areas of the town currently occupied by public housing, in part through the relocation of tenants currently housed in accommodation unsuited to – and generally too large for – their current household structures. Such a relocation would potentially be to higher density and, on occasion, grouped housing developments.

Narrogin's current housing situation is therefore central to a range of conflicts and paradoxes common to many country towns in Australia. With the collapse in many of their traditional industries (in Narrogin's case, particularly of railway and other blue collar government employment), such towns need to develop alternative demographic and economic bases. In adapting their housing stock to the need so fhteir changing populations, however, there is an ever present danger that they will compromise their attractiveness to existing and potential residents and employers still further by destroying those elements of their distinctive physical and social fabric (as encapsulated in such catchphrases as "country style" and "country lifestyle") and thus imperil the jobs and investment which, ultimately, will fill the houses and sustain the community.

As illustrated in the succeeding sections, and particularly among the less wealth residents, Narrogin's current housing stock is both perceived as deficient by some of its inhabitants but, even when it is less than optimal for its current inhabitants, it is often passionately adhered to as a lifestyle choice. Change and redevelopment in the town's housing stock is required to allow the community to adapt to contemporary socio-economic and demographic trends and is a fundamental component in the development of its capacity to do. But the current nature of the housing is, simultaneously, an important element of Narrogin's identity (as a "country town") in the minds of many of its inhabitants. The local housing situation is therefore at the centre of the paradox that change is a sine qua non of rural sustainability for both economies and communities. This paradox is particularly apparent when the housing needs of some of the more marginalized groups within Narrogin's population are considered.

ABORIGINAL HOUSING ISSUES

A number of parallels exist between the housing problems facing Narrogin's Noongar and non-Aboriginal populations. Young adults leaving home find difficulty in obtaining local housing that is economically and physically suited to their needs and, in spite of the higher birth rates and younger age structure, of the Noongar population, a growing proportion are becoming "empty nesters". Furthermore, both populations contain significant proportions of mobile individuals, particularly in the young adult stage of the life cycle.

That said, however, significant differences remain. Given the large differentials in income and employment levels between the two groups, the Noongar population is far more dependant on the provision of public housing, notably through Homeswest, but to a lesser extent through the Southern Aboriginal Corporation. Furthermore, while significant changes have occurred in the circumstances of both the Noongar and the non-Aboriginal communities over the last three or four decades, these have affected different components of their lives. For the (predominantly) white population, there has been a shift in employment type, as white collar and, frequently, casual, part time and contract work has supplanted the town's formerly blue collar and apparently secure employment base. While this change may have impacted upon many households' abilities to obtain and/or to remain within their homes, the effects on housing have mainly been indirect.

Over the same period, however, and notwithstanding the enduring gap in unemployment levels between the Noongar and non Aboriginal populations, it is in the housing area that the Noongar population have experienced the greatest changes. Forty years ago, and even less, the town's Noongar population still occupied fringe camps. (Tonkinson, 1962) and it is only in recent decades that a shift to more 'mainstream' accommodation has occurred. Initially this involved a move to what might be termed transitional accommodation, administered by a separate Aboriginal Housing Board. While the Noongar population now also has access to

other Homeswest properties, a number of differentials endure.

In 1991, it was contended that “(t)he local Aboriginal community and Homeswest have different opinions on how housing is best provided to and for Aboriginal people” (Crawford (ed.), 1991). Two major housing concerns raised by both individuals and representatives in the Noongar community, which were also mentioned in Crawford’s report, relate to the supply and the standard of local Homeswest accommodation. Members of the Aboriginal community contend that, then as now, the standard of public housing made available to them is low and that essential maintenance is frequently not carried out. While these may be seen as complaints of a type frequently made by many public housing tenants, it is undeniable that Narrogin, by virtue of its rapid population expansion in the post war long boom, does contain a significant supply of public housing that is now in need of considerable refurbishment, if not replacement. Furthermore, a number of Noongar informants cited serious structural deficiencies in some of the newer Homeswest properties which, they contended, had been inadequately checked and rectified at the construction stage.

Furthermore informants in the 2001 interviews also corroborated Crawford’s (1991:86) finding that the “(o)nly housing available is housing that other Nyungahs (sic) have previously lived in, i.e. (they) don’t get Homeswest houses that whites have previously been in.” Inevitably, in a relatively small town, such segmentation of an already limited supply of public housing increases inflexibilities, leads to longer waiting lists and times and, thus, to increased housing stress.

A major new concern/issue relating to Aboriginal housing has arisen, that is central to both the “ghetto” concept alluded to above and to the broader framework of community development, namely the overall distribution of housing for the Noongar population within the town. This topic was raised with us in discussion with both Noongar informants and Council employees, with both groups expressing sympathy for a greater dispersal of Noongar households within the town.

Noongar households currently tend to be concentrated in certain Homeswest sectors of the town. As Homeswest works towards rearranging and dispersing its properties within Narrogin, a degree of dispersment of the Noongar population might be expected to occur. The Town Council supports such a move and has recently opposed Homeswest plans which may have seen the movements of a group of Noongar households en bloc from one part of town to another.

While such a Council decision may have been made on a range of grounds from a desire for community integration through to a concern over the placement of a (locally) significant group of Noongar households in a particular locality, our responses from the Noongar community were broadly in agreement with this policy of dispersment. Not surprisingly, perhaps, individual views were expressed that they, as individuals, had concerns over a system (the allocation of specifically ‘Aboriginal’ housing) which further constrained their range of choice and could place them in close proximity to those with whom they, too, may not wish to associate. Specific personal, familial and cultural differences and disagreements occur in the Noongar, as in the broader, community. Even in a town as small as Narrogin, these can be ameliorated by a degree of residential flexibility and distance as, for example, in the deliberate location of two Noongar families at opposite ends of the town.

SPECIAL HOUSING NEEDS

The special needs/difficulties of the Noongar population, alluded to above, are but one manifestation of the interrelated housing and community needs of a population that is becoming increasingly fragmented. In addition to the Aboriginal fringe camps of the 1960s, Narrogin was then also divided into the two distinct class groups of the 'town' (i.e. the purveyors of services to the surrounding farming population) and the 'railways' (essentially those employed in manual public service occupations, such as the railways, but the Water Authority or Main Roads.) These class groups tended to live in different dwellings, with the public sector employees concentrated in public housing, while town residents purchased in the private market. They also had different social and sporting networks, with the public sector employees (particularly the railway workers) maintaining their own clubs and social and sporting premises and, frequently, exhibiting a wider ethnic mix than the predominantly Anglo-Celtic 'town' population. Many continental European workers obtained employment in the railway workshops during the early part of the post war long boom.

Even with the closure of the railway operations, and the private purchase of much of the former railway and other government housing, these social barriers have remained to the present day in some ways. Certainly a number of former 'railway' families have stayed in the town following the (sometimes early) retirement of the breadwinners as the government cutbacks progressed. This has further contributed to the town's aged population and has meant that many of this now elderly population remain in their own (ex railway) homes long after the railway itself has had a significant presence in the town.

This group therefore contains many people with a long duration of residence in the same dwelling and, thus, a very strong attachment to it. Many moved into these properties as young adults in the post war period and are now occupying family houses on quarter acre blocks which they are now physically unable to maintain. Agencies, such as Home and Community Care (HACC) are currently providing such individuals with assistance to remain in their houses. This service is necessary since small towns like Narrogin traditionally tended to lack a significant amount of aged housing (though it must be admitted that the local supply is growing, whether or not housing of this type is considered to be sufficiently "country style"). Furthermore, local HACC informants emphasised the personal attachment of many of their clients to their homes of long standing and the distress that they could consequently feel should they be moved elsewhere, notwithstanding the social isolation of living in low density accommodation in a town with virtually no public transport.

This social isolation is felt all the more by some elderly members of the ethnic communities, since this age cohort contains many central and Eastern European migrants who came to Australia and to Narrogin in the years after World War Two. HACC informants report that there is still a notable, if elderly, Polish community in the town, certainly one visible enough for its special dietary needs to be respected by those working in the area of home delivery of meals. HACC also runs a multicultural club to enable members to retain their memories and their language and to provide the intellectual stimulation that will enable them to retain their faculties and, thus, their independence as long as possible.

This is becoming a significant issue for small communities like Narrogin where housing provision for people with intellectual difficulties is inadequate to non-existent. While "borderline" cases are accommodated in Homeswest units in the town and, in the view of our informants, are often extremely socially isolated there, more serious cases are obliged to leave Narrogin and seek accommodation elsewhere, where appropriate treatment and services are

provided. However, HACC informants were of the view that housing and other provision for the physically handicapped was better developed locally. Homes were modified as required and the local council was working on a programme of ramp and footpath development to improve access.

In spite of the desire of many of the elderly residents of Narrogin to be 'carried out of their (detached) homes in a box', the presence of a growing number of elderly and/or disabled residents in the town emphasises the need for the provision of a growing number of smaller dwellings. Such accommodation, particularly in a rental form, is also desired by many younger residents of the town, both those who have grown up in Narrogin and wish to remain and those who have been attracted to the town by the growing number of white collar - but often temporary - jobs available there.

Inevitably, as indicated above, market forces then bring about an increase in local house prices and rents. As a wide range of our informants reported, this can lead to 'in-comers' obtaining little more than a *pied a terre* in Narrogin and spending their weekends in Perth. Thus they spend far less in the town and contribute far less to the town's social and community life. Even if these middle class 'spiralists' do obtain accommodation in Narrogin, their demands push up local housing prices, thus increasing the difficulties for the local poor and elderly who are also seeking this type of accommodation.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, Narrogin exhibits many of the housing characteristics and changes and problems identified in the previous studies. Furthermore, housing is a particularly durable and inflexible product. During a period rapid of social and economic change in regional Australia this can, as has been the case in Narrogin, lead to mismatches between dated housing supply and contemporary housing demand. When this occurs, existing residents, notably the rural young, may be further encouraged to move elsewhere and potentially valuable incomers may be discouraged from settling locally.

While the small size of towns such as Narrogin inevitably adds to the constraints of what is an increasingly stratified and fragmented housing market, a further complicating factor identified in this study relates to the surface of housing supply rather than to its substance. Running counter to the demographically driven need to change the nature of local housing provision in towns such as Narrogin is the demand to preserve, both in density and in design, an identifiable "country style". This demand appears to emanate from both long-term residents and from new arrivals, with members of both groups seeking and even more countrified style in the hobby farms of the surrounding districts. One of the authors (Jones, 2001) has identified a similar conundrum in an historic, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the UK, which is heavily dependant on tourism, retiree settlement and long distance commuting and where the success of this new economy is inextricably linked to the preservation and restoration of the traditional housing stock. It is notable that a similar phenomenon can be discerned in what is clearly not (yet) a post productivist part of rural Australia. It is also a further reflection of the complex ways in which local housing markets can be both a mirror of and a barrier to rural change.

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