FABIAN SOCIETY

Voices of rural England and Wales

Today the Fabian Society publishes Labour Country, a report outlining how Labour can win the rural votes needed to form a majority government. As part of this research we carried out three focus groups in October and November last year with rural voters, discussing what living in a rural area is like, their political concerns, and their perception of political parties in general and the Labour party in particular. All groups were composed of a combination of between seven and 10 people – all either Labour voters or those who considered voting Labour but in the end voted for another party. They were drawn from the social-economic groupings BC1C2DE.

The first session took place in St Asaph in north Wales in the constituency of Vale of Clwyd, which Labour narrowly regained from the Conservatives in the 2017 election (on an 11.9 per cent swing, having lost the seat in 2015). The second took place in the village of Probus in Cornwall, with participants coming from the neighbouring villages of Malpas and Tregony too. All are in the constituency of Truro and Falmouth, which remained Conservative in the 2017 election but witnessed a 22.5 per cent swing to Labour. The final group was in Clay Cross in North East Derbyshire, with participants drawn from nearby villages including Duckmanton. In last year's election the Conservatives took North East Derbyshire from Labour with a 12.5 per cent swing.

Each location, then, had a very different profile. And there were differences between and within the groups, particularly in their view of the Labour party, but there was also much that each group held in common. Conversations covered four main areas: their views of politics and the political parties, particularly Labour; the things people value about where they live; perceptions of the divide between rural and urban areas; the major concerns people had for their area and the country.

Politics

<u>National disaffection; local interest</u>

Political disaffection and contempt for the political class were common to all three groups. While such sentiments are also common in the country at large, they were expressed as a particular expression of rural and small town anger.

In Clay Cross, a participant said, "*They all talk a good talk*," before another continued, "*When it's election time, but after that you don't hear naff all*." There was a view this duplicity was driven both by self-interest and ignorance, with one woman saying, "*I don't think them in Westminster really know what it's like in places like this*" Others agreed, describing politics as "*London-based"* and claiming, "*They don't live in places like this*."

In Probus the mood was similar. One woman summed it up, saying, "*there is no faith in [politics] down here*." Another participant expanded: "*Do you know what, they haven't got a clue. None of them. If they wanted to do something, come down and speak to the people in the countryside […] and understand the way of life and how things tick down here*."

A man in St Asaph described politicians: "*election day they come around knocking on your door. You don't see them again.*" Similarly, when talking about politics politicians were seen to be talking only about "*Cardiff, South Wales or London, end of*."

And yet, when asked, participants in all three groups could think of individual local politicians who they respected.

In Clay Cross Dennis Skinner, MP for neighbouring Bolsover, was immediately signalled out by several participants, including Conservative voters, as being an honourable exception to the rule. He was variously described as "*straight*," "*the old style*," "*traditional*" and "*he doesn't take his expenses and stuff like that, he just works for the community*."

In St Asaph local MP Chris Ruane was respected at a local level, with one woman saying that he "*understands."* Plaid Cymru were widely seen to understand rural areas more than any other party in Wales, despite their being no Plaid voters in the group. And in Probus former Liberal Democrat MP David Penhaligon, who died in 1986, was seen by many in the group to be the only politician understood the area. As one woman put it, "*he was the voice, wasn't he, of Cornwall.*"

Conservative party

The Conservative party was given short shrift in all three groups, including in Clay Cross where the majority of the group had voted Conservative in 2017. When asked whether the party understood rural areas or were 'for people like me', participants – including Conservative voters – almost unanimously answered either neutrally or negatively. As a man in St Asaph put it, "*A lot of these Conservative MPs [are] big landowners that have nothing to do with farmers or farming people at all. Toffs*." In Clay Cross, a Conservative voter said, "*I just don't think they understand the average person, the normal person and how they live*." In Probus too, there was widespread dismissal of the Conservatives, including from their own voters.

The nature of the Conservative vote seemed soft. In Clay Cross, several in the group were Labour to Conservative switchers. To the extent that there was a policy reason for switching it was Brexit – "*Out means out pal, let's go,*" as one woman put it – but there was neither faith in nor attachment to the Conservatives.

Labour party

There were mixed views on the Labour party across the three groups, with groups in St Asaph and Probus more positive and Clay Cross more negative – perhaps reflecting the varied swing at the 2017 general election in the three locations. But there were some constant threads through all the groups, notably that Labour lost its way under Tony Blair and New Labour.

In Clay Cross there was a feeling that Labour no longer clearly stood for anything, and respondents neither felt like Labour was 'for people like me' nor that it understood their area. When asked what the first thing that came into their heads when they thought about Labour, one woman had no impression at all: "*Labour, to me, means having a baby, like that's as much as it means."* Others felt that, as another woman put it, "*Labour were always for the working man […] if any understand, it would be Labour. [But] Tony Blair put a total foot in that, didn't he? He did that. […] To me, Labour represents a strong prime minister like Harold Wilson when he were in and the members of parliament like Dennis Skinner. Strong men. They were proper Labour men*." Other agreed, with one woman saying, "*they should represent the working man, they should,"* but that they no longer do. Similarly, another

participant said, "*Since New Labour, I think that turned the whole thing on its head so they're all practically the same party really*."

In Probus, while the overriding message was that, "*nobody understands. You just get sick and fed up with it actually,"* there was a little more faith in Labour. One participant said, "*It's getting more towards the working class now, but it hasn't been in the past, has it? Because it's been run by war criminals*." Another agreed, saying: "*Labour became the New Conservatives, and now hopefully it's getting back to what Labour should be about, which is about the working class*." There was also a sense that young people trusted Labour, with one woman in her twenties who was raised on a farm saying, "*A lot of my generation have faith in the Labour party*."

In St Asaph, there was again little belief that Labour either understood rural areas or was 'for people like me'. Instead, as one man put, "*Labour is big cities. London is a prime example*," while another described Labour as "*an elitist Islington set*" who were out of touch with "*ordinary people*." But this criticism was mixed among praise for the modern Labour party. Whereas, as one woman said, "*You couldn't really toss a coin between Tony Blair and David Cameron, […] they're both the same person in a way*," the modern Labour party was seen to stand for something. There was also a recognition that Labour in office had done good things: bus passes, free prescriptions, tax credits and Sure Start were all named.

In all groups it was felt that Labour did not listen sufficiently to local people in rural areas. In Clay Cross a woman said, "*I just wish they would listen, just really, really listen to the average person*"; in Probus a man said that Labour should "*spend more time in rural, underprivileged areas*"; and in St Asaph a man recommended that Labour should think, "*outside the box and not just in cities*."

<u>Labour leadership</u>

The leadership of the Labour party was raised frequently by participants in the Probus and St Asaph groups, both in a positive and a negative context. On balance, participants felt that Jeremy Corbyn was real, authentic and more in touch than the previous leadership, but that he could have done with more strength. While the Labour party as a whole was seen as a primarily urban party, Corbyn himself was not described in those terms.

In Clay Cross the leadership was not recognised as offering a significant departure from the New Labour years. One man said, "*everyone says the same thing and they're the same*," and this was widely agreed with.

In Probus and St Asaph, on the other hand, Corbyn was seen to offer a new style of politics. This was largely seen as a good thing. In Probus, he was described by one woman as "*just a bit real. Just a bit more normal.*" People also appreciated the fact that "*he does commute everywhere himself. He gets on all the trains, buses*." And a Conservative-voting woman liked the fact that, "*He spoke as an ordinary person would speak to another."*

Similarly, in St Asaph, one woman said that Corbyn is "*the first politician I've liked in my life. First time I've really bothered, all my family voted for him in the end*," and another participant said, "*I like his blunders, I like his gaffs, because he's honest, he is himself. And I think that the sincerity and normality appeals to people, because we are sick of being talked down to and patronised*." A Labour voter who was unimpressed with Corbyn when he became leader was won over during the election campaign: "*he's genuine – whether you like him or not. May and other people, they're so false, they're just fake*."

Yet there were also worries about his strength. A man in St Asaph didn't vote Labour because of Corbyn and described him as a "*shabby Michael Foot.*" In Probus he was described by one participant as "*incredibly weak*," while another didn't vote Labour because while Corbyn would be a "*nice chap*" for a neighbour, "*You need someone with a little more force*." And in Clay Cross, a woman equated him with Ed Miliband, viewing them both as too weak to vote for.

Valuing rural areas

In no group did more than one person express an interest in moving to a big town or city when asked. Instead, people were happy to live where they lived and articulate about their reasoning. In fact, it was striking how many participants had consciously chosen to live in a rural area. While most spoke about living close to family and where they grew up, they also had carefully thought out reasons for living somewhere rural.

A strong community

When asked to talk about their local area, almost all responses referred to the community spirit and friendliness of living in a rural area.

As a woman in St Asaph said, "*Everyone's dead friendly*." Another respondent in St Asaph described how: "*When we had the flooding everybody got together, everybody helped each other because there were a lot that lost everything. So there was a lot of community spirit there*."

In Clay Cross a woman described it as "*homely*" and with "*more of a community spirit*", while another summed it up to sounds of approval: "*If you've got no milk, you could knock on anybody's door and they would give you a cup of milk,"* before adding, *"Well, you couldn't do that in London, could you?*"

And in Probus a woman said that, "*Villagers are really good. They're always there for each other,*" while others spoke of loving the "*village atmosphere*."

Pride of place

The community feel generated civic pride and identity which manifested itself differently in each group. While a woman in St Asaph spoke of a Welsh school in the area meaning "*that there's hope for continuing the Welsh language*", a man in Clay Cross said: "*this is Derbyshire and it should remain as Derbyshire, you shouldn't change the area too much."*

It was in Cornwall, however, that this was most strongly expressed. There was little animosity towards outsiders but rather a parochial pride and desire to defend what makes their home particular. As one man put it, "*people are protective of what they've got down here, because it is pretty special."* Another talked of how "*if you make friends with a Cornishman, it'll take a long time before you make them as a friend, but they'll be a friend for life.*"

But it was best expressed in one man wrestling with his self-identification. Whereas Sadiq Khan can say that anyone who moves to London is a Londoner, things are not so straightforward elsewhere. "*My dad's from Cornwall, he's Cornish and […] I'm not even Cornish proper, I wouldn't call myself Cornish, but you still feel really protective of your county."*

Beauty of the countryside

The accessibility of beauty and countryside walks was frequently raised by participants in all groups, along with the quietness and darkness that city life makes impossible. In St Asaph, one woman described how: "*When you walk the dog, it's just so peaceful, you know, we've got permission from the farmer and we can walk through his fields and so we walk through the fields and have all the sheep following us."*

A participant in Clay Cross talked of how "*there's lovely walks on your doorstep, like, you don't have to go far and you can walk for miles*". In Probus a man described how his favourite thing about his area is that "*the countryside is unspoilt and green and it's quiet and dark*," while others talked of its tranquillity and spaciousness.

Family

Another theme that came through very strongly was the importance of family, and providing a "proper" childhood for young children. As a man in St Asaph said, "*What I like around here, my kids aren't streetwise, they didn't have to think when they went out*." And a woman in Probus summed up the feelings of many when she said that it was a "*good place to bring your kids up and they can have a proper childhood.*" Another participant elaborated, describing a proper childhood as "*an outdoor, a bit more outdoorsy*" childhood.

Parents in all groups spoke about how reassuring it was to know the parents of other children, so they could keep one another abreast of accidents or bad behaviour. In Probus for example, a farmer described how, "*Somebody said to me today they got held up by the tractors […] I ring the father and go, 'Just tell them to pull in'. That's all you've got to do. And it works*." Similarly, in St Asaph a woman was thankful that "*People know whose kids are whose. Say one had an accident, they'll know where the parents are*."

In St Asaph, three mothers spoke powerfully about their prioritisation of family over career, which they took to be typical of rural areas. One said that to the shock of her former colleagues in an urban area, she made the choice to "*put children before my career, […] to be poor and happy for a bit, […] because I just think at the end of the day, when you go to the graveyard, you know, it doesn't go, 'Oh they did a 50 hour week' it says, 'Father', 'Brother', 'Grandmother' […] Where does [a focus on career and material things] end? And what does it bring you in the end? I'm not sure it brings you that much."*

Another woman concurred: "*And then you realise in a blink of an eye, your kids are all grown up and you've not watched them grow up."* In response, another woman contrasted her experience with that of her friends living in cities: "*I got a bit older, got married, had a daughter and thought, 'I don't want that [city] life, I want to live here'. But it's funny because a lot of my friends who are still living in London or Manchester or Leeds now, a lot of them are single, you know, very lonely. […] You're not getting in from work until 8 o'clock, you're knackered, you have your tea and go to bed. I don't feel like I'm missing out."*

Security and crime

It was notable too how often the absence of crime was brought up as a factor for choosing to live in a rural area. As a woman in St Asaph said, "*The crime rate is really quite low*", a sentiment echoed again and again by others. This was contrasted favourably with larger towns nearby which were seen to have experienced lots of crime recently. Likewise, although anti-social behaviour came up as a frequent complaint in the Clay Cross group, this was seen to be nothing compared to the crime associated with cities. As one man put it, "*Bigger cities have got a lot of crime."* And in Probus, a participant talked about valuing the "*lack of crime*" (although, he added, "*you might get a bit of sheep rustling, I suppose*.")

The urban/rural divide

Across the groups, there was a paradoxical mix of resentment towards urban areas which were seen to dominate at the expense of rural areas, and an incredulity that anyone in their right mind would want to live in a city.

Transience/change as loss

Rapid change, and particularly the movement of people into and, especially, around the UK was posed as a challenge to the strong community life participants so valued. Whereas in 2005 Tony Blair described how globalisation would benefit those who were "*quick to adapt, slow to complain*", participants understood communities as relatively stable things, which were threatened by transience. Change was often understood as loss, as the destruction of valuable things which were once held in common. This was particularly the case in Probus and Clay Cross.

There was a strong and unanimous feeling in Probus that there were too many outsiders, from "*up country*", in Cornwall. People with second homes and disrespectful holiday makers were singled out for watering down Cornish distinctiveness and community. A woman claimed that, "*Second homes […] kill villages*"; a man gave an example: "*Down in [a nearby village] there's about half a dozen lights on in the winter.*" Holiday-makers (and, to some extent, non-Cornish people who had moved to Cornwall) were described as 'emmets' – which participants described as the Cornish word for ants. They were perceived to be ignorant of local customs, littering and driving around small country lanes with oversized cars. As one man put it, "*There's just no consideration*."

As with Probus, in Clay Cross concerns about transience were mainly bound up with concerns around housing. One woman talked about the way in which the council housing scheme was no longer oriented to the local community. Instead, "*we've got people coming from other areas, I don't like that at all. And like, our young 'uns then, they've got not a shot at a house at all, and they're having to move out the area. […] I like to keep mine with me, do you know what I mean? Like we all used to when we were kids, you had a house in your village and that were it. You can't do it now*." Another participant agreed, arguing that they should keep the community "*as tight as possible*", clasping her hands together into a fist.

The result of more mobility was seen to be a decline in community spirit; a woman in Clay Cross said, "*There was more of a community spirit [in Clay Cross] then than what there is now […] because there's more people coming into the area now, isn't there*." Others agreed, with several participants repeating almost verbatim that, "*people used to leave their doors open*" in the past.

This parochialism was also evident in people's understanding of place and distance. A woman in Clay Cross talked about how she had to live "*away from my family*." It turned out that her family were less than a 20-minute drive or bus journey away in a nearby town. To someone in a city such journey times can seem immaterial, but what David Harvey calls time-space compression has not occurred to such an extent in rural areas. Distinctive places and the space between them can matter greatly.

Beyond the specificities, there was a widespread and wistful view that these destructive changes were inevitable, and that nothing could be done to prevent them. In Probus, for example, a woman talked of the strong Cornish identity the area had, "*not so much now, but in the past…*", while a man talked about the relatively undeveloped local area, before

qualifying, "*But yeah, obviously that's all changing.*" In Clay Cross, a woman talked about new housing developments: "*the sign of the times, it's the change."* It would be too easy to write all this off as nostalgia; the things which they spoke about losing were tangible and even quantifiable.

One woman in Probus channelled Edmund Burke particularly succinctly, saying: "*Somebody will come down from up country […] and they say, 'it's a fantastic place, these villages are wonderful', and the first thing they want to do is change it. […] I just find that so annoying. I said, 'This has been going for several years and everybody's really happy, so why try to change it?'*"

Pace of life

In all groups most participants felt that people living in rural areas and people living in urban areas have different attitudes to life. Much of this was put down to the friendliness of rural areas, which were contrasted with the anonymity of urban areas. But there was also a sense that in rural areas people took things more slowly and did things with more care.

A woman in Clay Cross said, "*I've been on that commuter belt, I've been where people don't speak to you when you say hello in a morning, and they're all bustling around and they're all fixed to get to work and a faster pace of life. Where, I think, in an area like this, people have got more time, shall we say, to engage with people more."* Another participant concurred, saying, *"I think [people] are more laid back […] when it's more rural."*

Similarly, in Probus there was widespread dismay at what one man called the "*hectic*" nature of cities, contrasted with village life in which, "*People are talking, saying hello, morning, good afternoon.*" This perception of a conflict in attitudes manifested itself in some hostility towards urban dwellers, particularly holiday-makers and second-homers. One man said, "*They just don't understand the country way life*." And in St Asaph a woman preferred the slower pace of life in rural areas to cities, where, "*You get caught in the hamster wheel."*

This division in attitudes between rural and urban communities was perhaps best expressed by a man in his thirties from Probus who said that living in the area was, "*a bit like going back in time, which is nice*."

Urban prejudice toward the countryside

When asked to think about how people living in cities thought about rural areas, there was a near-unanimous impression across all three groups that people living in cities looked down on those in rural areas. Many had first-hand experience of this snobbery.

In Probus, for example, participants various described being seen of as, "*a bit stupid or thick*," "*backwards*," and a "*country bumpkin."* Likewise, a woman in St Asaph thought that people in cities think they "*are more sophisticated*", while others thought that rural people were considered "*behind the times*," "*thick*," "*country bumpkins*," and the "*Wurzels."*

In Clay Cross too, the same language and themes were used, with one woman describing how people in cities thought rural areas are, "*Full of inter-breeds or things like that*" and others remembered being called "*country bumpkins*" and "*hillbillies."* One participant had a sympathetic explanation for the perceived snobbery of people in cities: "*I think they might be jealous, we get all these nice places to walk and just these nice community spirits, while they've got nothing."*

In Clay Cross this perception of snobbery crystallised around the issue of Brexit, with one man saying: "*A lot of people didn't respect, especially people living in London, I felt were*

blaming it on people of the north as if we didn't have a clue about anything, because we don't live in London."

Issues and concerns

When asked for their main issues and concerns, their answers were not dissimilar from what polling suggests the nation as a whole is most preoccupied by: the NHS, school places, Brexit, transport, housing and crime were the six most commonly cited. While the issues raised were the same, the particular form that they took reflected the rurality of the locations. Additionally, other issues were raised which seemed particularly pertinent in rural areas, including economic deprivation, the lack of opportunities for young people and the decline of thriving high streets and agriculture.

Transport

After increasing his majority in the 1959 general election, Conservative prime minister Harold MacMillan appointed Ernest Marples minister for transport. Marples was the former director of a road construction company in which he continued to own 80 per cent shares. He believed, along with MacMillan, that the future of British transport lay in roads.

In 1961 Marples commissioned Richard Beeching to write a report into the state of British railways. It recommended drastic cuts. Each one of the sites of our focus groups – Clay Cross, St Asaph or Probus – have railway stations which were permanently closed down. In Clay Cross and Probus this was as a direct result of the cuts recommended in the Beeching report; in St Asaph passenger lines stopped running earlier, in 1955, although the spirit of the Beeching report contributed to its complete closure in 1965. The road construction company which the minister for transport once ran went on to build large chunks of the roads that replaced the railways, including the extension of the M1 into London.

By the time Barbara Castle, minister for transport in the new Labour government, introduced the 1968 Transport Act which allowed for public subsidy of the railways, it was too late. More than 50 per cent of all railway stations in the country, and more than 25 per cent of all route miles had been closed down. Rural areas, which were the least profitable, were the worst hit. The railway stations, many of which were architecturally fine buildings as well as crucial transport links, were left to rot. The effects of the Beeching Axe is still felt in the geographic periphery of our country, whose cultural, political and economic distance from the core has only expanded in recent years in part owing to its infrastructural isolation.

The Beeching Cuts were directly identified as a cause of poor transport links in the Probus focus group, with a participant saying: "*When they closed all the branch lines, the railways […] that was back with Beeching. […] If they had been kept going, I think Cornwall would be a lot easier place to get around. Or other places in the country actually. Rural places around the country."*

All groups shared a view that transport links were not good enough as a result of the closure of bus routes and the lack of affordable trains. In Probus a man described the state of public transport as "*pretty shocking*", while a woman in St Asaph described it as "*terrible because it's very expensive, it's very limited, you're kind of locked into only a few places, otherwise it's very difficult and takes hours to get anywhere*." In Clay Cross, a man thought that, "*A local train station would be beneficial to the area because traffic, locally, has increased, […] it would be really good to link up these local villages to Chesterfield."* Other participants remember politicians talking about bringing in a new train station to replace the one closed

as part of the Beeching Cuts, but that the talk, as they expected it would, had come to nothing.

There were concerns about the increase in congestion in the roads that the lack of public transport creates. A man from Duckmanton in the Clay Cross group, for example, bemoaned the cars "*com[ing] down at ridiculous speed*" meaning his son can't play safely outside. Similarly, a woman in St Asaph complained about "*a lot of parking on pavements*" which was dangerous for her disabled son.

Shut out from the national economy / opportunities for young people

There was a shared impression in all three groups that rural areas had been forgotten about at the expense of cities, especially London.

In Probus, for example, a man said that, "*rural areas are generally overlooked*" while another participant thought that, "*If you go, you know, to Bristol, West Midlands, London, there's loads more money*." Similarly, a woman described (not without a bit of perverse pride) how the West Country was seen to stop at "*junction 30 on the M5"* (a junction next to Exeter). In St Asaph a participant described the area as "*struggling economically*", and another said being in rural north Wales felt like being "*the poor relative*" of better connected, urban areas.

This sense of economic deprivation was felt to be particularly damaging for teenagers and young adults. As one woman in Clay Cross put it, there are "*lots of things going on for the younger ones but there's not really much for the older ones to keep them out of trouble."* A man in his twenties in Probus said, "*Down here, there's not a lot really there. As nice as it is*."

This paradox between appreciation of rurality and a feeling that to find a better life you have to move towards somewhere more urban seems typical. I interviewed a former Labour activist from the small Cornish town Camborne earlier in the year who described from first-hand experience the process of "*forced migration*" by which young people fail to find suitable work anywhere near their home and so are forced to move to a bigger town or city in search of a better life.

High streets

The lack of local amenities and good shops was a cause for concern; and in St Asaph and Clay Cross, it was something talked about in terms of decline from a past heyday.

A woman in Clay Cross described how the town used to have a "*busy market years ago when I was a kid*," which no longer existed. And in both St Asaph and Clay Cross the last local bank branches had recently shut up shop, to the dismay of residents in both. The loss of bank branches was felt not just as a loss of a financial service but also a social one, particularly for older people – as one woman put it, "*My grandma, she will only ever go into a bank to talk to them, she wouldn't trust online banks."*

While there was appreciation for the good amenities that did exist – in St Asaph, the pub and the gym were highlighted; in Clay Cross the toddler mornings and Zumba class – there was dislike of the character of the changing high streets. While the bank branch was gone in St Asaph, it had seemingly been replaced by "*loads of takeaways*." And in Clay Cross the high street was described by one woman as, "*fast food, nail bars, hairdressers, tattoo parlours and charity shops*."

Housing

Housing is an issue which many believe pits the national need for a mass programme of house-building against the NIMBYism of suburban and rural areas. While there was hostility to new developments in Probus and Clay Cross, it was not a blanket hostility and there was acknowledgment of the need for new housing – so long as it was principally supporting the needs of locals.

In Probus there were fears about, as one participant put it, the "*nice, rural area, which is beautiful […] gradually disappearing*," but this opposition was not uniform. Four problems were identified with plans for new housing. First and foremost, people were angry that the new houses were "*for other people, not for local people.*" As one woman put in, there were both "*too many new houses and not enough affordable houses for people that are down here*." Second, there were worries over the capacity of existing infrastructure to support new residents, with one participant concerned that "*the surgery and school aren't big enough for the new estate that they're going to be putting in the top."* Third, there were concerns about the form of the new houses, with one woman saying, "*They don't fit with the environment*." And finally, there were concerns about the quality of the new housing; "*in 20 years*," one man said, "*they'll be falling to bits*."

In Clay Cross too, there was anger about developments. One woman said, "*From my house, across the road, it's all green belt and everything […] but they're building on there, nearly 300 [homes], they're building up farmlands*." But again, this opposition was qualified – what really irked was that these homes were not for locals. Outsiders buying second homes, for example, "*bumps prices up and people who live in that area can't afford to buy*."

When prompted, most Probus participants were aware of the scheme of St Ives council which bans new houses from being used as second homes, and all strongly supported it.

Working countryside

Around 70 per cent of the country's land area is agricultural land and as a consequence, despite only one per cent of the population working in agriculture, it has an outsized impact on the national psyche, particularly in rural areas where you are likely to be surrounded by farmlands. Participants in all groups made the connection between their local area and farming, and – where it came up in conversation – unanimously affirmed their support for the importance of farming.

When asked what image people might associate with their local area, the first response in Clay Cross was a "*sheep.*" In St Asaph, one woman described farmers as "*the mainstay of the country*" because they produce our food, while another woman appreciated the role of farming in instilling in children the understanding "*that not all animals come in packets."* In Probus, farming was described as "*vital*", and when one participant said, "*I like the fact that I get stuck behind tractors*," it was met with murmurs of agreement.