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## Rural Brexit? The ambivalent politics of rural community, migration and dependency

### Highlights

- Develops the nascent rural-Brexit relationship debates and examines the multiplicity of this relationship across three national contexts.
- Combines the emergent sociology of Brexit literature and rural sociology to examine the lacuna between the rural as a nationalist device and the rural as a lived and fluid space.
- Draws on and presents situated policy voices from an exploratory empirical study.
- Explores and emphasises new senses of rural precarity and recognition of rural interdependencies.

### Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between rural space and Brexit. It uses the 2016 UK Referendum outcome and the ongoing processes of Brexit as an optic through which to explore the changing configurations of rural communities and the ways in which these both reinforce and problematise the politics and geographies of Brexit. Taking as its starting point the ‘take our country back’ nationalism of the 2016 Referendum the paper considers how the anti-migrant, defensive Brexit positions folded into dominant rural imaginaries. Arguing that these imaginaries have always been fractured, the paper shows how this has intensified through the ruralisation of migration in the 2000s. In this context Brexit can be understood as rupture more than a confirmation of nationalist or exclusionary rural imaginaries and the complex *intra-rural* Leave/Remain geography is indicative of this. Drawing on a small set of in-depth interviews with expert ‘policy actors’ from rural community and migrant organisations in rural regions in of Wales, England, and Scotland the paper reflects on the rural-Brexit relationship by exploring rural diversity, perceptions of the impacts of Brexit on rural places and rural-migrant dependencies that are social as well as economic. It identifies the interconnected precarity of rural communities’ well-being as the decisions of (and constraints on) rural migrants in the post Brexit, re-bordered UK disrupt and affect rural livability. In doing so, it emphasises the ambivalence in the everyday ‘rural Brexit’ and calls for closer attention to the ways in which rural communities are constitutive of and respond to political turbulence.

### Keywords

Rural, Brexit, community, migration, dependency, diversity, national identity

## 1. Introduction

*\*\* What has brought rural North Yorkshire into your organisation's networks and the organisation's work?*

*Alex Changing migration patterns have obviously affected that because I think North Yorkshire would have been less interested in our work 20 years ago, because [...] they didn't really have diversity and were quite mono-cultural. Whereas since EU accession they can't say that anymore, and they know that they want to do something. Then building on that, Syrian resettlement, and particularly in North Yorkshire it's been quite successful, they've been very engaged in wanting to do it. So it's another reason for them to work with us.*

This extract comes from an interview conducted with Alex<sup>i</sup> as part of a small research project exploring the ways in which rural community and migrant organisation actors are planning for and thinking about what Brexit might mean for rural areas of the UK. Alex, a policy actor in a migration organisation based in the north of England, is drawing attention to different and distinct EU and refugee migration settlements that have significantly changed in rural spaces in two decades. As Alex's observations testify, this has meant that both rural and (traditionally urban-focused) migrant organisations have begun to recognise and engage with a shared agenda. The easy deceit of the rural as a timeless, social problem free, culturally and socially homogeneous space has been consistently problematized by rural sociologists and geographers (e.g. Newby et al. 1978; Murdoch and Pratt 1994; Cloke and Little 1997; Author 20\*\*; Author 20\*\*, Woods 2009) but it is a discourse that has a particular tenacity and stickiness. However, as Alex's reflections illustrate, the ways in which migration has been ruralised in the 2000s mean that the contestations and tensions that characterise the politics of migration – and the related Breaking Point<sup>ii</sup> politics of Brexit – are as embedded in the countryside as they are in the post-industrial urban, more affluent suburban and small town environments of the UK.

In the Brexit referendum (23 June 2016) there was a Leave majority in most rural areas, although this outcome was less consistent in rural Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland than it was in England, and there were Remain exceptions in all rural areas. However, the significance and complexities of rural patterns in Remain/Leave voting have tended to be marginalised in the noise of the dominant Brexit explanations of the urbanised 'left behind' or the 'ageographical' (Rogaly 2019) cultural polarisations of the 'Somewheres' and 'Anywheres' (Goodhart 2017) while a rural/urban divide has been seen to confirm assumptions of 'the rural' as more monocultural, conservative and anti-migration. This so-

called 'two Englands' model (Jennings and Stoker 2016) is most commonly associated with economic stagnation and the disproportionate impact of deindustrialization on places in the English north. Despite the 'geographical schisms' of Brexit Finlay et al. (2019: 21), qualitatively focused investigations of the ways in which place shaped, and continues to shape, the politics of Brexit are still emergent. With a few exceptions (e.g. Shucksmith 2018; Brookes 2019), there is still something of an analytical absence of accounts which seek to examine the meanings and implications of rural voting dispositions in the 2016 Referendum. This is surprising given the ambiguities of rural spaces and what the politics of Brexit reveal about them – do rural Remain/Leave politics reflect rural spaces as idyllic constructions through which national identity can be re-secured (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Askins 2006; Bressey 2009; Brookes 2019, Author 20\*\*; 20\*\*); or as turbulent geographies experiencing population churn, restructuring processes, migrant settlement, racism and ethnic diversity (Author and Agyeman 2006; Garland and Chakraborti 2006; Askins 2009; MacKrell and Pemberton 2018; Flynn and Kay 2017; Woods 2018; Lympelopoulou 2019)?

While there has been some high-profile, media and policy attention on the impacts of Brexit for farmers, food production industries and land and environmental management, little attention has been given to what Brexit might mean for rural communities and migrants (both internal and international), broader configurations of rural diversity, belonging, and social cohesion. So, for example, Cowie et al.'s (2018) review of the implications of Brexit for the rural northern England focuses solely on rural economies and yet, as Shucksmith (2017: 1) observes, 'Brexit will have significant effects on rural areas of the UK, but the challenges and opportunities these bring for rural economies and societies have been little discussed beyond farming impacts'. How these 'significant effects' are being articulated and experienced in rural social relations and interactions in those spaces is the focus of the small, qualitative study conducted in Wales, Scotland, and England on which this paper draws.

Drawing on a series of interviews from the study the paper suggests that the Brexit process offers a potent lens through which to view the emergence of more diverse populations in rural spaces alongside some of the the social changes associated with those shifts. The paper begins with a consideration of the relationship between the nationalism of Brexit politics and rural imaginaries and then maps the exceptionalisms in the devolved rural geographies of Brexit. After outlining the design and methods of the research we return, through the interview data to these central issues as we examine the ways in which Brexit presents a rupture to rural imaginaries through its exposure of social change and division in rural spaces as well as the extent to which rural communities have become - and acknowledge - their reliance on migrant settlements in those spaces. The paper concludes with a focus on the uneasy new

rural settlement in which migration and cultural difference, economic dependency and social cohesion characterize the debates around what rural Brexit means and how Brexit as a process is being experienced and worried about in rural places.

## **2.Situating Brexit in the rural and situating the rural in Brexit**

Focusing on how rural areas voted in the Referendum prompts a wider set of questions about the nature of the relationship between rural communities and the politics of Brexit both in 2016 and for post Brexit rural futures. Understanding the rural Brexit relationship involves consideration of first, the ways in which Brexit politics represented forms of nationalism; second, the ways in which the rural has been folded into essentialised and exclusionary configurations of national identity (and particularly so in narratives of Englishness) third, the ways in which rural areas have emerged as key sites of migration and migrant settlement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With its 'take our country back' central discourse much analysis of Brexit has been concerned with the ways in which Brexit evoked and fixed a particular populist version of nationalist, anti-migration and what Valluvan and Kalra (2019) describe as 'little Englander' politics (Bhambra 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2017; Benson 2019; Burrell et al. 2019). In these accounts Brexit condenses the populist, 'hostile environment' anti-migration politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the longue duree of colonialism, post-colonialism, race politics and the racialization of migration in the UK. As Benson (2019: 5) argues, Brexit not only facilitated and legitimatised the post Referendum surge in racial violence and race hate but it was 'the culmination of longer histories of racism in Britain'. The toxic mix of older national identity racisms and newer Leave politics of 'hierarchical rebordering' (Benson 2019) - filtered through a nostalgic recovery of a 'what was once' - overlapped with those assemblages of 'the rural' described by Brooks as the 'historical intertwining of rurality, hierarchy and empire in English national identity' (2019: 3). In the 1990s and early 2000s this intertwined relationship that was the focus of the work of an interdisciplinary range of scholars, artists and activists (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Bressey 2009; Ove 1987, Pollard 1988/2005 Author 20\*\*;; Chakraborti and Garland 2006) among others). Much of this work examined the social consequences of this relationship including the sanitisation of 'the rural', the folding in of the rural into a white, monocultural, national space, extensive levels of racism and discrimination, the denial and invisibilisation of rural black, Asian and ethnic minority populations as well as a mobilisation of the rural as a source for anti- multicultural backlash politics. This process was most intensely condensed around Englishness; while rural narratives of Wales and Scotland have been used in mobilisations of Welsh and Scottish nationalisms (Gruffudd 1994, 1995; Withers 1999), these national identities have a more complex relation to Brexit. Those who felt strongly Welsh or Scottish (or strongly British) were more likely to vote to remain, while those who felt *both* strongly Welsh or Scottish *and* strongly British were

more likely to vote to leave (Henderson et al. forthcoming). This does not mean that Welsh and Scottish rural locales are sites in which racism and marginalisation are absent but that they are shaped and sharpened by national contexts and narratives of identity (de Lima 2006; Williams 2003; Robinson 2006).

At the heart of much of this rural-race work was the tension between the representational role of the rural in exclusionary, anti-multicultural narratives of nation; and a new emphasis on the more heterogeneous, socially polarised and complexly constituted rurals that were recognised within 1990s rural studies contributions (Philo 1992; Murdoch and Pratt 1993; Cloke and Little 1997; Marsden 1998). This focus on the ambiguities and differentiations of rural areas and changing rural populations has continued in more recent work on transnational migration flows and settlement in the countryside (Moore 2015; Rogaly 2008; Kay and Trevena 2018; MacKrell and Pemberton 2018; Rye and Scott 2018; Woods 2018). Since the EU expansion in 2004 and 2007, the ethnic and cultural diversity of rural populations in the UK has been particularly transformed by the employment of EU-sourced migrants in social care, hospitality and food production industries. This shift created encounters of migration and cultural difference in countryside areas that had previously been less affected by large scale migration settlements (Woods 2018, Lymperopoulou 2019, Moore 2019). The rural destinations of EU migrant settlement often collided with traditional, monocultural rural imaginations and experiences, and highlighted the extent of economic and social change in the countryside.

Correspondingly, the manner in which these transformations have played out in lived experience has been the focus of a small, second wave of rural scholarship orientated towards post-2004 and 2007 migration from central and eastern Europe (CEE) and focused on the nature of these labour migrations to UK rural areas (Dawney 2008; de Lima and Wright 2007; Flynn and Kay 2017; Jentsch 2007; Jentsch et al. 2007; Kay and Trevena 2017; Moore 2019). This work maps some of the reconfigurations within rural spaces. For example, the emergence of conditional acceptances of migrant rural presence based on fitting in to localised narratives of 'working villages' (Moore 2019) or that rural destinations are actively chosen by migrant families as places offering opportunities and future prospects (Flynn and Kay 2017). Flynn and Kay have argued for 'greater attention to the complexities of migrant experiences (...) so that [rural] areas of 'new' migration may develop into positive places of settlement' (2017: 65). There is then a growing level of attention to the impacts and agency of transnational migration in reshaping rural communities and a recognition that these are not discrete categories, spatially or temporally, and there are interrelationships between these processes (Woods, 2007).

These transitions within rural spaces both constituted by and reflective of wider rural socio-economic restructuring (Pemberton 2020), the shifting terrains of the politics of the rural and rural social movements (Woods, 2018; Brooks 2019) as well as the changing demographics of rural populations (Lymperopoulou 2019; Statistical Digest of Rural England 2020; Scottish National Statistics 2018) provide the context for interpreting the rural-Brexit relationship and the variations between different rural regions across the UK, and within the national contexts of Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. Even in England where the Leave rural pattern was most pronounced – the highest Leave votes in the UK came from rural Lincolnshire with its town of Boston returning a 76% Leave vote (matched only by the Midlands city of Stoke) - there were Remain majorities in some rural areas (e.g. the Isles of Scilly, Cotswold, Oxfordshire and Mendip) and also in a number of rurally located towns and small cities (including Stroud, Exeter and Harrogate). In Wales the Brexit narratives were even more fragmented as the ‘rural’ counties of Ceredigion, Monmouthshire and Gwynedd voted Remain alongside the more metropolitan Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan (or its Cardiff suburbs, at least), while the Powys and Pembrokeshire voted Leave in keeping with the largely urban Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea and Wrexham constituencies. These outcomes work against any easy reading of the relationship between rural geographies and Leave politics and point not so much to a rural-urban Brexit divide, but to *intra-rural* Brexit divergences. In Scotland, where concerns about rural depopulation dominate debates and where migration settlement is explicitly encouraged, both rural and urban areas voted overall to remain, yet there were rural pockets of Leave voting ‘heartlands’ such as Whalsay and South Unst in the Shetlands (81% pro-Leave), and Banff and Buchan in northern Aberdeenshire (61% pro-Leave) (Rosenbaum, 6 Feb 2017). In Northern Ireland, rural constituencies – with the exception of East Belfast – were the only areas to record a Leave majority, although voting tended to reflect republican and loyalist divisions: more rural constituencies in the south and west saw Remain majorities (McCann and Hainsworth 2017).

It is these more partial, ambiguous rural geographies of the Brexit vote and their implications for the ways in which social relations in diverse rural places are imagined, enacted and managed in the post Brexit contexts that we aim to explore. We suggest that the changing formations of rural populations, the contested nature of the post-referendum debates and the challenges of the Leave Vote on rural social and economic life mean that community and cohesion become appropriate references for exploring how post Brexit social relations, interactions, tensions and conflict are managed and processed – as Anderson and Wilson (2017) argue it necessary not only to attend to the abstractions of the referendum vote but also to the everyday ways in which the politics of Brexit saturate and refix ordinary rural life.

The cohesion and integration agendas of UK governments in the 2000s have been overwhelmingly urban-focused and the ways in which rural areas have experienced and responded to the more recent experiences of migrant settlement, ethnic diversity and community change has been subject to far less scrutiny. As we note above the rural-racism literature more explicitly problematizes the rural in terms of belonging and exclusion, and ethnic difference. It therefore alerts us to the possibility of a rural disposition to Brexit, but also to the diversity of rural places and more open, complex interactions, identifications, attachments and connections in changing rural geographies. Even in the highest Leave rural areas there are indicators of these processes as migrants have settled and had families and where Wallis (2020) reports Boston residents being uneasy about being seen as ‘unwelcoming’ and engaging in ‘a big civic effort’ to rebuild community cohesion. Recent urban based work on new migration settlements, superdiversity and increasing heterogeneity has evidenced ambivalences and contradictions in the nature of interactions and relations in context of ethnic difference (Wise and Noble 2016; Author et al. 2018). We suggest that this work– addressing the quotidian capacity to manage cultural difference and conflict as well as recognise social connection – may also be productively developed through its translation to rural areas where ethnic diversity is increasing and where social and economic interdependencies are particularly acute given the nature of rural topographies, topologies and demographics. It is in this context that our interviews with a small set of rural policy actors examine how rural communities, diversified through EU migration settlement, experience, manage and imagine post-Brexit social relations.

### **3. Design and Methods**

In this paper, we draw upon seven in-depth interviews with policy and community experts purposively sampled from voluntary and public sector organisations which work either in the rural community and wellbeing and/or with migrant and ethnic minority client groups. Locating ourselves in predominantly rural areas in England, Scotland and Wales we worked with participants based in three locations which characterise some of the Brexit vote complexities alongside the aspects of rural restructuring and changes – areas with significant levels of agribusiness, tourism and food production and rural EU migration.

1. Fife in Scotland: voted Remain. It has a tourist industry, significant fruit and vegetable processing industries, and an EU origin population, especially Polish, that is higher than the Scottish regional average (3.6% Scottish Census 2011). Historically, Fife had a coal mining and a large fishing industry and elements of this remain in terms of jobs and, perhaps more importantly, cultural heritage.

2. North Yorkshire in England: voted Leave although its key small city (York) and large town (Harrogate) both voted Remain. North Yorkshire has an agricultural economy but, with its rural National Park area, this economy is also significantly driven by tourism. It has a slightly higher than regional Yorkshire and Humberside average EU origin population and is a county which became part of the UK's Syrian refugee Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme<sup>iii</sup>.
3. Mid Wales – the neighbouring areas of Ceredigion, Carmarthen and Powys capture rural diversity in the Brexit vote with a mix of Remain and Leave referendum outcomes. These counties have significant migrant, and especially Polish, populations. Powys has also participated in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme. All three counties have extensive agricultural and food processing economies combined with some tourism.

Lasting between 1-3 hours the interviews were conducted between April and August 2019 as part of a pilot study undertaken to inform wider collaboration efforts among the four authors. The organisations that we spoke to were located in both the local authority and the social sectors and variously focused on rural community wellbeing (Katherine in England, Thomas and Rose in Scotland); community cohesion initiatives (Richard and Elen in Wales), migration settlement and rights (Alex in England and Craig in Scotland). The interview participants were recruited via networking, snowball processes and pursuing existing professional figures, as situated rural experts able to provide indicative voices relating to the wider 'rural Brexit' perspectives and experiences. By concentrating on a small number of interviews with policy actors we were able to develop a series of extended, narrative interviews which made it possible to explore the complexity and multidimensionality of the rural-Brexit politics and processes concerning rural communities across Britain.

The key focus of the interviews was on experiential and policy perspectives on rural social cohesion, rural change and well-being and the rural-Brexit relationship. The interviews revolved around each regional locality (North Yorkshire, Fife and mid Wales), its distinctive identity, successes and challenges, as well as rural politics and impacts of Brexit across different levels (i.e. locally, but also in England/Scotland/Wales and in the UK more broadly). A significant part of each interview was devoted to discussing migration-driven rural diversity and relations between the long-settled population, urban newcomers, EU and non-EU migrants as well as refugees.

The interviews were conducted by different team members with ethics approval granted by all universities involved. They were transcribed verbatim and shared among all team members who each inductively analysed the full dataset and shared the emergent theme results with the rest of the team.

Subsequently, narrative analysis was employed to explore them in depth and generate knowledge about the politics of rural community, belonging and migration in the context of Brexit.

#### **4. Diversity and division in rural Brexit support**

As we have argued above the rural is a site of political contestation and rural populations in the UK are, through a variety of migration settlements, increasingly ethnically diverse and not only made up of Central and Eastern European and other EU migrants. This was the point made by Alex, cited earlier, and was similarly highlighted in Elen's (Wales community cohesion actor) description of migration to Powys, *[w]e have a Syrian refugee programme bringing in refugees. Eastern Europeans have come to work in the farming industry and in the health and care industry. We have dots of sort of Greek and Chinese and certainly in Brecon the Gurkha population and they tend to work in catering and food industries.* That there are very different dynamics shaping this diversity in particular micro rural geographies and localities also came through in an interview with Richard (community cohesion actor) in relation to west Wales:

*[T]here are more people from [...] EU backgrounds living around Lampeter [a very small university town in Ceredigion] because of the work opportunities within that area. There are people from very wide, sort of, international based around Aberystwyth [a significant university town in Ceredigion] because of the pull of the university. So you've got concentrated areas. You've just got a whole scatter across the whole place. You could find that if you've EU nationals working in some of the agricultural sectors, [...] dairy work -that sort of thing - well they could be anywhere. Hospitality to an extent as well. It's a bit like that [...] Llanelli [a significant town in Carmarthenshire] has quite a wide range of diversity. Carmarthen to an extent with Polish... Any of the larger towns will attract people.*

Richard's and Elen's mapping of rural migrant settlement and the ethnic diversities within this contrasts to the first wave of research on race and rural areas where encountering a 'no black population no problem here' position was commonplace amongst policy makers and service providers (Jay 1992; Derbyshire 1994), although the identified role of Aberystwyth University in sustaining international migration likely renders the Welsh locality something of an exception.

There was a widespread recognition, shared across the participants, of the ways in which different migrant settlements and complex micro patterns of ethnic diversity were integral to rural geographies and had become an ordinary rather than exceptional feature of everyday rural life. The recognition of these shifts in rural demographics extended into wider conceptualisations of who makes up rural

populations and to the ways in which the rural relationship with the Referendum was reflected on in our conversations with participants. In all three national contexts there were similar accounts given of the diversity and fragility of Brexit related positions and, although these were apparent in the English participant accounts, they were particularly evident in the Scottish and Welsh contexts as is seen in this extract from the interview with Thomas (Scottish rural policy actor),

*[T]he rural was probably somewhat more ambivalent about leave and remain, about remaining, [...] again it comes back to your farming and fisheries and the fact that they were probably influential in, you know, nudging the remain vote down in some areas compared to others. I think Murray was one part of Scotland where it was I think 50.1 per cent or something mad like that. Well why was that? Probably because of a number of things, but primarily I guess it would be fisheries, agriculture and kind of the military legacy as well.*

The connections Thomas makes here between particular rural industries and their associated geographies has a strong resonance with the accounts of other rural actors which stress the extent of Brexit contestation in rural areas. For example, Rose detailed the ways in which the Scottish fishing industry – popularly assumed to have strong Leave sympathies – is divided and fractured by its geographies. As she explained,

*[t]he inshore fishing people actually desperately need us to remain because their market is Spain and European countries. They won't have jobs if they can't get on their market out very quickly. And there's some contingency plans being looked at [...] but... they still don't know how it's all going to work. And inshore fishing is quite interesting coz it's mainly West Coast rather than East Coast and they have been very frank with us about how they feel about it. And I don't think there's anybody in that community that is pro-Brexit. Whereas on the East Coast where we've got the big trawlers, we think that they all voted Leave.*

The economic importance of the fishing trade to Fife is arguably outweighed by cultural significance, but such geographically nuanced differences in Brexit politics within a single employment sector are indicative of the complicated and volatile terrains in which rural organisations are operating. This was further evidenced in Rose's account of the ways in which support for Brexit was fluid and situational rather than political,

*[c]ertainly there are sectors where the remain vote is lower or the leave vote is higher. And it would be interesting in three-years' time to see what those sectors are thinking. So, I think within the farming industry there seems to be quite a change of opinion – not talking about the official position from NFU [National's Farmers Union] - but we had a couple of farmers coming along to our Brexit thing and one older gentlemen who came to Castle Douglas, he arrived in his tweed suit and said: "I'm not sure if I should be here because I voted to Leave for my pocket!" And then at the end of the evening workshop as he was leaving he said: "I'm really glad I came, I had no idea".*

The sense that rural support for the politics of Brexit could be 'thinner' or labile was made more acute by the evolutionary nature of Brexit. This has resulted in rural organisations feeling very uncertain as to how the processes and impacts of leaving the EU will continue to unfold in rural places. As Katherine (community actor in north of England) explained; *I think we're just kind of treading water with Brexit. It hasn't happened yet. We actually don't know what's going to happen yet. I think there's more pain to go, whether we go out or whether we stay in, and at that point there would be potential for community issues.*

Katherine's worries about post Brexit associated 'community issues' were developed further by other participants in relation to social exclusion and rural deprivation, resonating in some ways with the 'left behind' arguments to which we referred earlier. There are two key related aspects to the 'left behind' explanations of the Brexit outcome. The first highlights the ways in which particular urban places have been marginalised through processes of deindustrialisation; the second highlights the social and cultural consequences of those processes, pointing to the emergence of a white working class identity which was mobilised in support of Brexit and anti-migrant rhetoric. The social marginalisation arguments in particular have been criticised for the ways in which they have depoliticised and stereotyped working class politics and culture (McKenzie 2017) but there is shared ground in these debates in terms of identifying a relationship between economic marginalisation, poverty and pro-Brexit positions. The geographies of the 'left behind' have predominantly been associated with northern England, the English west midlands and south Wales and a 'city-town' divide (Boswell et al 2020), whereas participants' observations, in all three national contexts, suggest that such divisions are equally pertinent across and within rural regions and communities. For example, Rose explained, there are some rural communities,

*under massive stress already whether it's economic, poor housing, lack of good jobs... you know, all of those things that people could be under pressure on – we've got them in rural Scotland [...] The villages*

*that used to be the core of traditional industries like mining. So, lots and lots of Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire, quite rural little places. Generations of mining, for example. The mines are all closed – it's all cleaned up pretty much, so you don't see the scars on the countryside. But, you see the scars when you look at the communities [...] Their experience is probably quite similar to that of the urban poor except that they don't have the support services.*

The emphasis on rural poverty here is significant given the extent to which poverty and social exclusion tend to be invisibilised and written out of the white, middle class rural idyll imaginaries. In disrupting these imaginaries through this reference to social class and deprivation Rose (and other participants) add to the ambivalence of rural positions regarding Brexit. Rose's emphasis on rural deindustrialisation makes a connection to the socio-economic marginalisation of urban based 'left behind' commentaries but it also departs from them in that it points to social and economic differentiation within rural areas. As Boswell et al. (2020: 7) argue in their study of social and economic marginalisation in affluent English neighbourhoods, there is, 'significant economic and cultural marginalisation *within*, rather than just across, communities as a consequence of nested deprivation'. Importantly, the focus on rural poverty illuminates the ways in which international migrant arrival and settlement in rural areas has not been into homogenous or cohesive rural communities. Rather rural migrants have added other layers to existing rural differentiations and social divisions. It is in this context that concerns about rural communities and social cohesion and tensions around racism emerged in many of our conversations, and particularly in Elen's discussion of her anxieties about the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Llandrindod Wells (a small once affluent spa town in Powys). Elen explained that Syrian resettlement in Wales has typically been in those areas with the lowest housing demand which are also those remoter, more poorly connected Welsh rural small towns which tend to have high levels of poverty and social deprivation and, because of this, *Llandrindod is the hardest area to settle people [...] Unemployment rates are high and there are more vulnerable individuals in Llandrindod.*

In these deprived rural contexts social cohesion was a priority area of work for the organisations we spoke to across the national contexts. In contrast to urban cohesion debates, for the policy actors in the study, rural social cohesion tended to be conceived in terms of social rather than cultural polarisations in contrast to the focus on cultural difference that dominates in debates around urban environments (see e.g. Casey's 2016 report on social exclusion and integration). This is reflected in Rose's view that;

*[T]here needs to be some work done on social cohesion and particularly on the racism and xenophobia. The government really should be doing some kind of programme. Or we should be doing it with their support. [...] And, I guess, the decision is... do you say: "Let's go in and do a social cohesion programme"? Or do you say: "Let's go and address some of those underlying issues because that will then enhance social cohesion"? I think it's probably the latter.*

Despite Rose's stress on the need to prioritise racism as part of building rural social cohesion, one of the fuzzier aspects in our conversations related to reflections on whether Brexit support was shaped by anti-migrant sensibilities and the extent to which the post 2016 vote had created a 'gloves off' political environment in which racism was more open. Across the interviews, there was a reticence about interpreting Brexit as anti-migrant or racialised. For example, Katherine explained that the rural Leave vote in North Yorkshire was distinct from and not '*anything like that in Boston or Lincolnshire*' (where the high Leave vote was directly linked to migration to this agribusiness dominated area of rural East England). Alex too was concerned to avoid constructing a rural-racism relationship,

*I think it's fairly well known that those more rural communities that don't have a history of diversity are the ones that have struggled a bit more to deal with that, because it's about the pace of change and the unexpected nature of it rather than having any migration per se. [...] It's about the proportional and suddenness of the change that I think is the difference.*

Craig (a policy actor in a migrant organisation) too denied anti-migration motivations and racism in Leave positions;

*Listening to people that you speak to, Scottish people, I mean they just don't have a problem with migration, for the most part. I mean you get the odd [one] but I mean most rational people value migrants [...] Fife has very, very close to sort of fifty/fifty [Leave/Remain outcome], but [...] the difference is, I think, in the vote in Scotland - it wasn't racist. It was just people have been fed this thing about European Union being bad, UK, Empire and all the rest being good, you know? We're a fantastic... we're a great country and, you know, all that nonsense from the sort of right-wing conservative stuff. But it's not based on 'we want to get rid of our migrants'. The Brexiteers here in Fife, it's not that, I don't think.*

But, at the same time, there were concerns expressed about rural race hate incidents. Rose spoke of a Polish farmer being told to 'fuck off back to Poland' while standing in the queue in the post office in his Hebridean village and in her interview Katherine brought along and shared recent police figures showing

increases in reports of racist abuse experienced in North Yorkshire's rural areas. These anxieties about racial violence and race hate were regularly raised in the interviews alongside identifying the need for more recognition and interventions around racism as a rural problem. There are ambiguities here between recognising rural racism (especially in forms of hate crime) on the one hand but distancing Brexit from anti-migrant positions on the other. While these tensions reflect the particular positions of the participants in our study they are indicative of the challenges rural lobbyists and policy makers may face as they work to enhance rural well-being and social cohesion in socially differentiated and ethnically diverse rural populations in the post Brexit environment.

### **5. Brexit impacts on rural localities and rural dependencies on rural migrants**

There was consensus across the interviews that Brexit would have distinct impacts on rural areas. The interviewees recognized that, compared to urban locations and communities, rural areas were disproportionately dependent on EU funding, a migrant work force and EU exports. 'Typically' rural industries such as agriculture, horticulture and fisheries were thus viewed as being most likely to be critically affected. While there was some variation in the anticipated size of those impacts, the sense that Brexit would bring a profound change to rural economies, life and wellbeing was widespread. As noted by Rose: *Brexit is in everything... so, you know, we might be looking at rural funding anyway, but the impact of Brexit on that is devastating, absolutely devastating.*

The cessation of EU funding when the UK leaves the EU was a frequently voiced concern. There was a sense, voiced by Thomas below, that the significance of EU funding for rural areas had not been adequately communicated to the wider public in past decades, resulting in a general lack of awareness of how it had transformed rural locations and communities;

*The funding issue is a massive one. Most of the infrastructure investment in rural Scotland over the last ten years has all come through EU funding. [...] UK shared prosperity fund and nobody's really talking about that. [...] One of the things that the rural [EU] money did was allow rural communities to attract additional funds through match funding from other sources.*

Interviewees were also convinced that Brexit would dramatically affect rural work forces and economies by prompting EU citizens to leave the UK and significantly impede opportunities to obtain 'new' EU workers in the future. Indeed, EU migrant dependencies were widely acknowledged in a range of rural industries from farms, abattoirs and vets to hospitality, construction, health and care and small businesses. For Elen there was a particular rural vulnerability in losing migrant populations,

*The construction industry may lose workers. I know that a lot of the domiciliary care and in the hospitals we have a lot of Eastern European workers. [...] We will lose some really good hard working people who come over here to work and who may just, certainly as the economy are picking up in Eastern Europe [...] . There may well be a drawback to draw Eastern Europeans into the jobs back to their home. [...] I guess in city you've always got your safety of numbers or maybe there's more individuals around to fill those posts.*

Across the interviews, EU citizens were viewed as key to the successful operation of rural industries and to rural entrepreneurship. So, for Richard, Brexit's impacts were also about rural exports; *most of our products go to Europe [and] that could be an area of trade that's under threat*. There was a strong concern, reflected in Scottish research (Moxey and Thomson 2018), that many smaller farms would generate losses after Brexit. For example, Rose explained how,

*[A]ccording to SRC [Scotland's Rural College] who have done a lot of research onto it, 60% of farms will go bust. And, farms were originally the centre of communities. Communities grew around farms. If 60% of Scottish farms go out of business, that will transform rural Scotland.*

While there was, at times, a heavily economic framing of Brexit's differential impact on rural areas, these impacts were also perceived as having far-reaching social effects for rural communities with the capacity to unsettle wider rural life. Rose's connection of farm wellbeing to wider rural wellbeing - 'communities grew up around farms' - spoke to the ways in which the policy actors identified connective threads of rural interdependence in which Brexit was seen as presenting a potential rupture to economic activity but also to rural resilience and the social cohesion of rural communities. This was emphasized by Alex,

*[T]he government is piloting some short-term worker schemes at the moment. People from I think Ukraine and Moldova or Belarus. [...] But then that doesn't remedy any of the past issues for all areas empowered with migrant workers, it's going to exacerbate it because it'll be new populations [...] people who definitely are not coming to stay [...] I think is probably helpful for cohesion purposes that people staying feel more invested. But if you've got a series of short-term temporary worker schemes, that's just going to increase that short-termism, that churn and turnover in uncertainty that those communities don't like because it makes them feel fearful. So those things will get worse I would imagine.*

Alex's concern about the impact of Brexit on highly managed, short term migrant rural labour contracts and related effects for social cohesion is significant. While there is resonance here with Moore's (2019) argument that Polish migrants were conditionally accepted as part of the village narrative as long as migrants were understood as working for the village and local economy, it also contains a more radical perspective of the ways in which migrant settlement in rural communities has been transformative as, in Alex's account, migration has 'empowered' them (see also Kay and Treverna 2017).

Alex's focus on changing rural migrant experiences was part of a shared pattern of anxiety about rural population churn and population decline in the post-Brexit future. Crucially, this churn was understood to overlay and involve particular demographic trends in rural Britain: specifically, an aging population brought about by older in-migration and younger out-migration to urban locations. In post Brexit UK the worry that these rural departures could now include rebordered EU migrants generated an emotive awareness of an impending migrant absence and a sense of loss as well as a recognition of the detrimental social impacts of this process. In this narrative EU migrants were family members, friends and core members of local communities contributing to local life in variety of ways, including civic participation and community activism. This social value was emphasized by Rose,

*It's really interesting to look at who the community activists are [...-]. Interestingly, a lot of them are non-native Scots [...-]. On our board for example, we have a lady who's German and has been living and working in Galloway for a long time [...-]. And there are quite a lot of people like her who are very active in their communities, and communities are suffering because they're losing a lot of those community activists as they worry about the future, especially the EU ones. [...-] Given that they've been very active in their communities, they would be much missed.*

The worries about the social implications of rural population churn - and perhaps more significantly the social gaps left by migrants in those rural communities in which they have settled - are particularly intense in Rose's narrative and here we might usefully draw on research by Woods (2018) on the subject of migration and 'rural cosmopolitanism' in Ireland. Focusing on Ballyhaunis in County Mayo, and Gort in County Galway, Woods connects the influx of Muslim workers in Ballyhaunis with the construction of Halal meat plants in the 1970s onwards, and the arrival of large number of Brazilians in Gort, recruited to work in the meat processing factory in the town. Following of the closure of this plant in 2007, and the contraction of the economy post 2008, a large number of migrants returned to Brazil, leaving a strong footprint on the cultural and material fabric of the town in terms of shops, clubs and places of worship.

While there was significant overlap and shared ground for the rural actors, a nationally distinct inflection was apparent in the issue of Brexit related rural depopulation and this was particularly prominent in the Scottish interviews reflecting wider regional and historical concerns. In a recent report (SRA 2019), a Brexit-related depopulation of Scottish rural regions was described as ‘clearance’, in an emotive connection of contemporary depopulation to the Highland Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The report makes a vivid case for how Scottish rural communities are becoming ‘unviable’ because of Brexit. Interestingly, however, depopulation was given much less attention in Welsh and (especially) English interviews where rural problems more widely framed in relation to ageing populations and the impacts of austerity policies.

What is notable across the perspectives of policy actors is the extent to which a multi-dimensional rural reliance on migrants was stitched into their accounts. This reliance goes beyond economic need extending into a wider social dependency in which rural well-being is directly connected to migrant settlement. The emphasis given by participants to this migrant dependency of rural communities was at time related to the sense of rural marginality in policy agendas (as Alex notes, rural places are ‘*noticed less*’ by people, large organisations and governance structures) and most often picked up on the more commonplace worries about the negative impact of Brexit processes such as rural labour shortages and the needs of an ageing rural population. However, there were also thicker dependencies between rural communities and rural migrants that were articulated for example in Rose’s concerns about migrant departures and socially depleted communities. Brexit’s exposure of these dependencies return us to Benson’s (2019) research on how some British expatriates living in France struggled with a new precarity as they attempted to navigate their migration and citizenship rights in the new post-Brexit European context. Benson argues that new vulnerabilities are generated, particularly along class lines, for those people who have not formerly experienced migrant insecurities. There were echoes of these new experiences and anxieties generated through Brexit’s social shifts and rebordering of migration in the perspectives of rural policy actors as they identified a new rural precarity that was not only economically framed but, as we have seen in Rose’s and Alex’s accounts, socially focused. This explicit recognition of interdependency illuminates more plural and differentiated rural narratives emerging out of the evolving politics of Brexit. These are narratives which trouble easy assumptions of an anti-migrant rural disposition towards a pro-Leave, ‘take our country back’ politics.

## 6. Towards conclusions

We begin our ending with a re-emphasis on the temporal, processional basis of Brexit and a reminder of the small-scale nature of the qualitative work here. This means that the narratives and perspectives of our interlocutors examined here should be viewed as empirical ‘bellwethers’ or indicative voices which prise small openings in the rural-Brexit black box. These openings enable a situational examination of Brexit affects within particular rural spaces at a particular moment in the politics of Brexit.

Since our participants were drawn from specific organizational, geographical and distinct national contexts<sup>iv</sup>, we are aware that the accounts presented in this paper are partial and in many ways ‘second hand’. In this way the limits to having only ‘policy voices’ involved in our research include the inevitable tendency for narratives of advocacy, perhaps emphasising worse-case scenarios and those most problematical aspects of community life within their respective professional and territorial orbits. As such, these accounts might not be reflected in those of ordinary rural residents’ ones. Moreover, in being drawn from specific localities within Scotland, Wales, and England, it should not be assumed that they are representative of similarity and difference across these national contexts. That said, devolution has inevitably shaped the legal and political backdrop within which our respondents operate. Nevertheless, we maintain that our micro engagement with rural-migrant policy actors – whilst also carrying the attendant limitations of scale – does, nevertheless, offer sufficient scope to respond to Finlay et al.’s (2019: 21) call to ‘expand our geographical understandings [of Brexit]’ and consider ‘rural areas with migrant labour’. Highlighting the rural contours of the 2016 Referendum vote and drawing on rurally embedded policy narratives provides a lens for ‘mov[ing] beyond competing binaries of rural versus urban towards a more textured and sensitive reading’ (Brooks 2019: 16) of the nature of the rural-Brexit relationship.

Part of this ‘texture’ that is most apparent is the extent to which Brexit processes have generated a newly acknowledged and more acute sense of social and economic vulnerability and migrant dependency in different and distinct rural geographies. There is of course a wider Brexit driven uncertainty at a national level too, but the experience of a significant scale of rural migration and an awareness of rural contexts being differently impacted by Brexit are emergent narratives in national political and policy debates (as the recent high-profile National Farmers Union’s campaigns against ‘no-deal’ Brexit settlement demonstrates<sup>v</sup>) as well as within our interview conversations with the policy actors. Across these the consensus that there are distinctly ‘rural’ Brexit effects is related to rural economic needs and the longevity of the reliance of rural economies on migrants (further exposed by

the reports of Romanian fruit pickers being flown to the UK in spring 2020 amid the UK-wide Covid-19 lockdown to save the struggling farming sector; O'Carroll, 15 Apr 2020). And while these economies are dominated by agriculture and food production, participants also emphasised the broader nature of rural economies and the needs of hospitality, social care, small businesses and digital sectors.

This awareness of migrant dependencies in rural areas and the awareness of rurally-distinct Brexit effects is evidence of the extent to which migration and cultural difference is no longer as easily framed as an urban-only phenomenon. In the rural studies work of the 1990s and early 2000s (Philo 1992; Cloke and Little 1997; Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Author 20\*\*; Bressey 2009) it was the denial of race and the related invisibilisation of ethnic and social difference that dominated conceptualisations of rurality. There has clearly been, then, a significant shift over the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the scale and visibility of rural migration settlements have repositioned the rural as a core site of migration and made any claims that race, ethnicity and cultural difference are irrelevant to rural areas impossible to sustain. Our interlocutors shared a recognition of this shift. It is reflected in their emphasis on the complexity of rural belonging and the diversity of rural populations as well as in an openness about divided rural communities and rural social problems relating to poverty and social exclusion. Following these policy actors, it is the extent to which post-Brexit rural differences will require more granular approaches to and problematisation of the meanings 'the rural' that is striking.

While it would be naive to argue that the dominance of the de/racialised rural idyll, rural-nation trope has been anything but partially ruptured by the politics of Brexit what Brexit has relentlessly exposed is the extent to which rural space is fragmented and shaped – as much as in urban areas – by an intense interdependency between migrant and non-migrant rural populations. As Valluvan and Kalra (2019: 2394) argue (of the English case), 'Brexit signaled one significant instantiation of a successful new nationalist political programme that hinges substantially on the ostensible problems of immigration, multiculturalism, and ethnic diversity more broadly'. A particular exclusionary rural imaginary has traditionally been successfully mobilized as a discursive resource for parochial monocultural nationalism precisely because it has been effectively and emotively positioned as being outside of these 'ostensible problems' (Author 2016). But, viewed close up in the everyday, community life of rural places, the politics of Brexit have, paradoxically, exposed the insecurities, fragmentations and slippages of 'the rural' for sustaining and securing nationalism.

Despite some evidence of a rural disposition to a Leave vote, particularly in England, this is a fractured, partial and intra-rural patterning rather than a straightforward rural-urban, Leave-Remain divide. Brexit

support in rural areas sits uneasily alongside an awareness and anxiety that Brexit's new bordering and management of migration regimes will profoundly impact rural economies and rural liveabilities. At the heart of this paradox are the older contestations, around what the rural is and who is included and belongs within rural communities. The reticence we noted above within the some of the policy actor narratives to identify race and racism as part of the rural-Brexit relationship highlights this. But, as with Benson's (2019: 14) examination of the new experiences of migrant vulnerability and insecurity in citizen status amongst British expatriates who never expected to fit into such a categories, 'Brexit refracts privilege' and what the politics of Brexit have been effective in revealing in the British rural context are the ongoing contestations of rural social relations across social difference, but also the extent and depth to which there are social as well as economic need for and reliance on diverse, multicultural rural populations.

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<sup>i</sup> For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

<sup>ii</sup> Breaking Point was the infamous Leave campaign poster showing long lines of refugees walking through fields with the text 'take back control of our borders'.

<sup>iii</sup>In 2015 the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme (VPRS) was established to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK by 2020. Local authorities in the different areas of the UK are able to volunteer to participate in the scheme.

<sup>iv</sup> It is important to note that our research did not include Northern Ireland where the impacts of Brexit on migration and rural communities may again be different.

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⁴ The National Farmers Union has been increasingly vocal about a no deal Brexit lobbying that it would be 'catastrophic' for farming [www.nfu.online.com/news/brexit-news](http://www.nfu.online.com/news/brexit-news)