

CENTRE FOR RURAL POLICY RESEARCH and SUPPORTING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

At the end of March, twenty u3a members attended a talk by **Matt Lobley** and **Rebecca Wheeler** of the Centre for Rural Policy Research. Matt Lobley, director, introduced us to the work of the Centre and its evolution from the department of Agricultural Economics in the 1960s to today's broad-focused centre, looking at the land, the environment and the agricultural community as a whole. As well as farmers and academics, there are representatives from industry and key landowners such as Clinton Estates on the Centre's board,

Research projects cover not only the UK but also the US, parts of Europe, and Japan where relevant such as the *Farm Transfers Project*, an issue of concern at the moment to farmers in the UK due to the proposed Inheritance Tax. *Agri-environmental Management* is another important project in modern farming, for example bringing back wild flowers and managing hedgerows to provide a variety of habitats. Matt emphasised the constant need to apply for external funding for all the projects, requiring reports to be written for research councils, local authorities, the government, charities, local benefactors etc. Indeed a key report was due to be handed in by the end of the day of our visit and so we greatly appreciated their giving up their time for us.

Rebecca explained the findings of her research among the farming community into their health and well-being (or living well), focusing on particular aspects which affect farmers more than people in general: the intergenerational aspect of farming; the hard physical labour leading to greater and earlier onset of pain; the increasing demand for sophisticated computer skills in managing finances, crop planning and management, and driving high-tech machinery. Rebecca looked particularly at the issues of concern to women in farming, whose level of mental health is lower than the UK average, and 41% of whom report arthritis and other muscular-skeletal problems.

On the plus side, farmers cite the outdoors and the natural environment, their animals, and the fact that farming is a good environment for bringing up children. While many feel that outsiders do not understand farming issues, 61% reported that they feel valued. The Farm Community Network offers a lot of support such as 'accidental' counsellors, but there are some barriers to seeking help due to the farming tradition of being strong, stoic and independent.

The talk stimulated a lively discussion with members asking a range of interesting questions, and Matt and Rebecca thanked us for being such an engaged audience. *Trudi*

Learmouth