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New head of rural charity says farmers still facing difficulties

The new chairman of a Nottinghamshire charity that aims to help rural people struggling with stress or ill health says the need for its work is as great as ever, with issues over late-payment of government subsidies causing fresh financial difficulties for some farmers in the county.

Peter Geldart, of Ossington, near Newark, has taken over as chairman of Nottinghamshire Rural Support from the founding chairman, Cauntton farmer Michael Arlington.

The charity, which was founded in 2013, runs a small network of volunteers who offer counselling, advice and practical help when needed to farmers and people in the wider rural community. It also organises a regular drop-in clinic and nurse service at Newark Livestock Market on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Mr Geldart said the financial climate for farming and rural businesses remained precarious in many sectors.

"In just the past couple of weeks, we have become aware that a number of farmers in the county have not received their Basic Payment Scheme payments, which are a vital part of farming incomes. Late payment for whatever reason can cause severe financial difficulty as farmers rely on this money to pay suppliers, repay the bank or buy feed for livestock," he said.

"Our volunteers are talking to several farmers and, if necessary, we will try to intervene with the Rural Payments Agency on their behalf or advise on how best to approach their banks. In some cases, we may be able to put them in touch with organisations that can give financial help.

"What this certainly shows is that, after two decades of upheaval in the farming industry, the financial situation for many small farmers remains difficult and, in some cases, this leads to stress and ill-health."

Mr Geldart said that, under his predecessor, the charity had established a firm financial footing and built a network of supporters and volunteers.

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"NRS came about through Michael Arlington's vision and energy and he is an extremely hard act to follow," said Mr Geldart. " Fortunately, Michael will remain active in NRS as a trustee and on the main committee."

"It is no exaggeration to say that our clinics at Newark Livestock Market have the potential to save lives as the nurse and volunteers there have picked up several cases that might have become serious if they had not been diagnosed and treated.

"Looking to the future, we want to build on the work of the past three years to ensure we are reaching all sections of the agricultural community and all parts of the county, including farmers who do not attend the market.

"One of the challenges we have faced - and probably always will face - is that rural people are often reluctant to ask for help for themselves. However, we can still often help if alerted to a problem by a family member or friend or even a rural professional like a vet. Rural GPs may also be able to point people in our direction so our task is to ensure that as many people as possible in the wider rural community are aware of the help we can offer."

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