

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

I have been thoroughly enjoying this year serving as President of the Suffolk Agricultural Association, alongside my day job. I am about two-thirds of the way through the year in this role, and will in fact finish just three days before I retire as Bishop at the end of February.

The highlight of course has been the Suffolk Show, which I have loved since I first went in 2015, and this year was very special, not least because the first day of the show coincided with my 70th birthday.

I have also loved getting to know more farmers, visiting more farms, listening to a wide range of experiences of farming, and learning about the joys and the challenges of the industry.

One of the treats has been instigating “Clergy on Combines” where we teamed up vicars with farmers for the vicars to spend part of a day experiencing riding on a combine – the most amazing machines – and using that to build a stronger connection between church and farm. Twenty-five clergy/farmer pairs took part across the county and I hope it is repeated next year, after I’ve gone.

I have listened to the challenges farmers face, with the increasing unpredictability of the weather, with the complexities of the current government support schemes, with the moves towards more sustainable farming practices, and the very thin profit margins – indeed losses in some parts of agriculture – for the farmers and their families to live off.

In my experience the average family farmer in Suffolk may have a great deal of value tied up in their land and the equipment essential for their work, but they live on a modest income.

Basically, farmers do not get paid for their livestock or crops the value that would enable them to make a reasonable living, a living that requires them to work long hours, often seven days a week. And yet they provide much of our food.

So the Government’s Budget a few weeks ago has been a devastating blow, financially and for morale, and for the mental health of farmers.

Let me start with the mental health issues. Because of the financial precariousness of many farms, farmers live with a fairly high level of uncertainty, and for many this has had a significant impact on their mental health.

I hear from my agricultural chaplain, Graham Miles, who tells me just how many contact him to talk about the troubles they are facing.

And then the farming charities, YANA (You Are Not Alone), the Farming Community Network, and RABI (the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Association) are facing an increasing number of requests for help from farmers.

But the Budget has seen that escalate. Graham tells me of family members worried for their husband or father, of farmers worried about what they can pass on to their children, of farmers just worried sick about the further financial pressures they will face now.

What has the Government done? There are several items in the Budget that come together. The rise in the National Insurance employers’ contribution and the rise in the minimum wage affect everyone in any business or charity employing staff.

But there are some changes that have a huge impact just on farmers. First, farmers have been exempt from paying inheritance tax, and until the Budget they believed the Government had given assurances that would continue.

Paying inheritance tax would mean that the children who inherit the farm would have to sell some of the farm to pay it. There is no spare cash to do so. And that makes no sense.

So there could be no choice but to sell part of the farm, and then it can become unviable. And even if you plan ahead and pass the farm to your children seven years before you die, none of us can guarantee how long we will live, or, tragically, if our children will die before us.

Added to that, the Government, having said there would be no change, have now put a cap on the post-Brexit subsidies that were being tapered off, leaving farmers out of pocket, some significantly so, and feeling betrayed.

The Government declared “food security is national security.” I would agree. But the Budget seems to fly in the face of that.

And the Government claims, “the vast majority of farmers will not be affected.” But that is simply not true.

I can only imagine this is a grave miscalculation by the Treasury based on misleading information. I cannot see how they can otherwise impose measures so destructive to our food supply.

I deeply value farmers and the work they do for our nation. They are essential to our food supply and food security. I support the NFU campaign on this, and will do everything I can to help to change these measures that imperil our farming industry, our farmers and our food.