NEWS

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Rates bill may force seal hospital to close

£15,000 DEMAND: Rescue centre hopes to get charitable status

By Mark Lord

AN ANIMAL rescue hospital says it faces closure after receiving a £15,000 bill for unpaid business rates.

Harry Nicholson, manager of the Winterton Seal Hospital, said in the past it had been exempt from paying rates – but late last year Great Yarmouth Borough Council issued it with the huge bill.

The hospital, which cares for animals found from Southwold to Wells in north Norfolk needs more than £50,000 to operate for just six months and relies heavily on donations and grant funding to survive.

> We can't afford to pay. We are struggling to survive as it is
> Harry Nicholson

Mr Nicholson said: "We have been issued with this £15,000 business rates demand. We can't afford to pay it, we are struggling to survive as it is. The council has threatened to take legal action against us. We will be forced to close if they take us to court."

Hospital supporter Ken Houchen, from Lowestoft, said: "The hospital is applying for charitable status, which if successful will give it 80% relief from the rates but I doubt it can be backdated and the hospital will still face a large bill."

A spokesman for the borough council said: "The Valuation Office rated the property from April 1, 2005, with a rateable value of £8,500.

"Once the valuation officer has placed a rateable value on the property we have no alternative but to send a bill out.

"We could not award charitable relief on this as the seal hospital is not a registered charity. A letter was sent to them confirming this.

"We have spoken with Mr Nicholson with regard to the outstanding rates, and believe he is now trying to get his charitable status backdated.

"I am not sure whether such status can be backdated but he is keeping us informed. If charitable status can be backdated – the hospital will automatically be entitled to 80% relief.

"We also believe that the Valuation Office may be looking to reduce the rateable value of the property but we have not had official confirmation of this. If the rateable value is reduced the outstanding balance should reduce considerably."

Great Yarmouth Borough Council collects business rates on behalf of the Government and therefore must adhere to information supplied by the Valuation Office.

The spokesman added: "We have every admiration for Mr Nicholson and the work of the Winterton Seal Hospital."

Anyone wanting to help the hospital financially, either by donation or by adopting a seal, should visit or call 01493 393947 for more information.

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VOLUNTEERS NEEDED: Winterton Seal Hospital Photograph: NICK BUTCHER/EDP

PRESSURE on the hospital has greatly increased in the past few years as it struggles to deal with an ever bigger influx of sick and abandoned seals and pups.

It expects to have to deal with more than 200 animals during the coming weeks rather than the dozens it usually has to deal with at this time of year.

Mr Nicholson puts the increase in numbers down to changes in breeding sites and seal habitats.

As well as desperately needing more money, the hospital is appealing for about 30 volunteers to help deal with the seal crisis.

"We are currently running on very low steam and if the expected numbers of seals do turn up during the coming weeks then we will be swamped," said Mr Nicholson.

He added that the hospital was moving to new premises so that it can cope with the large numbers of animals and work needs to be completed by July so that the seals can be cared for.

He said the hospital wanted volunteers to help get the new building ready so any one with skills such as carpentry or decorating would be more than welcome to help out.

"The struggle to keep going without help from Government, councils or wildlife trusts is a painstaking, dedicated effort, by only a few animal-loving people. We need lots of help to keep going," said Mr Nicholson.

"We also need between two and four qualified seal care nurses – these would be paid positions, and we need a further 30 volunteer seal care helpers and rescuers.

"The coming months are going to be a big operation for us and we are going to need all of the help we can get."

People who wish to volunteer their services should contact the seal hospital on 01493 393947.