Introduction

1. In July this year the Government published its response to the report by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) entitled ‘Crop spraying and the health of residents and bystanders’.

2. This paper provides a brief introduction to how the Government sees the commitments made in the response being taken forward and particularly focusing on the proposed voluntary approach to deliver a number of benefits around ‘good neighbourliness’ and how the Forum may be able to contribute.

Response to recommendations

3. The Government has accepted, will consider, or is already doing 25 of the 35 recommendations in the report. In addition to this the Government made commitments to work with organisations representing the full range of stakeholders to take forward a voluntary approach to address many of the practical issues raised by the report.

4. The Government accepted the concerns of the RCEP regarding the robustness of that part of the approvals process that assesses resident and bystander exposure and announced a complete review of the model.

5. The UK will take the lead in revising the guidance on acceptable exposure limits, including the assessment of resident and bystander exposure, for the European Commission (EC).

6. The Government is considering implementation of some of the RCEP’s other recommendations in the context of the EC’s Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides which includes proposals for a new EU directive to establish an EU framework of controls on sustainable pesticide use.

The “Voluntary Approach”

7. The Government has accepted the scientific advice that there is insufficient evidence to support the RCEP’s recommendations for additional regulatory measures on safety grounds at this time. However, this will of course continue to be reviewed in the light of any emerging scientific evidence.
8. The Government has nevertheless acknowledged the very real concerns of some residents and bystanders about the spraying of pesticides in close proximity to their properties and is committed to ensuring that these are addressed. Ministers believe that this is best done at local level through constructive dialogue between residents and farmers and that this approach can be delivered most effectively and rapidly through voluntary arrangements that allow for innovative and flexible solutions – this is the basis of the ‘Voluntary Approach’

**Better regulation – better outcomes?**

9. This approach has been developed in line with the Government’s Better Regulation policy. Before introducing new regulations Government is now required to fully consider viable non-regulatory alternatives to deliver the desired outcomes – an approach very much supported by the agricultural industry.

10. This initiative gives the agricultural industry the opportunity to demonstrate that this form of self regulation can deliver real benefits and most importantly behaviour change.

11. That this approach has been adopted on such a controversial issue shows the Government’s commitment to this policy but also places a significant onus on the agricultural industry to make it work. The future use of non-regulatory approaches such as this may well be influenced by the success or otherwise of this initiative.

**Initial steps**

12. Ministers are keen to see an industry-led Voluntary Approach developed, with key stakeholder participation. Officials from Defra and PSD have recently met with industry representatives and campaigners to discuss taking this forward.

13. These preliminary discussions have resulted in agreement that, since the aim of this approach is primarily to encourage behavioural change on the part of farmers, it is most appropriate for the farming industry to take the lead. However, in order to be successful it is vital that views from ‘both sides of the fence’ are included.

14. We are aware there are already many good examples throughout the country where farmers have established dialogue with their close neighbours and have agreed actions such as advance notification of pesticide spraying, or maintenance of spray-free zones, to allay fears. The Government, as part of this exercise, would like to encourage and build upon such good practice.

15. However, it is also clear that some farmers may currently feel that their obligations do not extend beyond complying with the law and following the
relevant Codes of Practice. One of the key issues will be how to change this view and demonstrate the potential benefits of a more proactive approach to good neighbourliness (and the potential risks of ignoring the issue). Equally many residents do not understand what the farmers does and why and both the risks and benefits this entails. A key aspect of this voluntary approach is therefore to provide advice and guidance on potential solutions for residents and farmers, in situations where concerns exist.

16. It has been suggested that one starting point might be a guidance document or “Good Neighbour Guide” could be produced, to be used by farmers and local residents, which would set out a range of possible solutions (a ‘toolbox’ of measures) that could be implemented according to individual circumstances. This could include providing advice on;
- establishing a dialogue between farmers and neighbours;
- putting land adjacent to residential properties into set-a-side;
- informing neighbours about pesticides and spraying practices; and
- providing advice to neighbours about how best to approach the farmer with their concerns/queries.

17. These initial ideas should not be viewed as a one off exercise but more as a starting point for discussion and development of an ongoing process that will evolve as awareness of this issue amongst both residents and farmers changes and that takes on the views from ‘both sides of the fence’.

Measuring success

18. The most difficult question with the approach will be measuring success. Particular difficulties include the absence of relevant baseline information and whether it is possible to set meaningful targets.

19. It is also likely that reporting will only take place in situations where the new approach does not work rather than when it does. It has been suggested that the impetus should come from the top down and that Crop Assurance Schemes and major retailers could be approached with a view to getting the voluntary approach incorporated into stewardship schemes.

Issues for the Forum

20. There are three key issues we would like to put to the forum for discussion

- What are the views on the initial ideas put forward, where is further input required and from whom?
- What role can/should the forum play in this initiative?
- What might success look like and how can we measure it?