



Annual Report 2019-20

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1. Chair's Report

It must be said that 2020 was a very strange year and a year like no other. Even before the arrival of the global pandemic caused by the appearance of COVID-19, 2020 was always going to be summed up by the word “uncertainty”. Emerging from 2019, a year of political paralysis, Agriculture faced a number of challenges, for example the introduction of the Agriculture Bill and although the UK had agreed to leave the EU, uncertainty reigned as to whether a deal would be done, a) in time and b) whether any deal might be beneficial to the farming sector.

The same could be said for the weather. After the planting of winter crops in 2019 was impacted by wet weather and waterlogged soils, the arable growers were always playing catch-up. After a warm winter, three named storms came through during February which contributed to the month being the wettest on record with severe flooding in many areas. Then, by contrast, the spring and early summer were bone dry and many crops suffered with drought minimising grain fill and threatening the existence of some crops completely. To compound the situation, the heavens opened in late May and June and into July producing the worse harvest in living memory.

Work with Defra continued, but with the COVID-19 outbreak consuming much of the Department's time and effort with regard feeding a population under lockdown and with “Brexit” deal discussions rumbling on, the VI was able to focus on long term policy. This culminated in a scoping document that was sent for review by Defra and the Ministerial teams to decide the future direction of the VI, particularly with a move to focus on implementation of IPM.

Collaboration with the water industry continues with our VI Champions, now encouraged to work with Catchment Sensitive Farming Officers on a regional basis. Data from the EA and WaterUK suggest that when done in a structured manner, stewardship can have a dramatic effect on the amount of plant protection products found in water courses. A concerted effort to help water companies to deal with on-farm pollution issues is only the first step to



the VI making a huge difference to the sustainability of UK farming. This is no less important for farmers where grass is the main crop and the VI is working with colleagues at the NFU to implement a dedicated “Grassland” IPM Plan for introduction in 2021.

The VI looks forward to helping co-design the Environmental Land Management scheme through continued dialogue and input with Defra, particularly through facilitation of cross-sector discussion and comment to the revised National Action Plan (on sustainable pesticide use) consultation expected in early 2021.

Paul Temple
VI Chairman

2. The VI and its Stakeholders

The VI is an industry-led partnership that works with government, regulators and stakeholders to promote the responsible use of agricultural and horticultural pesticides.

The VI Steering Group oversees and coordinates the work of the VI and keeps Ministers informed:

Agricultural Engineers Association (AEA)
Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)
Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC)
Association of Independent Crop Consultants (AICC)
Assured Food Standards (AFS)
BASIS (Registration) Limited
British Crop Production Council (BCPC)
Chemicals Regulation Division, HSE (CRD)
City and Guilds (C&G)
Country Land and Business Association (CLA)
Crop Protection Association (CPA)
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland (DAERA-NI)
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
Environment Agency (EA)
Farmers Union of Wales (FUW)
Food Standards Agency (FSA)
Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT)
Lantra
Linking the Environment and Farming (LEAF)
National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC)
National Farmers Union (NFU)
Natural England (NE)
NFU Scotland (NFUS)
Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
The Scottish Government (SG)
Ulster Farmers Union (UFU)
Water UK
Welsh Government (WG)

The strategic aims of the VI are as follows:

- Ensure that industry demonstrates continued commitment to best practice in pesticide use through enhanced uptake of IPM
- Ensure the Voluntary Initiative (VI) is considered the vanguard on pesticide stewardship by government, industry and stakeholders
- Minimise the environmental impact of pesticide use and related farming practices on water and biodiversity
- Maximise the opportunities for the development of UK agriculture post-Brexit

The strategic priorities of the VI are:

- Show continued leadership in the principle of industry self-regulation that delivers world leading benefit to UK agriculture post-Brexit
- Encourage adoption of enhanced IPM principles and ensure the uptake of a holistic approach to crop protection through integration of quantifiable IPM measures within the proposed new Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) or equivalent and in line with the 25 year Environment Plan
- Improvement in water quality, ensuring implementation of IPM minimises the impact of pesticides through enhanced stewardship and collaboration between the Agriculture and Water Industries
- Introduce a network of Regional “VI Champion” farmers and advisers to drive through change in the industry
- Improved stewardship of pesticides, specifically insecticides, to reduce the risk to bees and other pollinators through appropriate use of IPM linking to government National Pollinator Strategy
- Ensure the VI is the key delivery mechanism for the National Action Plan (NAP) for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides as the plan is revised during 2019 and linking into wider pesticide policy development
- To simplify delivery of information through integration of messaging between initiatives and across relevant organisations.

Adherence to best practice in pesticide use results in:

- Helping achieve the aims of the 25 year Environment Plan, by helping growers deliver “public goods” and to help achieve the goals for improving the environment within a generation and leaving it in a better state than we found it

- Reducing risk to the aquatic environment and improved compliance with the Water Framework Directive
- Protection of biodiversity, specifically pollinators and other farm wildlife through greater engagement with key stakeholders
- Reassurance for the general public that pesticides are being used safely
- Increasing confidence of consumers and retailers about the safety of food produced in the UK
- Actively reduce the first stage of in-field and farm store food waste

3. Priorities

A. Water

Much of the VI work on water quality has been delivered through a partnership with Water UK and the various water companies. We receive the most up-to-date data on the monitoring programmes undertaken by the water companies and this information feeds into our strategy for dealing with those pesticides that are appearing most regularly in these reports. The data are delivered and discussed during the three VI Water Group meetings held throughout the year, for 2020, the second two of which were virtual Teams meetings.



1. OSR Herbicides: Think Water? Campaign



The VI has been at the forefront in developing the latest 'Oilseed Rape (OSR) herbicides? Think water' campaign. Five key herbicides commonly used to manage blackgrass in crops of OSR continue to be detected in raw water. The campaign helps farmers to minimise the risk to watercourses. The VI campaign focuses on 3 target catchments: The River Kym, Mimmshall Brook and Instead Brook although the work will be applicable to all water companies facing similar problems.

Following a second year of poor establishment and problems caused by Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle, less OSR grown was planted during the 2020/21 season than the previous season and this provided The VI and our project partners with an opportunity. The VI ran an early season campaign to encourage farmers to think more carefully about where OSR was sown, to actively encourage them to sow OSR in fields with the least risk of run-off to water courses, particularly with regard to fields with drains. The campaign used the hashtag #KeepItInTheField to highlight that any herbicide leaching into surface water is not only harmful, but also was not giving effective blackgrass/weed control and was also not cost effective!.

Below are the five key messages from the campaign that farmers were asked to consider to minimise the movement of herbicides to water:

- **FIELD SELECTION:** Although dictated by rotation to a degree, aim to grow oilseed rape on a field that is low risk i.e. doesn't slope to a watercourse, less susceptible to run-off or further away from a water course. Fields that are high risk include those that have underdrainage or slope down to a watercourse.

High risk fields might also include those that have problem levels of black-grass or other grass-weeds where metazachlor, propyzamide, and carbetamide may be used.

- **CULTIVATION AND TRAMLINES:** Cultivation is a key factor in managing risk. Considering appropriate establishment and direction of working travel are important factors in minimising risk according to soil type and topography. Lay out tramlines in order that they do not provide a direct route for water to leave the field e.g. enter the crop at the top of the field. Where possible, disturb surface compaction in tramlines. Those with GPS guidance on sprayers may like to switch off tramlining kits when drilling OSR.
- **BUFFERS:** Buffer zones next to watercourses can be effective in reducing run-off and soil particles that may contain pesticides reaching watercourses. A wider buffer zone is more effective. Cross compliance dictates a 2m minimal buffer zone, but the VI recommends establishment of a 6m buffer alongside watercourses if possible. Wider buffers are advisable in particularly vulnerable areas.
- **CHECK DESIGNATIONS:** Use the Environment Agency's Drinking Water Safeguard Zones Website (http://bit.ly/EA_WIYBY) to check whether planned oilseed rape fields are in a Drinking Water Safeguard Zone. Avoid growing rape, if it requires herbicides likely to move to water, in these areas if at all possible, particularly if they are high risk fields.
- **INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT:** It is important to only use pesticides when necessary and there are a number of ways to reduce reliance on pesticides including cultivations, drilling dates, regular crop inspections among others. Talk to your BASIS-registered agronomist to make sure that where possible you utilise herbicides less likely to move to water where there is a risk of this occurring. As always: use the right product for the job, at the right time and to best practice.

However, the main focus of the 2020/21 campaign is to help growers effectively control the weed pest, in most cases blackgrass. Helping growers maximise control by applying the right product, at the right time, as part of an IPM-based approach is key! It is vital that stewardship steps are followed this season to help protect water and, as a result, the five actives themselves. To do this, we will use our VI Champions (see below), to work in tandem with water company Catchment Officers and Catchment Sensitive Farming Officers to drive the message home through peer-to-peer visits in catchment, socially distanced of course.

B. Biodiversity

One of the priorities of the VI is to minimise the risk to bees and other pollinators. In 2018, the CPA-funded spray alert system BeeConnected was launched. This web-based alert system enables operators to alert directly local beekeepers of their planned insecticide applications.



BeeConnected

However, uptake of the system by both farmers, growers, sprayer operators and beekeepers has been lower than expected. The VI is working with the farming union's, Red Tractor and the other farm assurance schemes to increase awareness of the scheme as evidence of the 'Code of Practice for using Plant Protection Products' requirement to inform local beekeepers before using certain sprays in place of the previous telephone-based sprayer liaison network operated by the British Beekeepers Association. Featured at agricultural shows such as Cereals 2020 and CropTec 2020 both of which were run virtually in light of the COVID -19 pandemic. BeeConnected also featured on the VI's and supporting organisations social media and figures are slowly increasing year on year.

BeeConnected

Connecting beekeepers and farmers

Home Profile How it Works FAQs Contact

A valuable tool connecting beekeepers with farmers & informing of crop protection activities nearby

Welcome to BeeConnected – bringing farmers and beekeepers together, and keeping beekeepers notified when a neighbouring farmer is applying insecticides to their crops.

Farmers & Spray Contractors

Please [register as a farmer](#), enter the details of when and where you're planning to spray an insecticide that may present a risk to bees (for instance on a flowering crop, or where the field has a conservation buffer strip), and a simple notification will be sent to neighbouring beekeepers registered with the system.

Beekeepers

Please [register as a beekeeper](#), enter the position of your hives on our easy to use mapping system, and you will receive notifications from registered farmers when they are planning to spray their crops at a proximity of your choosing up to 5km away.

C. Meeting the Sustainable Use Directive

Although the United Kingdom has now formally left the European Union, the EU Directive on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides (SUD) has been transposed into UK legislation and the Government has stated its intention to retain the general provisions of the SUD for the immediate future. The VI and its schemes provide delivery mechanisms which help meet many aims of the SUD and the UK's National Action Plan (NAP) for the sustainable use of pesticides. The NAP will be reviewed by government during 2021. Currently, there are three main elements which affect farmers and sprayer operators:

- To encourage greater use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) – economically and environmentally sustainable management of pests, weeds and diseases using cultural, chemical, physical and biological controls. The VI IPM Plan has been adopted by the UK farm assurance schemes, ensuring IPM is used on farm. The VI in Scotland has developed a specific IPM Plan to address their particular weed, disease and pest issues. The challenge is now to continue to develop and enhance the Plan so that it remains relevant to all those responsible for using the plan, from farmers/growers to advisers/agronomists. The VI has been busy working during lockdown to introduce an updated IPM Plan that will also provide a metric on IPM uptake and it is hoped this will be introduced by the end of 2020. As part of ongoing work over the next few years, the VI are looking to work with the Government to further embed the use of the IPM within British agriculture.
- For all spray operators to hold a specified certificate. The VI continues to raise awareness of the need for operators to hold a specified certificate. In this way, by ensuring operators are up-to-date not only with our current legislation but also the safe handling and stewardship of pesticides, we can continue to maintain the professionalism of the UK's sprayer operators as being amongst the best trained in the world. The VI also actively encourages spray operators to join and participate in the National Register of Spray Operators (NRoSO) scheme (see below) and membership is a requirement for spray operators working for businesses that are Red Tractor assured (or some other assurance schemes, for example SQC).
- For equipment to be tested. Since November 2016, certain pesticide application equipment is required to hold a valid test certificate from the National Sprayer Testing Scheme. The majority of equipment in regular use is already tested voluntarily on an annual basis, as the UK farm assurance schemes have long championed this as best practice. The VI continues to promote the Scheme and demonstrate that the UK has amongst the best maintained spraying equipment in the world.

4. Key measures and indicators

National Register of Sprayer Operators (NRoSO)



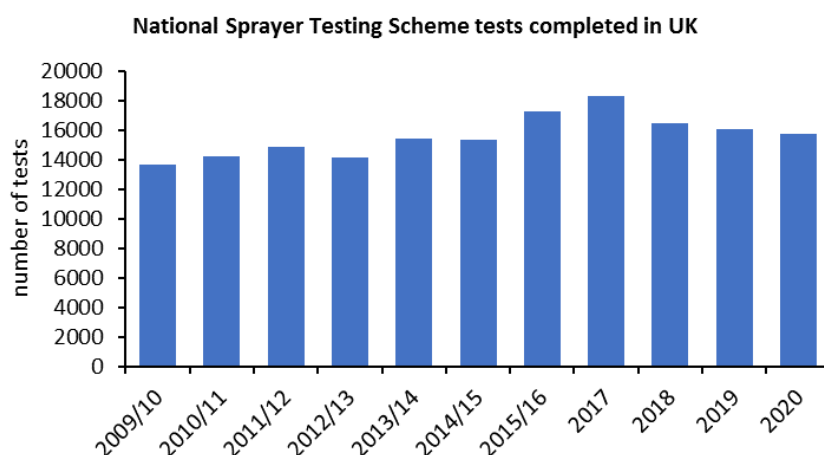
NRoSO is a VI scheme managed by City & Guilds. It is a central register of sprayer operators using Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as a means of ensuring ongoing training to ensure best practice. Members must be fully qualified and collect a minimum number of CPD points each year. Membership of NRoSO is a necessary requirement of many of the UK's farm assurance schemes. As of March 31st 2020 there were 21,925 NRoSO members. As with NSTS figures reported below, membership reflects the agricultural nature of the different UK regions with 86% of members being located in England, 10% in Scotland, 3% in Wales and 1% in Northern Ireland.

National Sprayer Testing Scheme (NSTS)



Certain pesticide application equipment must hold a valid test certificate to comply with the national legislation implementing the SUD. The NSTS is a VI scheme managed by the Agricultural Engineers Association which encourages the annual testing of equipment to meet the requirements of many farm assurance schemes.

- NSTS tested 15 718 machines in 2020.
- Tests were split between:
 - England: 13 709
 - Wales: 367
 - Scotland: 1268
 - Northern Ireland: 374
- In addition, 1076 micro-granular applicator tests, 51 fogger tests and 429 (down from 2019) slug pellet applicator tests were conducted. The number of tests was down from 2019 for micro-granular and slug pellet applicators, and slightly up for fogging equipment. The years in the chart have been corrected this year to reflect the fact that in 2017 the NSTS switched to calendar year reporting.

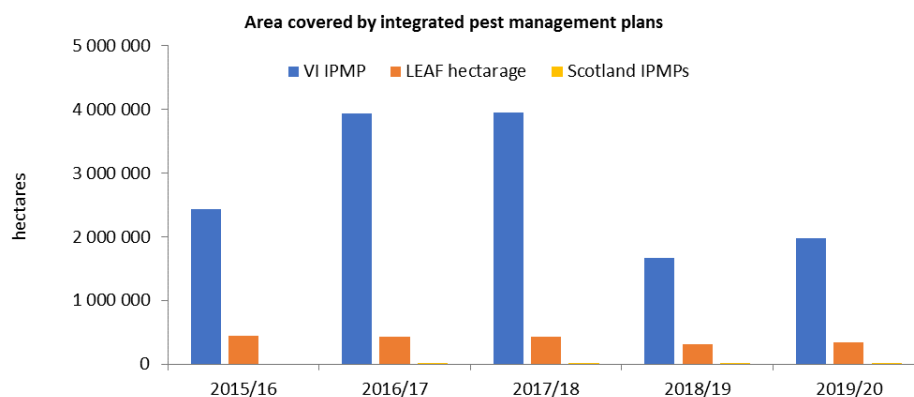


Source: [NSTS](#)

Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPMP)



1. IPM plans (IPMPs) were introduced in 2014 and are required for membership of farm assurance schemes, such as Red Tractor. In 2016, the Scottish VI group and NFU Scotland developed a specific IPMP for Scotland in collaboration with Scotland's Rural College (SRUC).
2. IPMPs use a range of cultural, chemical, physical and biological controls to help ensure economically and environmentally sustainable management of pests, weeds and diseases.
3. LEAF Marque assurance scheme requires that an implemented crop health and protection plan, including IPM strategy, is in place as part of their members' annual audit.
4. The decrease in area covered by VI IPM plans between 2017/18 and 2018/19 does not correspond to any actual decrease in IPM delivered on farm. It is the result of the area prior to 2018/19 being estimated from farm size 'range' data provided in plans. Plans have been reviewed and improved such that since 2018/19 actual area data are provided.
5. The chart shows the area covered by IPMPs, including LEAF Marque, which meets IPMP requirements, and Scottish IPMPs.
6. Other schemes such as the Conservation Grade assurance farming scheme may also fulfil the objectives of IPM.



Source: National Farmers' Union (NFU)/Voluntary Initiative (VI)/LEAF/Scottish government

The VI around the UK

Through its national groups the VI provides a UK wide framework for promoting best practice at the local level.

Scotland

The Scottish VI Chair reported that during the year, there had been some very productive meetings with the Rural Affairs and Rural Environment Minister Mairi Gougeon. The Minister had been out on farm (pre-COVID 19) and was shown agro-ecology measures such as wild-flower margins and hedgerows and was informed of the latest innovation "in cab" regarding GPS and variable rate application. As such, the VI now had a very good working relationship with Scottish Government.

At an early 2020 VI Scotland meeting, the group had a presentation from Henry Creissen on the new Scottish IPM Plan that was being developed with Fiona Burnett at SRUC and that this would eventually be re-located to the Scottish Plant Health Clinic website. The ethos of the group was to ensure that there were measurable outcomes and that the goal of the new IPM Plan was to influence change. The Minister was also in attendance at the meeting and updated the group on progress with the revised National Action Plan. The group also discussed a slight re-branding of the Scottish VI to re-align with some of the NGO's north of the border. New Scottish VI Champions had been added to the group with Andy Evans of SRUC and David Bell farming in Fife. In addition the SQC had entered an arrangement with City & Guilds for 10 points for a Scottish version of the NRoSO Annual Training Course. Andrew Moir mentioned that with the impending re-brand and after 6 years as the Scottish VI Chair, it was time for him to move aside and that David Bell had agreed to step up to become the new VI Scotland Chair with immediate effect.

Andrew Moir, VI Chairman, Scotland

Northern Ireland

Much of the VI NI group's work continued to support the work of The Water Catchment Partnership (TWCP). Much of this work in 2020 had involved responses to some local press articles that had wrongly reported various issues surrounding the use of glyphosate and TWCP had been able to dispel some of these articles throughout the course of the year. In addition, Bruce Steele (VI Northern Ireland Representative) mentioned that he was currently Chair of the Ulster Arable Society and that at the annual conference held at Greenmount College (CAFRE) in January 2020, Mark Buckingham (Bayer CS) had been invited to speak in response to some of the press articles. The presentation was well received, widely taken up in the press to provide a balanced, scientific basis to counter some of the negativity that had been previously seen across NI and the island of Ireland in general.

Similarly, VI in Northern Ireland, in collaboration with TWCP were also involved in a weed wiping program that had continued across 2020 even in light of the COVID 19 situation. The campaign had been principally organised by Rebecca Allen of NI Water and that the level of weed control achieved had been very effective and that this work continues apace. However, the follow-on project, the "Source to Tap" programme, had begun slowly since all trade shows/conferences, the main delivery mechanism for the project, had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, on the whole, VI Northern Ireland had seen a positive and productive year during 2020.

Bruce Steele, VI Representative, Northern Ireland

Wales

The VI works closely with the Welsh Pesticides Partners group that is made up from a wide range of stakeholder organisations.

During 2020 the group were involved in promoting Dŵr Cymru/Welsh Water's "PestSmart" campaign which featured a number of initiatives. In addition to free

advice this initiative built on weed wiper trials that began in 2015 to offer free weed wiper hire. The PestSmart initiative also funded a free and confidential pesticide disposal programme aimed to remove unwanted, revoked or out-of-date pesticides which was targeted at farmers, growers, foresters and land managers. PestSmart was due to conclude in December 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic which significantly impacted planned activities, Welsh Government agreed to extend the project to December 2021.

The group continues to meet regularly, virtually since March 2020 and the VI attends those meeting whenever possible. The Chair of the group – Bob Merriman – is keen to build closer links with the VI and other stakeholders to ensure that Welsh farmers, growers, agronomists and sprayer operators continue to benefit from this close co-operation. As an example, during 2019 it was agreed that The Welsh Pesticide Partners Group should have representation on the NRoSO Advisory Board and a member attended the 2020 Board meeting in March 2020 just before lockdown.

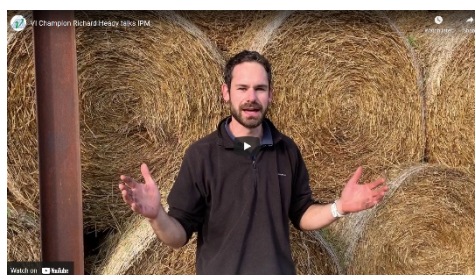
7. The VI Champions

In autumn 2019, the VI introduced a new initiative, the VI Champions. Taking the message further than “best practice” and “safe stewardship” of pesticide use, the VI was moving to a message of integrated pest and crop management to drive change across the industry, working towards the visions encapsulated in the 25 year Environment Plan. We continue to recruit a team of experienced and passionate growers and advisers to provide knowledge and peer-to-peer learning, driving home the VI’s emphasis on IPM.



The VI message of an IPM-based approach to sustainable farming requires close interaction with on-farm decision makers. Champions deliver VI IPM-focused presentations and messages, to lead active dialogue to challenge current practice and drive through a commitment to farming in an environmentally sustainable way.

The 25 VI Champions recruited to date (see map), farmers/advisors/catchment officers are held in high esteem within the agriculture and water industries for advocating forward-thinking farming practices with an excellent knowledge of the problems affecting the UK farming and water industries. Each has a good understanding of VI core values with regard safe and responsible use of pesticides and they will all have received media training. All are advocates of the need to move to environmentally sustainable farming through the adoption of an IPM-based approach.



See Richard Heady (VI Champion based near Milton Keynes) and some of our VI Champions on YouTube to see why IPM means so much to them, click on the image to view.

8. Working with other initiatives

The VI is committed to working with, bringing together and championing other initiatives in this area.



Nematicide Stewardship Programme

The Nematicide Stewardship Programme promotes best practice, helping to ensure the responsible use of nematicides; a vital tool in tackling potato cyst nematodes - the biggest pest threat to the potato industry. The VI

supports this group and its objectives. www.nspstewardship.co.uk

Metaldehyde Stewardship Group (MSG)

Metaldehyde in raw water is a particular problem in catchments used as drinking water sources. The aim of the group is to promote and encourage best practice use of metaldehyde slug pellets, to minimise environmental impacts and in particular protect water. As we work towards the final deadline for disposal, storage and use of existing stock on the 31 Dec 2021, the VI continues to work closely with the MSG to address these issues. www.getpelletwise.co.uk



Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use

The VI has strengthened links with the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use which promotes best practice and training for the use of rodenticides among all professional users including farmers. www.thinkwildlife.org

Catchment Sensitive Farming

Although the VI Strategic Partnership with Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) formally ended last year, both parties continue to work together wherever possible to help disseminate information for each other. It is hoped recent developments, that will see funding for CSF activities continue for the next few years, will result in more partnership working.



Championing the Farmed Environment

As well as working in partnership on issues affecting pollinators and wider farm biodiversity, the VI has provided the CFE with VI Champion speakers to aid local CFE delivery. Together the VI and CFE launched a best practice document for arable and grassland farmers.

www.cfeonline.org.uk. CFE recently undertook a review of their work and relaunched during 2019 and the VI hopes that there will continue to be a close co-operation between the two organisations.

Tried & Tested

This initiative addresses the issues associated with nutrient management – particularly the use of manures and slurries; one of its aims is to help keep nitrates out of watercourses. As water protection is a key theme for both initiatives the VI and T&T work together where possible.

www.nutrientmanagement.org



Amenity Forum

The Amenity Forum promotes and encourages proper and responsible use of both pesticides and integrated methods to amenity users of professional plant protection products. The VI and Amenity Forum work together on common aims and objectives. www.amenityforum.co.uk

9. The VI CIC

The Voluntary Initiative registered with Companies House as a Community Interest Company (The VI-CIC) in 2009. The VI-CIC has 9 directors, including the eight organisations that sponsor the VI and one independent Board Member:





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