Technical Sheet for Solution Implementation

Open stables

Thematic Area: Health and Welfare of Equines.

Priority: How to accommodate horses while ensuring their well-being?

Need: How to guarantee health and well-being on limited surfaces?

Solution EU Number: WE-09.

Content of the Solution:
Keep horses in open group housing with several compartments (open stalls) in order to best meet their natural needs, even in small areas.

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Reasons for Implementing this Solution

Horses require sufficient exercise, social contact, and continuous access to appropriate forage to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Housing systems such as open stables, active stables, or paddock trails can better support these needs by allowing more movement, social interaction, and species-appropriate behaviour than conventional individual box stabling.

Description of Solution Strategies

A modern housing system offers animals the opportunity to solve tasks, make decisions that lead to a pleasurable states, such as standing in or out of the wind, in the sun or in the shade, or performing behaviours that the animal directly experiences as rewarding and enjoyable, such as social interactions with 'friends', rolling on the ground, searching for food, resting in the company of a fellow animal, etc. But how can such housing be offered?

A housing system that usually meets all these criteria is pasture housing, but this requires a lot of space and available infrastructure, such as natural or artificial shelter. Other options, which can work almost as well and take up much less space, are structured open stables or 'active' stables. In this type of housing, horses are kept in groups and have permanent access to different areas, including a feeding area, a resting area and a stabilized outdoor area. It enables free choice of the location of the horses and gives access to various environmentally enhanced resources like sandpits for rolling, wood trunks or brushes for scratching etc. One can enrich horses' environment by including, for example, large eaves, water points, salt licks, edible bushes to nibble on, and a mound on which to stand and survey the surroundings. The use of different types of ground stabilization such as concrete, sand, round gravel, pebbles, wood chips and paving stones also counts as enrichment. Enrichment can also help to provide structure, which encourages horses to move, allows horses to retreat from aggressive interactions with herd mates and promotes biodiversity. Active stables as a special form of open stables additionally encourage movement by locating commonly used resources and enrichment items such as water, feed and scratch brushes as far as possible apart from each other or by creating fenced pathways so that horses need to take detours to get from one place of interest to another.

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To encourage movement and ensure good sleep quality, it is advisable to separate the feeding area from the resting area. The rest area must allow all horses to lie down at the same time without disturbing each other, provide good air circulation and offer adequate protection from the elements.

The feeding area can take many different forms, ranging from portioned and individualised feeding using stalls to ad libitum group feeding using a rack. When using racks, slow feeders can be used to reduce the amount of fodder consumed.

However, an important condition for starting an open stable is to have horses that know and accept each other and will remain in the same stable for a long time. To prevent injuries and in the case of a new arrival, it is essential to have an emergency/integration box that can be used both to treat an injured horse and to provide a safe first contact for a new arrival. It may be appropriate to unshoe at least the hind legs of horses when a new horse is to be integrated into a new group. Furthermore, it is important to design spaces carefully so that there are no dead ends or tight corners in which horses can be trapped and instead, subordinated horses can move away when a dominant horse approaches. Apart from when the hierarchy is redefined when a horse changes stables or joins the stable, open stables do not cause more injuries or lost working days than conventional box stabling (König von Borstel et al., 2016a; Kjellberg et al., 2024). However, the incidence of abnormal behaviour, including dangerous behaviour such as increased aggressiveness or fearfulness is considerably lower in group housed horses (König von Borstel et al, 2016b).

Group housing systems in open stables can be suitable for a wide range of horses, including stallions, mares with foals, and horses with a history of anxiety, hypervigilance, or traumatic experiences, provided that the housing design, group composition, and management practices are adapted to their individual needs. These horses may require more individual assessment and tailored management, particularly during introduction and integration phases. With appropriate facility design, sufficient resources, and regular monitoring, they can be successfully accommodated while ensuring their welfare and social needs are met.

Open stables come in many varieties, including simple open stables, active stables and paddock trails. Typically, “active stables” rely on automation and mechanisation to provide a living environment that is as close as possible to the horses’ needs, while reducing the workload. For example, it provides access to additional feeding station (hay and/or concentrate) via a transponder enabling the distribution of individually adjusted feed. It is also possible to use selective gates. These work in conjunction with one-way gates (‘anti-return gates’) through which horses that have had access to a hay area, for example, can rejoin their fellow horses in the outdoor area, but horses can not enter the hay area through this gate. In the case of automatic feed racks that are accessible to all horses at the same time, it is advisable to leave them open for long periods and to always have significantly more places at the feed racks than there are horses. A well-known commercial example of an active stable is the “HIT active stable”.

Regarding paddock trails, it is a form of active stable in which the various points of interest (resting area, feeding area, water trough) are as far apart as possible and linked by 3 to 6 meters wide tracks / slopes. The ground of the tracks is stabilised (or partially stabilised) and surrounds the pastures. This type of housing allows horses to move up to 5 km per day without requiring large areas of land (Long et al., 2024). A well-known commercial example of a paddock trail is the paddock paradise (registered trademark by Jaime Jackson).

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Implementation Steps

1. Assess farm objectives and horse population
- Define the target group of horses (e.g. leisure horses, sport horses, breeding stock, young horses).
- Evaluate the needs of both horses and owners, as well as available land, existing infrastructure, and budget.
- Consider local climate conditions and management requirements.

2. Seek professional advice
- Consult specialists in horse-friendly housing systems, such as open stable, active stable, or paddock trail consultants.
- Where appropriate, involve agricultural advisors, architects, veterinarians, or equine behaviour experts.
- Evaluate different housing concepts and identify the most suitable solution for the farm.

3. Develop a housing concept
- Choose the housing system that best matches the farm's objectives, horse population, available space, and budget.
- Plan key elements such as feeding stations, lying areas, water points, shelters, tracks, and social spaces.
- Ensure sufficient space for movement, feeding, resting, and avoidance behaviour, taking horses' social dynamics into account.
- Plan emergency isolation boxes for biosecurity reasons

4. Build or adapt the facilities
- For new construction:
  - Construct the planned housing system according to welfare and safety requirements.
  - Install appropriate feeding, watering, shelter, and fencing infrastructure.
- For existing facilities:
  - Assess which buildings and structures can be integrated into the new concept.
  - Implement modifications gradually to minimise disruption.
  - Adapt existing areas to improve movement opportunities and group housing conditions.

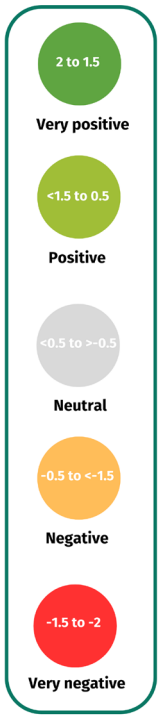
5. Establish and manage horse groups
- Create compatible social groups whenever possible.
- Introduce new horses gradually using an integration paddock, introduction area, or integration box.
- Monitor interactions closely during group formation and after introducing new horses.

6. Monitor welfare and adjust management
- Regularly assess horse health, body condition, behaviour, and social interactions.
- Ensure all horses have safe and stress-free access to feed, water, shelter, and resting areas.
- Adapt group size and facility design if competition, stress, or resource limitations occur.
- Continuously review and improve the system based on observations and practical experience.
- Continue to handle the horses for being temporary isolated from other horses for veterinary care and riding work.

Open stables

How Will this Solution Impact the Performance of your Farm ?

TOPIC	SCORE
Social	1.00
Economics	1.00
Welfare	1.50
Health	2.00
Environmental	0
Pasture access and management	1.00
Global	1.00



Color coding explanation

Socioeconomics: This solution will support the social performance of the farm because it is generally well perceived by horse owners, visitors, and the wider public as it promotes more natural and welfare-friendly living conditions for horses. Open stables improve social acceptability and can enhance the quality of working life by reducing daily management tasks when mechanised systems are used, although benefits depend on the housing design and effective integration of new horses to ensure safety and group harmony. This solution will support the economic performance of the farm because it can reduce labour requirements and management costs, particularly in mechanised active stable systems, while improving horse health and welfare, which may lower veterinary expenses and increase customer satisfaction. In addition, investments in well-designed open stable infrastructure can enhance the long-term value and attractiveness of the farm, although economic benefits vary according to the level of mechanisation and system configuration.

Health & Welfare: TThis solution will support the farm's health performance because more natural living conditions can help maintain low levels of pain, mortality, and drug use. Horses can seek shelter when needed, while regular free movement supports healthy joints, good hoof condition, and overall physical fitness. Prolonged access to forage and movement can improve digestive health and reduce the risk of some management-related health problems. This solution will support the farm's welfare performance by promoting positive emotional states and providing welfare-friendly living conditions. Horses can form stable social groups, move freely, and express their natural behaviours. These conditions reduce stress, encourage positive social interactions, and improve overall welfare.

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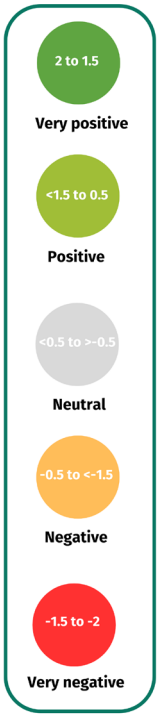
Environmental Sustainability: This solution will not have effect on the environmental performance of the farm because environmental impact is generally moderate. However, the solution requires attention in several areas. From climate change mitigation perspective increased automation contributes to higher electricity consumption. In terms of halting biodiversity loss, positive effects include the use of hedges and improved forest management that supports ecosystems and helps prevent fires. However, the daily voluntary movement of horses, particularly in pasture-track systems, can reduce vegetative cover, leading to increased erosion. From water management perspective attentions should be paid to water transport and runoff with pollution.

This solution will support on the land access or management performance of the farm because well managed grazing generally supports soil health. On the other hand, especially if paddocks or pastures are small, the soil can be affected by soil stabilization measures and trampling, which reduce the soil's natural permeability. This can lead to soil compaction and artificialization.

How Will this Solution Impact the Resilience of your Farm?

TOPIC	SCORE
Social	0.58
Economics	0.33
Welfare	1.67
Health	1.00
Environmental	-0.28
Pasture access and management	-1.00
Global	0.44



Open stables

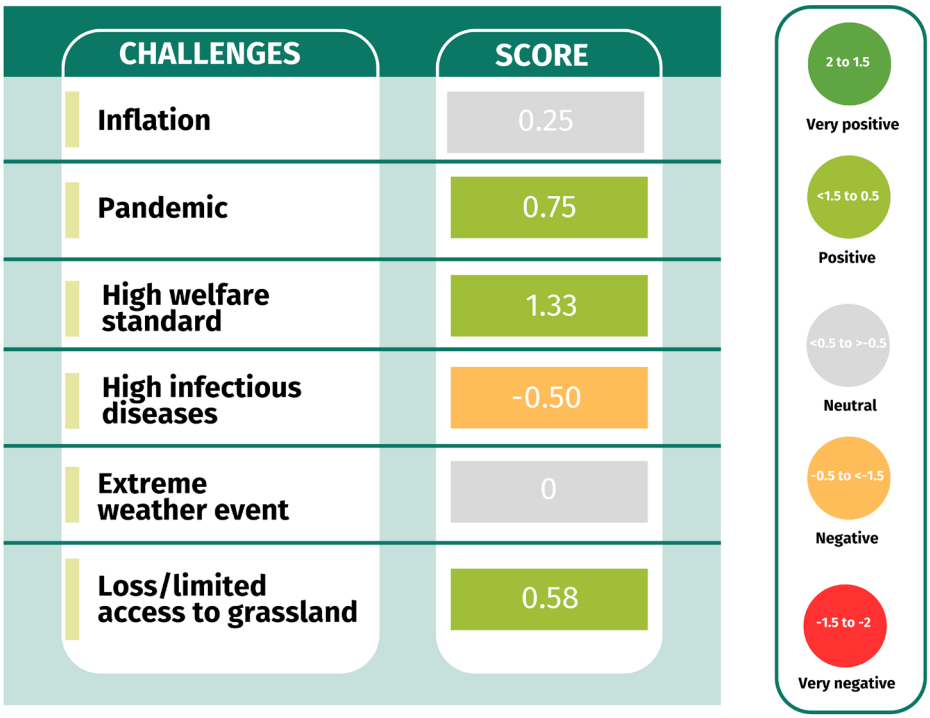
Socioeconomics: This solution will support social performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because it aligns well with societal expectations for horse welfare by promoting access to social contact, movement, and forage, which are increasingly valued by horse owners and the public. Open and active stable systems can enhance the horses' emotional well-being and reduce health and behavioural problems, while also maintaining a positive image during crises such as pandemics or the implementation of stricter welfare standards. However, social benefits depend on appropriate management of group housing, disease control, shelter provision, and environmental conditions, as outbreaks, extreme weather, or poorly managed systems may increase workload and raise concerns about horse health and biosecurity. This solution will not impact economic performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because its economic effects remain highly dependent on the specific housing design, degree of automation, labour requirements, and local conditions. While the system may reduce some costs through improved welfare and grazing opportunities, these benefits can be offset by investments in infrastructure, maintenance, energy consumption, adaptation costs, and increased labour during disease outbreaks or extreme weather events. Consequently, open stables do not consistently strengthen or weaken economic resilience across the different challenges assessed, resulting in an overall neutral economic impact.

Health & Welfare: This solution will support the farm's health performance by helping to reduce pain, mortality, and the need for medication, even when the farm is exposed to external pressures. The benefits of this system generally outweigh the potential risks associated with pandemics, inflation, and extreme weather events since it is the most like natural living conditions for equines and generates mostly positive effects for the health, keeping horses in good physical condition. This solution will also support the farm's welfare performance by providing a more natural living environment compared to indoor stabling that promotes positive emotional states and allows horses to express their natural behaviours. Horses usually are generally able to cope well with normal weather changes. As a result, this solution can strengthen the farm's welfare resilience and improve its ability to cope with and adapt to external pressures.

Environmental Sustainability: This solution will not impact environmental performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because it has neural effect on climate change mitigation and adoption and halting biodiversity loss when farm tries to cope with these challenges. Effect on water management can be negative, depending on the management system. When farm faces these challenges, it is important to pay attention to avoiding nutrition and pollutants run-off leakages, keeping up high water quality and try to cope with problems caused by inflation or pandemics. This solution will weaken land access or management performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because while open systems can offer flexibility, they can also demand more labour and management in challenging conditions. Effects vary between assessed challenges. Open systems can improve resilience during pandemics or when aiming for high welfare standards, as they allow easier access to pastures and paddocks. Inflation can negatively affect land access and management by grassland upkeep more difficult. In addition, infectious disease situations can greatly reduce resilience from grassland management perspective, as they require more fencing, isolation areas, and horse movement between paddocks, increasing workload and complexity.

Open stables

How Can this Solution Help your Farm Cope with Specific External Challenges to Become More Resilient?



Inflation & Social Crises: Social challenge: This solution will support the global performance of the farm facing pandemics because open and active stable systems continue to provide horses with access to the fundamental welfare requirements of social contact, movement, and long durations of foraging behaviour, helping to maintain their physical and emotional well-being during periods of disruption. These systems were generally viewed positively during pandemic situations and can support stable horse health and welfare even when normal farm operations are affected. However, benefits depend on good group management and sufficient labour availability to maintain the system and address biosecurity requirements.

Economic challenge: This solution will not impact the global performance of the farm facing inflation because its economic effects are balanced between potential advantages and additional costs. While open stables may reduce some management and health-related expenses and improve welfare outcomes, inflation can increase the costs of infrastructure maintenance, pasture management, energy consumption in automated systems, and ongoing adaptations. As a result, the overall economic resilience benefit remains variable and largely dependent on the level of mechanisation, labour availability, and farm-specific conditions.

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Welfare & Diseases: Health challenge: This solution may have a slightly negative effect on the global performance of the farm when facing an infectious disease outbreak, depending on how the system is designed and managed. If the farm does not have isolation facilities and the horses are not accustomed to handling, controlling an infectious disease outbreak may be difficult. However, as in any equine facility, good biosecurity, appropriate isolation facilities, and horses habituated to temporary isolation and human handling can greatly reduce these challenges. Under these conditions, the benefits of this solution outweigh its potential drawbacks.

Welfare challenge: In contrast, this solution is expected to have a positive effect on the global performance of the farm when complying with high animal welfare standards required by legislation. Open stabling provides many of the conditions that are essential for good horse welfare, including freedom of movement, social contact, and opportunities for natural foraging behaviour. As a result, implementing this solution can make it easier for farms to comply with stringent welfare requirements while maintaining high standards of animal welfare. This also strengthens the farm's resilience to future legislative changes.

Climate Change & Access to Land: Environmental challenge: this solution will not impact the global performance of the farm: abnormally low temperatures, excessive raining, windstorms and/or flood because effects are two-folded. Social outreach depends on having enough stabilised areas and shelters to keep horses safe and visible in good conditions. The quality of working life may decrease, as daily tasks become more difficult and time-consuming. Profitability may decline due to increased workload and additional management needs, while the farm's resilience also depends on the availability of infrastructure such as shelters and well-designed surfaces. Horse welfare can be affected, requiring closer attention to fodder supply to maintain good body condition and a positive emotional state. Wet and muddy conditions increase the risk of health problems such as mud fever, abscesses, and skin infections. Water management can become problematic, with higher runoff and risk of pollution, and land access becomes more difficult, often requiring horses to be moved and paddocks to be reorganised.

Land access/ management challenge: this solution will support the global performance of the farm facing loss or limited access to agricultural land because it supports good quality of working life via less working load, equine welfare and health (good maintenance (3F), positive emotional state, less pain, mortality, disease and injuries, less curative medication). It also supports social outreach if the farm has active stable, but farm has paddock paradise system, effect might be negative.

When farm faces limited or lost access to grassland, this solution may have negative effect on farm capital. The water management can be affected negatively because pressure for use of remaining land increases, which can lead higher run-offs. This solution has neutral effect on profitability, climate change mitigation and adoption and halting biodiversity loss.

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Cost-Benefit Analysis

Costs

Socioeconomics:

- Initial investment in infrastructure (e.g. shelters, feeding areas, fencing, tracks, water systems, automatic feeders).
- Construction, renovation, or adaptation of existing facilities.
- Time required for planning, group formation, and introduction of new horses.
- Ongoing monitoring of horse interactions, body condition, and resource use.
- Staff training may be required to manage group housing systems effectively.
- Depending on the system, maintenance costs for tracks, stabilized areas, feeding stations, or automated equipment.

Benefits

- Potential reduction in labour requirements for feeding, mucking out, and daily horse management.
- Improved workplace safety through reduced manual handling and fewer confined-space interactions.
- Potential reduction in veterinary expenses associated with management-related health and behavioural problems.
- Increased attractiveness of the farm for horse owners seeking welfare-oriented housing systems.
- Opportunity to charge higher boarding fees for well-designed group housing systems.
- Positive public image and stronger market differentiation compared with conventional stabling systems.
- Improved horse health and welfare may increase customer satisfaction and retention.

Health & Welfare:

- Risk of minor injuries resulting from social interactions, particularly during group formation or introduction of new horses.
- Poorly designed systems may increase competition for resources such as feed, water, or resting areas.
- Automatic feeding systems may create frustration or competition if not properly managed.
- Older, lame, or physically compromised horses may require adapted management, especially in systems with long tracks or extensive movement requirements.
- Inadequate space, narrow passages, or insufficient resources may increase social stress.
- Horses with unrestricted access to forage may require monitoring of body condition and feed intake.

- Increased opportunities for social contact and social bonding with conspecifics.
- Greater freedom of movement and increased daily exercise.
- More opportunities for behavioural choice and environmental exploration.
- Improved expression of natural behaviours such as grazing, locomotion, resting, and social interaction.
- Reduced prevalence of stereotypies and other undesirable behaviours associated with confinement.
- Improved emotional wellbeing and reduced chronic stress.
- Better overall physical health through increased activity and more species-appropriate living conditions.
- Potential improvements in musculoskeletal health, respiratory health, and digestive function compared with conventional stabling.

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Cost-Benefit Analysis

Costs

Environmental Sustainability :

- Construction of tracks, stabilized areas, shelters, and feeding stations may result in soil sealing or land artificialisation.
- Some loss of vegetation or biodiversity may occur where heavily used areas are stabilized.
- Automatic feeding systems consume electricity and may increase energy use.
- Construction materials and infrastructure have an environmental footprint.
- Poorly designed high-traffic areas may contribute to local soil compaction and waste accumulation.

Cooperation between farms:

- No significant direct costs identified.
- If farms collaborate on shared facilities or management practices, coordination and communication may require additional time.

Benefits

- Integration of shade structures, hedgerows, and diverse vegetation can enhance microclimate conditions and landscape value when included in the housing design
- Creation of structurally diverse environments that can provide habitats for wildlife.
- Reduced reliance on concentrate feeds when forage-based feeding systems are successfully implemented.
- Well-designed housing systems can help structure high-traffic areas and reduce pressure on surrounding pasture through targeted use of designated activity zones
- Well-managed systems can support sustainable land use while maintaining horse welfare.

- Exchange of practical experience and best practices regarding group housing management.
- Opportunities for joint training events, study visits, or demonstration farms.
- Potential sharing of specialised equipment, expertise, or contractors during construction and maintenance phases.
- Development of local networks promoting welfare-friendly horse housing.

Additional Resources

Publications

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Videos

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kPCWm4BfN8
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34iQSG99Ess
- https://www.youtube.com/shorts/JK9hugyu5YQ
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndlJiIAY6L8

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Annex

Ideas to Animate a Workshop About the Solution

- Ask an agricultural housing specialist, equine facility planner, or company specialised in open barn and paddock trail systems to sponsor or support the workshop.
- Identify a model farm (open stable / active stable / paddock paradise) where the workshop can take place.
- Include hands-on observation of herd behaviour, feeding areas, resting zones, and movement patterns in a real system.
- Allow participants to evaluate different housing designs and discuss their suitability for different horse types and farm contexts.

Proposed structure for the workshop on Open Stables in Equine Farms

1. Introduction to open stables
- What are open barns, active stables, and paddock trail systems.
- Key design principles (space, movement, social structure, resource zones).
- Differences between box housing and open stables.

2. Benefits of open stables in equine farms
- Increased freedom of movement and social interaction.
- Improved expression of natural behaviour.
- Potential reduction in daily manual labour for routine tasks.
- Stronger focus on welfare-oriented management and farm image.

3. Practical applications on equine farms
- Designing functional zones (feeding, resting, movement, shelter areas).
- Group composition and herd management strategies.
- Integration of feeding systems (manual or automatic).
- Adaptation to different horse types (sport horses, leisure horses, sensitive individuals).

4. How to choose the most suitable system
- Assessment of herd size, horse types, and management goals.
- Evaluation of available land and existing infrastructure.
- Budget and labour capacity considerations.
- Risk management (social dynamics, feeding competition, injuries).

5. Hands-on demonstration
- Observation of horses in an existing open stable system.
- Analysis of movement routes, feeding behaviour, and resting patterns.
- Comparison of different design elements (if multiple systems are available).
- Group discussion on strengths and weaknesses of the observed system.

6. Management and operational routines
- Group formation and introduction of new horses.
- Monitoring of horse health, behaviour, and body condition.
- Feeding management and resource distribution.
- Daily handling and safety routines.

7. Case studies and real-world examples
- Examples of successfully implemented open stable systems.
- Common challenges and solutions from farm operators.
- Lessons learned from different system designs.

8. Cost analysis and long-term perspective
- Investment in infrastructure and planning.
- Ongoing management and maintenance costs.
- Potential economic benefits through labour efficiency and market positioning.
- Comparison with conventional stable systems.

9. Q&A session
- Open discussion on practical implementation challenges.
- Individual farm situations and adaptation possibilities.

10. Wrap-up and resources
- Summary of key principles of open stables.
- References to further reading, advisors, and specialist planners.
- Information on networks or demonstration farms.