

# **Agricultural Organisations: Farmer Engagement**

A report for



By Daniel G Meade

2017 Nuffield Scholar

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# Executive Summary

Many industries across the world's employment, business and recreational activities have representative and research organisations which seek to promote and progress their activity. Agricultural representation and research is amongst these activities. This report aims to investigate how agricultural representative organisations from varying countries engage with farmer members and non-member farmers to effectively advocate for advancement in policy that truly represents the majority of industry sentiment. In addition, the report also looks at agricultural research and development organisations and how they determine study topics and extension that is confidently reflective of the sector's needs and desires.

This report is not the first, nor will it be that last, based on agricultural groups and how they operate. However, the author endeavours to focus on how these groups engage, interact and communicate with farmers in the main and also across the wider industry.

There are various factors that come into play leading to whether these groups are effective and successful in their farmer engagement. These include geography, resources, history, markets, competition, champions, governance and culture. Some of those listed are explored further in this report.

This report informs readers of how different agricultural groups from numerous countries are structured, staffed, governed, represented and how they are held accountable to their payer of the levy which keeps them in fund or their member base which gives them purpose.

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# Foreword

From an early age of attending various farming or sporting events, a hot topic of discussion was always agricultural current affairs, of which I took a keen interest in from the beginning. Be it milk price or what the United Dairy Farmers Victoria (UDV) were, or were not doing, or what the dairy levy was spent on by Dairy Australia. Nuffield Australia presented the opportunity to further investigate an element of these groups and how they engaged with farmers whom they represent.

It was not long before I got involved in a local dairy discussion group where these discussions became more prevalent and provocative. This led to some time spent on the local Regional Development Program Board of Dairy Australia and a closer examination of how research and development (R&D) groups operate and determine research topics and extension activities.

I chose this topic to explore different agricultural groups from around the world and to endeavour to write a report that may lead to Australian agricultural groups adopting a small change that could benefit farmers and their business. As we know, these benefits to farmers then flow onto communities in which they live. Many of these small rural communities across Australia need a voice and I would see the agricultural group that represents the main industry in these towns as an extension of this voice. The agricultural research conducted to help progress farming businesses not only helps that business but also the many small local businesses that service that farming operation. That is why I see the success of agricultural representation and research as critical to Australia's primary production future and subsequently rural and regional Australia's future.

As part of my study, I had the privilege to travel to Brazil, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines, Germany, England, Wales, Ireland, United States of America (USA), Canada and New Zealand. My research topic gave me the opportunity to meet and interview people in agriculture in each of these countries that were all fiercely passionate and positively optimistic about agriculture and its future wherever they may hail.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Nuffield Australia for the opportunity to experience a once in a lifetime scholarship. The team at Nuffield Australia and the investment of the William Buckland Foundation is greatly appreciated as is their support throughout.

There are two scholars that were of great help during the scholarship journey and regularly called on for advice and guidance, so thanks to Peter and Roma.

Having to be away from the family and farm for 16 weeks presents challenges for a scholar, but even more so for the family left at home. I thank my wife Michaela for her excellent work managing the farm and caring for our two, then three, children. My parents were also often on hand to assist for which I thank them.

Throughout the scholarship many agriculturalists have generously given their time to be interviewed. I would especially like to acknowledge the farmers who found time in their schedule to accommodate a tour and tea!

One of the unique benefits of the Nuffield experience is the network of the global community. I was fortunate to be welcomed into many homes and graciously hosted by fellow scholars around the world. Many also helped with appointment leads and itineraries. I am very grateful for their hospitality and assistance.

# Abbreviations

AFB: American Farm Bureau

AHDB: Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board

AFI: Australian Farm Institute

CLA: Country Land and Business Association

EO: Extension Officers

FUW: Farmers Union of Wales

IFA: Irish Farmers Association

KEO: Knowledge Exchange Officers

KPI: Key Performance Indicator

MNF: Macra Na Fierme (Irish Young Farmers)

NZ: New Zealand

NZFF: New Zealand Federated Farmers

NZYF: New Zealand Young Farmers

NFF: National Farmers Federation

NFU: National Farmers Union

R&D: Research and Development

UDV: United Dairy Farmers of Victoria

UK: United Kingdom

USA: United States of America



# Objectives

The objectives of this report were to discover how agricultural organisations from other countries engaged with farmers and industry. In particular:

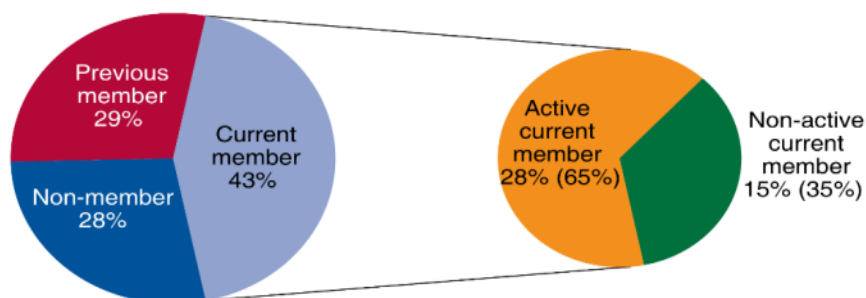
- To research membership models.
- To investigate differing modes of communication in relation to effectiveness.
- To examine governance structures.
- To explore how members were able to access an organisation representative.
- To learn how groups were effective in selling the value of engagement.

This report expands on each of the listed objectives and forms the basis from which the recommendations are formed.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Australian agricultural groups have regularly attracted the ire of farmers across the country and across commodities.

An Australian Farm Institute (AFI) report (2014) states that *“existing farm advocacy bodies in Australia are facing shrinking resources and loss of membership and finding it harder and harder to sustain their organisations”* (Figure 1). There are approximately 86,000 farm businesses in Australia and from these it is thought that a minority percentage are actively engaged in their industry representative group, commodity representative group or their industry R&D organisations (National Farmers Federation (NFF), 2019). This is despite the need for organisations to be unified and well supported in their advocacy and R&D’s determination to invest millions into research, development and extension that reflects the broad industry desires. How agricultural lobby groups and R&D’s engage with farmers directly reflects the organisation’s success in relevant policy advocacy and relevant research.



**Figure 1: Only 28% of farmers surveyed by the AFI are actively engaged (Source: AFI, 2014)**

## Membership

Ways in which advocacy groups structure their membership offerings differ greatly from group to group. Who they offer memberships to, and what that membership offers, determines attraction to the organisation and subsequently the level of engagement from both sides. For example, Beef Farmers of Ontario in Canada have a focus on producer-based membership with minimal offerings to other industry associates. Whereas the New Zealand Federated Farmers (NZFF) have numerous options for farmers with a *“more the merrier”* approach and have undertaken a recent effort to attract more industry service providers to its membership base in order to broaden the scope of communications, as well as promote its achievements

(McIntyre, 2018, personal communication). Voluntary membership percentages of the total potential pool of farmers alone varied from 5% to 80%. Factors influencing these figures included entry cost, member benefits, membership succession, voting rights, youth options, ease of access to representatives or employees and perceived success of the organisation.

## Communication

Communication is the most obvious element to effective two-way engagement between the organisation and its member base. In today's world of digital platforms dominating correspondence, a danger lies in the mass reduction on reliance of the traditional personable human contact. It is no surprise that digital media formed the majority of communications of all the modern agricultural groups interviewed. Many groups sent weekly, fortnightly and monthly emails. For example, Dairy UK used a fortnightly bulletin email as their main method of communication. The ease of use and mostly free financial cost of social media has in many cases led to saturation of messaging, disorganisation and the *"message being lost"* (Cooper D, 2018). The nature of the agriculture industry and its traditional and dominant demographic, however, seems to prefer face-to-face contact in group or individual context. Dairy NZ has a strong focus on discussion groups as a key method with an estimated 65% of farmers attending an event annually.



**Figure 2: The Author at Lincoln University Dairy Farm with Dominic Conheady and Farm Manager Peter Hancox (Source: Author)**

## Governance

The opportunity for members and levy payers to have their say in the leadership of an agricultural organisation proved important as a method of engagement throughout interviews with farmers. It was repeated that the number of members whom participated in voting correlated with the percentage of farmers actively engaged with the group's message. Open elections for positions with public campaigns and canvassing resulted in increased publicity and awareness for the organisation and their achievements. The American Farm Bureau (AFB) has a defined governance structure from County to State to Federal, and along the way farmer members have an opportunity to impact the leadership. This model of competition for election puts the candidates in front of members hearing firsthand the issues faced at the time, resulting in leaders being in touch with their farmer members and members filtering candidates for reality and purpose. Of course, *"the world is run by those who show up"* (Kniffen, personal communication, 2018), so multiple candidates create interest and is critical to getting a campaign tested leader.

## Staff structure

Access to team members from advocacy groups and R&D's was seen as critical to members being able to give feedback and have input into the direction of the organisation. Depending on the size of the organisation and available resources, a low Field Officer to Member ratio gave mutual benefits to both. The organisations have the opportunity to have troops on the ground and members have a known point of contact for information and complaints. *"I see my local rep at most events around the county"* (Fouts, personal communication, 2018). The concept of putting a local face to the organisation seemed to give members a sense of confidence that their locality had some voice. A number of groups interviewed had high numbers of employees based in offices that rarely went into the field to experience a sense of affinity with the member base. Several admitted to being top heavy in office staff and light on field staff and saw this as an area to improve. This runs the risk of the office staff losing touch with the farmers' sentiment. Of the numerous groups interviewed, 82% agreed that more field staff was a sure way to improve their farmer engagement.

## Engagement

It is the first step to be able to actively engage with farmers, it is another to *“sell the story”*; *“to know us is to love us”* (Duffy, personal communication, 2018). A regular theme were groups admitting to the difficulty of selling their value proposition to potential members, as well as explaining why current members and levy payers were getting value for their investment. *“Too hard to quantify”* was a get out of trouble answer. One group said they could not tell farmers all their achievements due to confidentiality (Anonymous 2018). The National Farmers Union of England and Wales (NFU) went to a decent effort to provide economic returns for each regulatory and policy win, leaving members well informed on how their fees were being put to use and giving confidence in renewal. How effectively success was measured with direct links to the strategic goals set by farmer elected farmer boards gave Dairy New Zealand a clear message to explain their achievements to the levy payer. To successfully *“sell the story”* is the icing on the cake for farmer engagement.

## Chapter 2: Membership Models

Over 20 different lobby or research agricultural organisations were interviewed from six countries. All were asked their current membership trend and all answered either stagnant or in decline. One may ask whether ‘stagnant’ is another way of saying *“I am not revealing the real figures”*. Many reasons were given to explain this answer, including competitive market conditions, tough seasons and declining demographic. Engagement with farmers and industry is likely strengthened when they are signed up as members and part of the cause.

### How much?

There is also the price of the membership that plays a large part in membership numbers. *“When a potential member is approached to join a voluntary membership advocacy group, their first question is: how much?”* (Fouts, personal communication, 2018). The answer to this question determines whether the potential member is happy to discuss further, walk away or sign up. It would come as no surprise that the simplest model, which also was one of the more affordable, had the most members signed up. The AFB has around six million members and each state decide the fee to join, with most being a flat rate; New York Farm Bureau is US \$75 to all. In Ireland, the author asked several farmers how much they were paying for their Irish Farmers Association (IFA) membership, none could answer definitively. They pay a levy from their acreage as well as a fee. The NFU has a similar set up with a fee and a land levy. Whilst the two previous mentioned groups are successful in their own right, they do not have the weight of numbers of the AFB, a great advantage in advocacy.

### Link to youth organisations

Whilst many of groups interviewed had a branch or link to an agricultural youth organisation, the progression from young member to senior member was not always strong. This is a clear area for open age agricultural groups to improve engagement and build their membership base. New Zealand Young Farmers (NZYF) has recently been through a rebuilding phase built on key links with the state education system. A specialised program for primary aged children called “Agri Kids” was free to join, whereas “Teen Ag” is targeted at secondary schools at \$30 a membership then a progression to the standard NZYF (18-30 years) membership at \$70 per year. Whilst this stepped system is new, there are already signs of success in attracting more people to agriculture. Furthermore, having the youth being signed up members and taking

those steps *“These students are the future of New Zealand agriculture”* (Copeland, personal communication, 2018). (Figure 3). This tiered system has led to NZYF having approximately 50% of the demographic as members. Whilst the open age groups concentrate on their core role, opportunities for stronger ties with youth groups can be missed. The author concluded that a link to a youth agricultural group could be strengthened to partner status to optimise the great opportunities of succession in agricultural memberships.

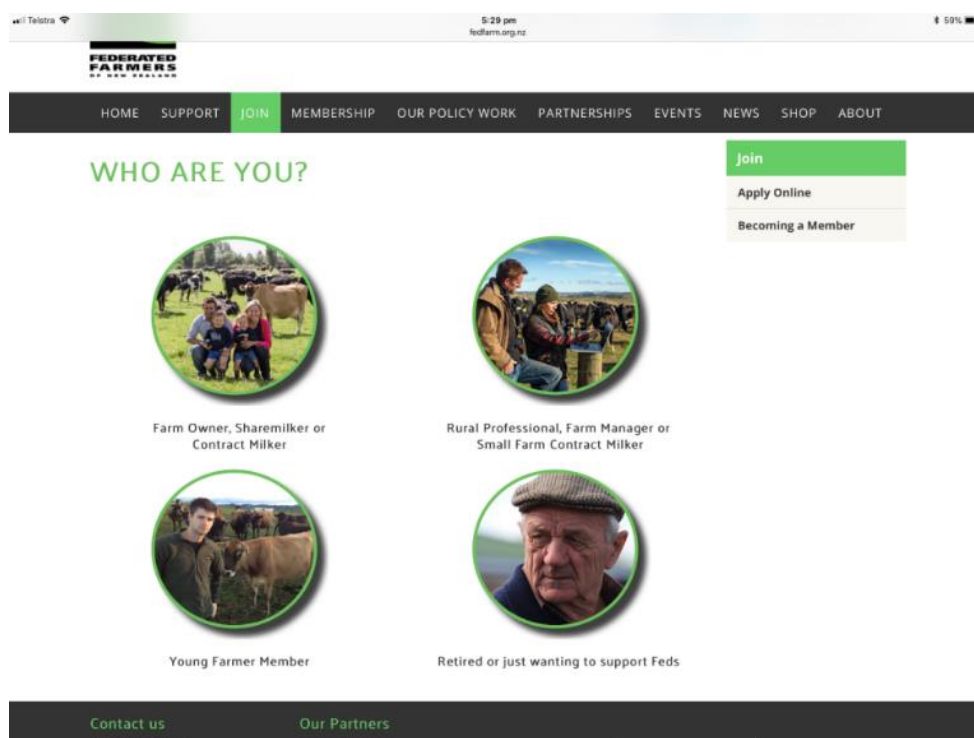


**Figure 3: The author with Terry Copeland, Chief Executive Officer of New Zealand Young Farmers (Source: Author)**

With membership declining across many of the groups interviewed, a wider visioned outlook may be beneficial to addressing this downward trend. Agricultural advocacy groups cite representing the farmer as one of their main purposes. However, is it only the farmer than benefits from a strong agricultural industry?

NZFF recently began a campaign targeting businesses to invest in their organisation as *“Rural Professional Members”*. A NZFF Provincial President had the belief that widening the scope of membership profiles, in particular rural professionals, would lead to great benefits (McIntyre, personal communication, 2018). The fact that these rural professionals interacted with dozens of farmers per week was an obvious way to help NZFF have more advocates on the ground. *“We see rural professionals as providing great value as champions and improving our engagement, whilst also providing us with feedback on our organisation”* (McIntyre, personal communication, 2018). In addition, these agri-businesses were only too willing to contribute

financially and emotionally as they understood that a well-represented industry also benefits their business.



**Figure 4: NZFF webpage demonstrates differing options for interested people to join**  
(Source: NZFF, 2019)

## Wider community engagement

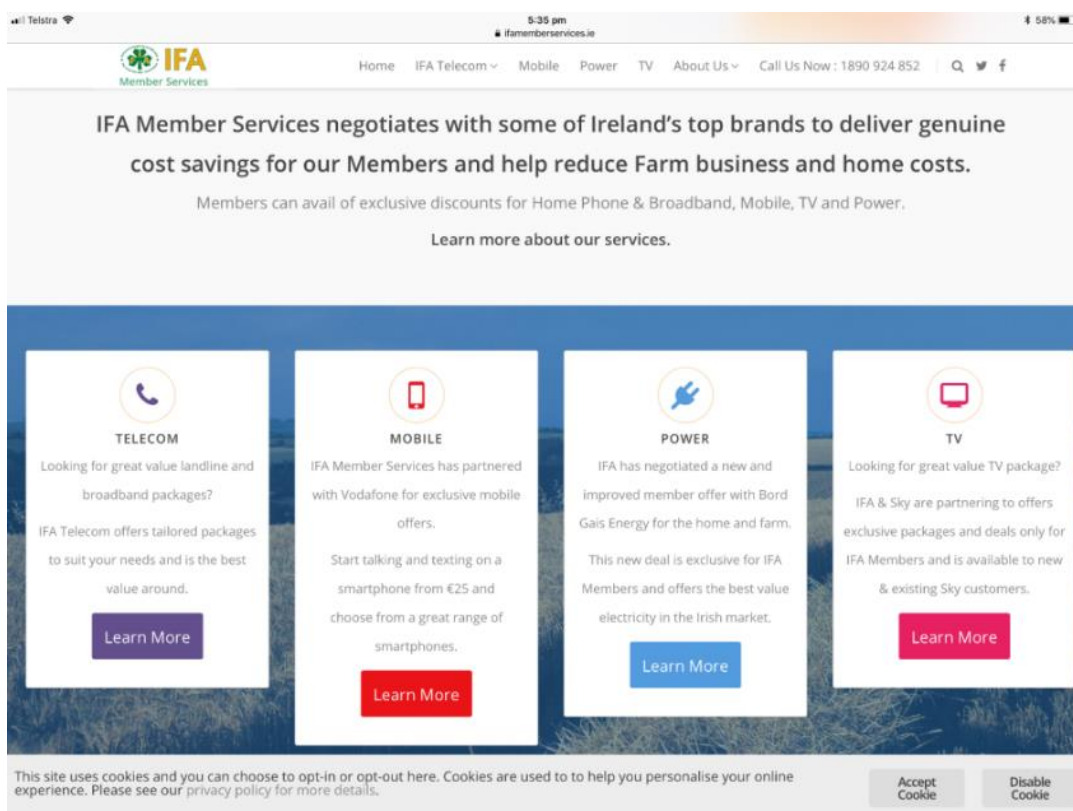
Beyond the farmer and even the professionals who directly service the farmer, what about the rural towns population that service the farmer in a wider sense; the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker?

It is an old saying, but still a good one: smart rural towns across the world know that they ride on the “cows back”, meaning a strong local agricultural industry permeates economically through the whole rural community. NFU offers “countryside memberships” as a sub-category to appeal to this section of the community. Given the engagement is conducted effectively, this section of membership throws the net even further. The message of what NFU is trying to do for the agricultural industry is known by not only the farmers but the wider community, hence, increasing engagement levels. There is another benefit to countryside members, and that is helping in education and understanding of the broader issue of the right to farm amongst other urban pressures on rural areas.



## Membership benefits and discounts

Membership benefits and services is another tool in the kit bag of agricultural organisations and what they can offer as an attraction for more members to join and therefore increase engagement. From interviews, the list of benefits and discounts are great and varied. The New York Farm Bureau have many offers including corporate discounts in hotels, flights, vehicles, and farm merchandise stores. *“Non-members can check out information about our member benefits and why these perks are another reason to Join New York Farm Bureau today”* (NYFB, 2019). The IFA is a standout for the depth of services offered to their membership. It negotiates deals with power, telephone and internet packages on behalf of members providing lucrative savings. *“I have saved a good deal of hard-earned dollars from the member services of IFA. These benefits make it easier to renew my membership year in, year out”* (Sheahan, personal communications, 2018). Whilst these added extras are not the core business of agricultural organisations they do provide added clout for people to join and renew as members. This then has them involved and somewhat engaged in the organisation and industry.



**Figure 5: IFA webpage illustrating the member services offered (Source: IFA 2019)**

Farmer engagement by agricultural organisations is greatly enhanced if farmers are members. Engagement is critical to these organisations accurately representing and promoting agriculture and the ultimate success of longevity. The author surmises that simple fees, open membership options, intertwined youth group connectivity, and attractive benefits are ways to grow membership beyond the advocacy.

# Chapter 3: Communication

*“There may be many ways to skin a cat”*, as the saying goes. Just as there are many ways to communicate between agricultural organisations and farmers, but which way is the most effective? Effective interactive communication is the key to effective engagement. This chapter explores the many different communication methods performed by agricultural groups and which methods have the greatest success from the point of view of the group but also the farmers who are the target.

## Written

The most relied upon form of communication for many agricultural organisations was that of the written variety. This includes posted newsletters, magazines, emails, text messages, social media and written media. However, emails have only a 22% open rate (SuperOffice, 2019), newsletters have an 18% read rate (Knowledgebase, 2019) and magazines are decreasing in popularity (Statista, 2019). Whilst these forms of communication may be amongst the most affordable, how effective are they when they are on the majority ignored? Is this the reason why these larger organisations are persisting with these unenergetic methods? One farmer commented: *“I get too much junk mail already from white goods suppliers without getting more from my representative body”* (Vaughan, pers. comm., 2018). The most modern form of written communication, social media, can be a dangerous platform for trolls and subsequently make matters worse. How much is too much? Each reader is different but in today’s world the shorter the better. As Lambie (pers. comm., 2018) stated *“short and sharp is the key”* when it comes to selling the story on social media.

## Human interaction

The author found that any form of human interactive communication was more appreciated by the farmer: *“I like to see who I’m dealing with. You can ignore an email or letter easy enough without guilt, but you cannot ignore someone looking straight at you. It is non-productive and plain rude”* (McIntosh, pers. comm., 2018). Whether that be individual or in a group situation the opportunity for two way interaction and to build a relationship was by far and away the preferred method by farmers. Dairy New Zealand estimated that 70 % of their levy payers had some form of face to face interaction with a representative on a yearly basis. This was on the large part due to their successful Dairy Discussion Group extension program. These discussion

groups are well attended as they target regions and demographics within the densely populated dairy areas of New Zealand (NZ). This results in the extension officers having regular contact with farmers, therefore, gaining an excellent knowledge of the current climate and also what issues are facing farmers that may be helped by further research and extension by Dairy NZ. Also farmers get satisfaction to see and hear how their levy money is being invested effectively into programs they have had an input into via their attendance at discussion groups.



***Figure 6: Dairy New Zealand discussion group with good attendance by local farmers  
(Source: Author 2018)***

The opportunity for farmers at a grassroots level to have their opinions heard by their representative body was of key importance to effective engagement and member satisfaction. For the majority of lobby groups interviewed, the local branch structure was still the avenue for farmers to have their say and hopefully be listened to by decision makers. “*Branches are where it all begins*” (Wilkinson, pers. comm., 2018). Well respected local leaders were the drivers of successful local branches. NZFF had several branches leading the way in innovation of branch events (not meetings) and re-invigorating attendances. These events included special guest speakers, be it from industry, government, sport, comedy and even music. The aim was to not have a traditional meeting, but an event where grassroots farmers can mingle with elected authorities and have fun whilst still a focus on agricultural issues. These events resulted in the branch having greater engagement leading to more numbers at provincial meetings to vote on and succeed with motions of action. Therefore, having greater input into

policy and the advocacy direction of NZFF, and greater evidence of confidence in their membership investment.

*“Be seen, be safe”* is a common enough saying for pedestrians, but also stands for agricultural organisations within farming communities. Groups that were well represented within the community in agricultural circles or regular community circles, for example a sports club, had greater success in engagement with farmers: *“I see many of my local farmers at the market on the weekend”* (McCabe, pers. comm., 2017). This representation includes having stands at local agricultural shows, fetes, and cattle showing competitions with stands being occupied by either staff or local elected leaders. The representative’s role is to listen to the pundits in attendance but also gives the rare opportunity to verbally explain the recent successes of their organisation.



**Figure 7: The state agricultural lobby group with a strong presence at the local agricultural show. Multiple activities and stalls were on offer throughout the shed (Source: Meade, 2018)**

Extracurricular activities have the ability to provide an effective conduit for engagement with farmers. They can be a means to attract new people to the organisation yet result in benefits by basing around agriculture. Macra Na Fierme (MNF) (Irish Young Farmers) is a great example

of this. MNF hold a range of activities and competitions which attracts healthy numbers of young farmers to participate. Debating, for example, attracted hot competition from across Ireland with members putting great effort into winning and in the meantime gaining great skills for future agricultural leadership opportunities. Acting is another activity offered to MNF members which may also hold them in good stead for future political ambitions. Whatever the activity, the result is more people engaged in agriculture.

The author concluded that the more opportunities for agricultural organisations to be in the physical presence of farmers, the more effective the engagement. This means two-way engagement, something that cannot be effectively replicated by written means. Two-way engagement means being able to listen to the emotion and passion of a farmer's plight and also to have the chance to deliberately converse the success of the agricultural group represented.

# Chapter 4: Governance

Governance of agricultural organisations has varying designs from country to country. There were a few groups interviewed by the author that had a non-elected board in authority for policy directions or research selection. Most, however, were elected boards. They were elected by representation of members, either directly or via a delegates system. Organisations that understood the importance of maximising the opportunity for engagement with members with elections had a greater engaged member base.

## Attracting the right people

The majority of organisations interviewed mentioned that they had difficulty attracting the right people for leadership roles. Many were attempting to remedy this issue by offering leadership training targeting the younger portion of the industry. MNF currently have four past members in the Irish Parliament (Duffy, pers. comm., 2018). They contribute a part of their success in election to the leadership training offered by MNF. Dairy New Zealand offers Young Leaders courses which result in a targeted approach to engaging those with future leadership ambitions by making the courses into events where industry networking is a key element in attracting participants and improving their knowledge. In addition to the internal courses offered by Dairy NZ, they have a strong history in supporting and funding external leadership development opportunities like the Kellogg's Program and Nuffield Scholarships. Supporting well respected leadership development opportunities is a proven way agricultural groups can engage more farmers and develop future leaders.

The ability for standard members to have their say and play a part in who should be in positions of authority within an agricultural organisation is a key element of grassroots engagement. People are more willing to belong to an organisation if they feel they can make a difference (Wright, pers. comm., 2018). Having a vote in leadership positions is one simple way members and potential members could make a difference. However, several groups interviewed had people in positions of key policy setting positions or research direction positions that were nominated or selected by members of staff. These decisions to invest into research or take a policy stance using members levies or fees without consulting members directly or indirectly via leader elections seems a risk to member satisfaction, incorrect decisions being not representative and also a missed opportunity to engage with members

with the event of elections. The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) in the United Kingdom (UK) appoints committees by nomination from the Regional General Manager and Local Chair. This method is repeated across the three levels of government being County, Regional and National. Teagasc (Irish Agricultural Research, Development and Extension Organisation) have a Dairy Advisory Committee that has great input into research for Irish dairying and is selected by members of staff. The funds used for this research comes from either the state or some levies. There is potential there for research to be done that is not truly representative of farming tax/levy payers who fund the bank. Whilst the two examples given are successful agricultural organisations, there is opportunity there for all groups to increase member engagement and member satisfaction of investment if members have the opportunity to be elected to these decision making positions and have a say in who should represent them in these positions.

Images of USA presidential election campaign rallies with thousands of noisy followers holding slogan banners and shouting messages of support for their favoured candidate is an exceptional example, however, there is no doubt the voters come out in droves to listen and decide on their choice. In an agricultural context, leadership elections provide similar opportunities for groups to engage with their member base whilst also hopefully attracting new members who wish to participate in the election. The NFU have well pursued elections for senior leadership positions and have some forms of regional tours and forums for candidates to demonstrate their potential to effectively represent grassroots voters (Smith, pers. comm., 2018). However, the benefits of a public election campaign of increasing media attention and testing candidates' worthiness cannot be truly realised if there is only one candidate for the vacancy. The National Cattlemen's Association of USA faces this issue: *"Unfortunately our elections are not hotly contested as no one wants to do it"* (Kniffen, pers. comm., 2017). As previously mentioned, offering attractive training in leadership to the next generation is a potential way of reducing this occurrence. Most agricultural groups interviewed acknowledged that they can improve member engagement. Contested, public leadership elections are an opportunity to communicate with and empower their reason for purpose.

Thankfully, as a society the majority of the developed world has moved on from the days of when only certain classes or races or genders could have the right to vote. However, not all



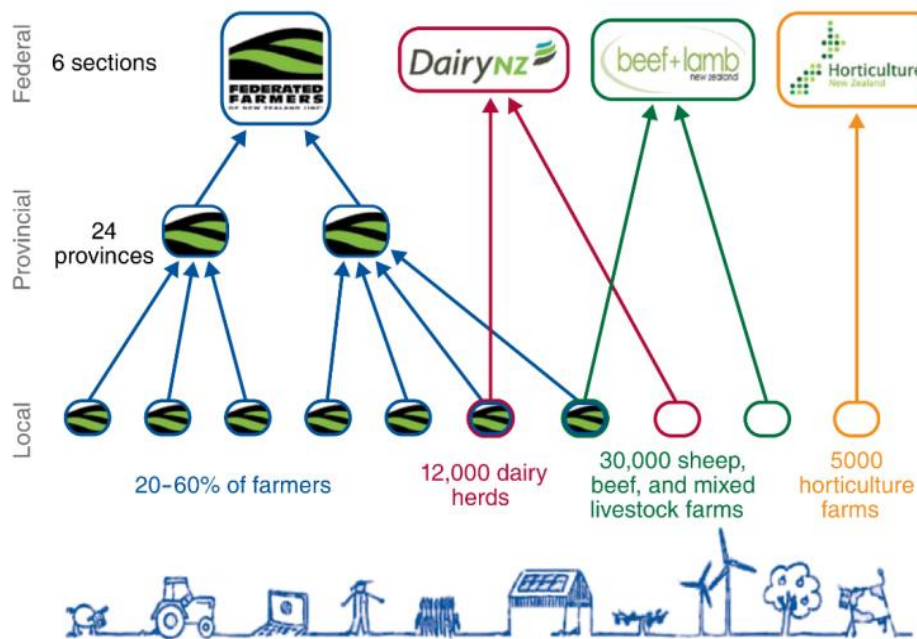
agricultural organisations currently allow all members the equal rights to vote. Several organisations have lower classes of membership categories that may not have the same cost of fees or have the same position within the Industry. For example, the IFA has a Countryside Membership option for those living in rural towns but not necessarily farmers. This category of membership provides the chance to *“spread the net of the farmers’ voice by numbers”* (Clarke, pers. comm., 2018) (Figure 8). However, they have limited voting power. There is an argument by some that only those with real skin in the game should have voting rights, yet happy to take fees from these lower classed groups of members. If these categories are offered on a fee basis, then a vote should be part of the deal.



**Figure 8: The Author with Sean Clarke, from Irish Farmers Association (Source: Author)**

*“An iceberg will not float upright without the weight and size being proportioned in the lower half under the sea; indeed, the iceberg is nothing without its base. The same with agricultural organisations whereby local branches are the bedrock of any successful lobby group”* (Wilkinson, pers. comm., 2018). Local branches are the first point of contact for new members, without a strong network of branches the attraction for new members greatly diminishes. The benefits of local branches include local commonness of issues, climate, industry, and regulation. People find it easier to attend a local meeting where topics will be mostly understood and most people will be known to each other. *“Members love the personal nature of communication that decentralised local branches provide”* (Ware, pers. comms., 2018). For agricultural lobby organisations to attract new members whilst maintaining strong retention

rates, it must be demonstrated that they actively engage with grassroots members. All policy must start at local county branch level which assists in policy more accurately representing a cross section of the industry (Fouts, pers. comm., 2017).



**Figure 9: New Zealand Tiers of Advocacy and Research (Source: AFI 2014)**

The events associated with governance and leadership of agricultural groups provides great opportunities to effectively engage with members whilst attracting new people. Assisting with training and development of future leaders that people will follow will help ensure healthy competition for the public election campaign. Hopefully, that results in a high percentage of members voting and subsequently electing the right people to make the important decisions after having the chance to listen to their grassroots members via local branches.

# Chapter 5: Staffing Structures

Field employees representing agricultural lobby groups or agricultural research and development organisations are often the local public face for farmer engagement. Employing the right staff in these roles to act as full time liaisons between members and decision makers can be critical for effective two way feedback. Success in this field can aid true representative policy and research.

## Levels of staffing

Recruiting the right people into farming facing roles can be paramount to member satisfaction. Dairy New Zealand place great importance in their recruitment of Extension Officers (EO). Dairy NZ EO's are the conduit for relaying feedback from the farmer back to the senior staff and also developing the skills of dairy farmers from knowledge gained from the levy investment into research. The interview process for these positions is rigorous and competitive (Sankey, pers. comm., 2018). The candidates are tested by being given a boring topic and told to jazz it up for a five minute presentation, and make it appealing to a dairy farmer. The process also includes a group interview with the other candidates, which simulates a dairy discussion group. This pressure helps the selection committee choose the right people to handle situations in the real world. Dairy NZ even engage their levy paying dairy farmer members in the selection process, with several involved in the interviews and role plays.

1 of 3	<div><div>DAIRYNZ</div><div>POSITION DESCRIPTION</div></div> <div><div>Title and Reporting Relationships</div><div>Position Title: Trainee Consulting Officer Reports to: Regional Manager Location: To be finalised after initial training period depending on area vacancies</div></div> <div><div>Key Activities for DairyNZ</div><div><p>The purpose of DairyNZ is to secure and enhance the profitability, sustainability and competitiveness of New Zealand dairy farming through</p><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Investing for valued outcomes</li><li>Delivering against commitments</li><li>Earning the support of dairy farmers</li><li>Engaging with dairy farmers</li><li>Developing and maintaining capability</li><li>Influencing stakeholders</li></ul></div></div> <div><div>Purpose</div><div><p>This position is to undertake a structured training and coaching program over the course of 12 months that develops people into proficient and capable Consulting Officers. The emphasis will migrate over the course of 12 months from training to delivery. By the end of the year you will be able to assist progressive dairy farmers, and the industry as a whole to achieve productivity improvement within the dairy farm system. This will be achieved through identification of needs of dairy farmers and the co-ordination and facilitation of potential solutions within the agreed regional extension strategy.</p></div></div>
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**Figure 10: Example of a Dairy New Zealand job description, listing key activities (Source: Dairy NZ 2019)**

Simon Sankey (pers. comm., 2018) was questioned on what he thought were the three main attributes in an extension officer: *“Event management and facilitation are key elements to their role so they must be highly energetic. They must also be able to create, build and maintain strong working relationships with farmers, then must have a reasonable knowledge of the industry”*. These attributes for either an agricultural lobby group field officer or a research extension officer contributes greatly to the foundation of effective farmer engagement.

Employed representatives for agricultural lobby groups can have multiple facets to their role. NFU has in their employment 350 branch secretaries across the country. The main duty of this role is to sell insurance to farmers under the NFU Mutual banner, with a portion of the revenue of this insurance helps fund NFU’s advocacy efforts. The other part of their role is to recruit new members to NFU, for which they have targets set and, if successful, can win awards and bonus. However, this can create conflict for potential members as the two brands being NFU Advocacy and NFU Mutual Insurance can be confused (Woodger, pers. comm., 2018) (Figure 11). It can be worse if the non-advocacy brand has poor sentiment, for whatever reason, and can be to the detriment of the advocacy arm. On balance, the benefits of having more numbers on the ground outweighed the potential conflicts: *“NFU mutual branch secretaries have a strong physical presence in their counties. They attend all local events and act as an important vessel for the NFU”* (Ware, pers. comm., 2018).



**Figure 11: The Author at National Farmers Union (NFU) with Lee Woodger, Head of Membership (Source: Author)**

Each farming region having access to a regionally assigned field officer or territory manager proved important to members: *“I know my field rep well. I see them at the local bar, the local hockey, the local school committee. I know they are the go to for any issues I have”* (Dorland, pers. comm., 2017). The Farmers Union of Wales (FUW) has eleven regional offices with a county officer based in each, along with at least one more administrative employee. FUW have approximately 7,500 members from an estimated commercial farmer population of 13,000, thus equalling approximately 60% of the demographic. This being one of the highest percentages of interviewed representative organisations, their density of offices is credited with assisting this positive result. They have one regional office per 681 members.

The county officer’s role includes providing one on one assistance to farmer members as well as having a strong community involvement. *“This direct contact with the local office and the local officers is valued greatly by our members. This is one of our key strengths in engagement with our farmers”* (Fenwick, pers. comm., 2018) (Figure 12).



**Figure 12: The Author with his partner Michaela, and Dr Nick Fenwick, FUW Director of Policy, Dr Nick Fenwick (Source: Author)**

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (ADHB) in the UK also understand the importance of regionally specific based *“Knowledge Exchange Officers”* (KEO’s). These locally based KEO’s have the benefit of running field days and discussion groups that are specific to their region: *“The local knowledge allows the KEO to have strategically specific focus farms that results in high farmer attendance and therefore engagement”* (Bolton, pers. comm., 2018). Locally employed officers know the local issues the farming community is facing, some



history of the region, key local influencers and associated stakeholders. All this extra local knowledge provides unquantifiable benefits to the organisation and its success in representation, research and extension.



**Figure 13: Map showing the 11 office locations of FUW (Source: Online, 2019)**

## Stakeholder engagement

Whilst the discussion is about farmer engagement, another avenue to effective representation is key stakeholder engagement with agriculture to lead to policy success and research funding. The regionally assigned field officers play a key role in this also. NFU has county advisors based in each county. On a regular basis they engage with their local politicians and pass on the issues they are hearing by being based in a particular region. In addition, the county advisors host farm tours where local Members of Parliament, local County Councillors, relevant Government Ministers are guided through local farms seeing and hearing firsthand the challenges faced by members of their constituencies. *“Politicians really appreciate the NFU organised opportunities to go on local farms and report back to their colleagues ways in which they may be able to help”* (Larusso, pers. comm., 2018). Whilst part of the county advisor’s role is lobby the local politicians, they also take the opportunity to get their local members involved to lobby directly. They run an *“invite campaign”* where farmers are provided with a

template letter to invite their local politicians on-farm for one on one visits. They also provide “pledge cards” to members to send to local MPs to make campaign pledges that support agriculture in their region. Thus engaging local NFU members to engage with local MPs and empowering the farmer members to lobby directly. This reflects strongly on NFU efforts to represent the farmer.

The author estimates that the average percentage of office staff versus field staff of agricultural organisations interviewed was approximately a five to one ratio, with office staff having the higher number. The office staff could be researchers or scientists for R&D organisations or policy advisors for lobby groups. Often the majority of the office staff would be based at the national headquarters, by nature of distance being detached from the farming regions and farmers whom fund their employment. NZFF go some way to addressing this detachment by basing the majority of their policy advisors in the regions. *“This provides extra presence of NZFF branded staff in the regions whilst also allowing the policy advisors to be in touch with farming community”* (Harper, pers. comm., 2018). It is understood that policy advisors at times need to be close to Parliament House, although the option of being based in the regions hearing first hand from farmers provides them with greater passion and emotion when they have to travel to the capital to lobby on their behalf. However, as mentioned earlier, the majority of office based staff are in the national headquarters. NFU attempt to have all headquarter based office staff get out on farm several times a year: *“It is ever so important that our office staff have a firsthand understanding of the farmers we represent”* (Smith, pers. comm., 2018).

Farmers like to engage with people that they can relate to, thus making the right decision to employ the right person with the required attributes is dependent on this. Quality regionally based field officers provide great benefit by having in depth local knowledge of local issues and being immersed in the local community, providing greater opportunity for one on one engagement by presence.

# Chapter 6: Value of Engagement

Why should farmers want to engage and be members of agricultural organisations? The author asked those interviewed about the benefits of membership to the farmer and how engaged farmers helped determine accurate policy and research as well as areas they can improve the numbers of farmers that are actively engaged.

## Lifelong investment

*“For many farmers agriculture is a lifelong investment of time, energy and resources”* (Clarke, pers. comm., 2018). This underlying reason was mentioned by several interviewees as the primary reason farmers should invest in their organisation. They drew the link that if the farmer contributed financially and emotionally to a body that is representing their interests that their *“business would be more secure”* (Fouts, pers. comm., 2017) and a greater chance of a *“sustainable future for the next generation”* (Kniffen, pers. comm., 2017) was more assured. The AFB listed their weight of numbers as a key strength in lobbying. *“When we tell members of Congress we have six million members they do stand to attention”* (Moore, pers. comm., 2017). By high numbers of farmers joining as a member, the organisation can lay greater claim to being truly representative of large portions of the industry, therefore, carrying greater clout and adding volume to the voice with key decision makers (Moore, pers. comm., 2017). Some farmers said they felt no need to become a member as many of the benefits were mutual. National Cattlemens Association member Dan Kniffen (pers comm., 2017) of Pennsylvania highlighted the simple reason he is happy to continue renewing his membership: *“How many farmers have the time and energy to lobby authorities? I know I don’t, that’s why I pay someone else to do it for me. What’s the alternative if most farmers decide not pay up? Who will fight for us then?”*

## Time constraints

The next issue addressed by many farmers was that while they paid their membership or levy, they do not have the time to get involved. This point was made by several of the non-engaged farmers. Inevitably, as the questioning continued, the farmers revealed they were on the most part dissatisfied with their levy body or representative organisation. Whilst the author understands that getting involved in agricultural organisations may not be everyone’s cup of tea, do these farmers then have the right to be dissatisfied? If they were aware of the



opportunities they had to contribute their views on a matter and they were simple enough, but chose not to contribute, can they then complain about an outcome? Farmers being engaged with their compulsory levy body assists in greater farmer led input into research, extension and development of their levy investment, with more relevant studies being initiated. Greater engagement of members in advocacy groups gives the groups more knowledge of the real issues facing a greater number of farmers, increased clout with member led advocacy and more representative policy direction.

The author found that 95% of organisations interviewed for this report admitted that they needed to improve their member and farmer engagement. They acknowledged the opportunity presented as mentioned prior about having a greater engaged base. A variety of responses were given when asked how they could improve their engagement:

*“We need to improve a connection with our young farmers groups; too many young farmers are not making the step from junior to senior memberships”* (Clarke, pers. comm., 2018). *“We are focusing on mobilising service providers to tell our story on our behalf”* (Bolton, pers. comm., 2018).

*“Grassroots branches remains the key, we need to be innovative in our approach to local branch events”* (Wilkinson, pers. comm., 2018).

## **Face-to-face**

However, there were two responses that were clearly above the others. One being clearer, concise communication (McCabe, pers. comm., 2017). The groups realised from member feedback surveys that at times there was too much non-physical communication. The farmers highlighted too many nonspecific emails and letters that were not relevant to them and therefore, after a while, stopped reading them. There was a need for an improved database to get more targeted information sent to the relevant farmer Woodger, pers. comm., 2018).

Overwhelmingly, the most common response on improving farmer engagement was: *“We need to have more face to face time with our farmers”* (Fenwick, pers. comm., 2018). When pushed as to why more face to face time would improve engagement, reasons given included greater opportunities to listen to farmers first-hand on what they were doing on farm and how organisations can help them, as well as how they can improve the job they are doing. Also,

face to face time would have a greater effect in explaining the message, whether that be research results via extension to improve farm practices or how organisations have helped with policy and regulation wins and how the farmer can help themselves. When asking: *“How can you increase your face to face with farmers?”* the organisations listed that more member relations staff would be the most effective way of achieving this. However, they also mentioned that this could be resource heavy and that they needed to find the right person for this role to assist in self-generation of employment and *“make it happen”* (Bell, pers. comm., 2018). Another avenue to achieve this was to increase existing staff exposure to farmers and have this element included in the main key performance indicators.




## **Proof of benefits**

Farmers often seek proof of the benefits of investing in something before the decision is made. Likewise, the same goes with the decision to become a member or vote to retain a levy. However, measuring and explaining the success of the organisation did not prove easy for many. R&D organisations mostly responded that it was difficult to accurately quantify financial returns for levy investment. Dairy New Zealand did provide return on investment calculations for some specific research topics. However, they based their measurements of success on whether they achieved their six goals from a “Dairy Tomorrow” forum; the goals were led from farmers. The Dairy NZ annual report provides assessment of their success in achieving these commitments: *“It is important that we clearly articulate our achievements and even more important that the goals are led by farmers”* (Paine, pers. comms., 2018). Voluntary membership organisations mostly measured their success by their membership trends and also cited *“state of the industry”* (Masciotra, 2017), *“actual product prices”* (Kniffen, pers. comms., 2017) and *“policy wins”* (Smith, pers. comms. 2018) as factors used to demonstrate success. Selling their story well is a point that agricultural organisations recognised as key to effective farmer engagement.

# STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DAIRY FARMING 2013-2020

## SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

### COMPETITIVE – GLOBAL AND LOCAL

OBJECTIVES	TARGETS	INDICATORS	2013 BASELINE	2016 PROGRESS	SNAPSHOT
 <b>FARM PROFIT</b>	1. Profit from productivity increase from an average of \$50/ha/year to \$65/ha/year by 2020.	Overall measure - average profit from productivity.	\$50	\$56	Rate of increase in PFP (profit from productivity) has declined
		Average actual six-week in-calf rate.*	66.3%	66.8%	
		Average operating expenses owner-operator (sharemilker).*	\$4.90 (\$2.95)	\$5.05 (\$3.06)	
 <b>RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT</b>	2. Research delivers farm systems that increase production and profit by \$110/ha/year, while reducing the environmental footprint by 30%.	Footprint. <i>In 2015, farmlet research demonstrated a 28-43% reduction in N leached and 44-52% reduction in P loss but \$35-\$227/ha/yr less operating profit.</i>	0	Research to reduce footprint at lower cost underway	Research on cover crops, diverse pastures and welfare-friendly low-cost infrastructure underway
		Profit.	0	Options to increase profit through higher forage yields underway	
 <b>TALENTED PEOPLE</b>	3. By 2020, 90% of dairy farm businesses have fully competent farm teams.	Overall measure - percentage of dairy farm businesses with fully competent farm teams.	78%	77%	7.6% increase in qualifications at farm assistant level
		Training (qualification completions for training at farm assistant level).	2361	2541	
		Experience (e.g. average time working in dairy farming for 15-24 year olds).	1.5 years	1.6 years	
		Team work (average response, on a 0-6 scale, to the statement 'my boss regularly meets with the team to plan work on-farm').	Not previously asked	3.4	
	4. By 2020, all dairy regions have sufficient certified rural professionals.	Overall measure – percentage of dairy regions that have sufficient certified rural professionals.	0%	22%	160 advisors certified to support nutrient and effluent management
		BCS scorers certified.	0	223	
		Nutrient management advisors certified.	0	117	
		Dairy effluent WOF assessors certified.	0	21	

**Figure 14: Clear example of measurable Farmer assisted targets and corresponding performance evaluation. (Source: Dairy New Zealand 2016/17 Annual Report)**

# Conclusion

With membership numbers declining for most agricultural organisations, there is a need to widen the net of potential members. These organisations would be helped by making membership available to anyone interested. Greater membership leads to greater industry engagement.

Organisations with simple flat fee arrangements had more members. The author witnessed that the tactics to *“have more that pay less”* greatly assisted in advocacy clout and having greater confidence in broader representation.

Closer connections with young farmer groups are paramount to sustainable organisations. Empowering young farmers to join open age groups will help secure the future engagement of the next generation of farmers.

Individual face to face engagement is the most effective for the farmer and organisation, however, face to face via a group is most efficient.

Greater opportunities for farmers to give feedback on the performance of the organisations.

Less written communication as the majority is not read. Focus is to be directed to shorter sharper bulletins and to target relevant farmers from detailed database.

Agricultural organisations offering governance and leadership training assists in attracting the right people for the right roles whilst helping to ensure competitive elections.

Farmers have greater confidence in their research or advocacy organisation if they have farmer elected farmers holding the majority of authority for decision making, in particular in regards to financial expenditure of farmer investment.

Competitive, public leadership election campaigns provide great opportunity to engage with members and potential members.

Local branches for agricultural organisations are the bedrock for grassroots farmer engagement.

Employing the right people to interact with members is a key element in successful grassroots engagement. They must be in touch with farmers and farmer sentiment.

Regionally based territory field officers provide clear physical engagement opportunities for local farmers. Locally based employees who are immersed in the wider local community provide greater human connection between the organisations and the farmers.

Having as many office based staff located in the regions instead of the headquarters provides increased presence of organisation branded staff within the community. Having office-based staff on the front line of farming leads to greater apprehension of industry affairs and increased emotional connection.

In order to sell the benefits of the organisation to the industry, there must be farmer involvement of key performance indicator (KPI) targets and measurable objectives. Transparent reviewing and demonstrating performance of these objectives annually helps farmers appreciate the value of their investment and their engagement.

Increased investment in face to face engagement is the key to improving agricultural organisations and their engagement with farmers.

# Recommendations

- Greater focus on physical engagement rather than written.
- Simplified flat fee subscription structures for advocacy groups.
- Increase membership opportunities for all farmers and associated interested stakeholders.
- Provide clear opportunities for grassroots members to influence direction.
- Local branches/committees must remain as they are the foundation of entry engagement.
- Majority of authority positions to be farmers elected by farmers.
- Increased investment in farmer facing employees, including regionally based office staff.
- Employment of locally based territory field managers.
- Have clear farmer led objectives to explain performance and demonstrate value.

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Wright, S (February 2018) Foundation Arable Research member. Mixed Arable Cropping Farmer. New Zealand.

# Plain English Compendium Summary

Project Title: Agricultural Organisations: Farmer Engagement	
Nuffield Australia Project No.:	1715
Scholar:	Daniel Meade
Organisation:	203 Garvoc-Laang Road Garvoc, Victoria 3265
Phone:	0417 896 138
Email:	<a href="mailto:Danielgpmeade@gmail.com">Danielgpmeade@gmail.com</a>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To research Membership Models.</li> <li>• To investigate differing Modes of communication in relation to effectiveness.</li> <li>• To examine Governance structures.</li> <li>• To explore how Members were able to access an Organisation Representative.</li> <li>• To learn how groups were effective in selling the Value of Engagement.</li> </ul>
<b>Background</b>	This report aims to investigate how agricultural representative organisations from varying countries engage with farmer members and non-member farmers to effectively advocate for advancement in policy that truly represents the majority of industry sentiment. In addition, the report also looks at agricultural research and development organisations and how they determine study topics and extension that is confidently reflective of the sector's needs and desires
<b>Research</b>	Interviewed and researched different agricultural organisations from various countries about their methods of communicating with farmers and members.
<b>Outcomes</b>	<p>Greater focus on physical engagement rather than written.</p> <p>Simplified flat fee subscription structures for Advocacy groups.</p> <p>Increase membership opportunities for all farmers and associated interested stakeholders.</p> <p>Provide clear opportunities for grassroots to influence direction.</p> <p>Local branches/committees must remain as they are the foundation of entry engagement</p> <p>Majority of authority positions to be farmers elected farmers.</p> <p>Increased investment in farmer facing employees, including regionally based office staff.</p> <p>Employment of locally based territory field managers.</p> <p>Have clear farmer led objectives to explain performance and demonstrate value.</p>
<b>Implications</b>	With membership numbers declining for most agricultural organisations, there is a need to widen the net of potential members. These organisations would be helped by making membership available to anyone interested. Greater membership leads to greater industry engagement
<b>Publications</b>	Nuffield Australia National Conference, 2018, Melbourne, Victoria