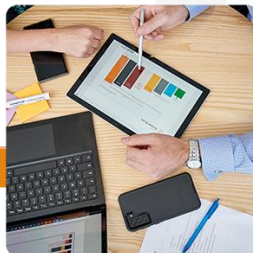


Prepared for:
B+LNZ

Informing the future of the B+LNZ Action Group programme

Programme evaluation report

February 2024



Scarlatti.co.nz



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Executive summary

Since April 2021, B+LNZ has been overseeing the Action Groups that were created as part of the Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) programme. B+LNZ has adopted the Action Group extension and adoption model to ensure all sheep and beef farmers can benefit from the success of this small group learning approach. The annual grant that B+LNZ supplied to these Action Groups concluded on September 30, 2023. The key objective of this evaluation work was to help determine what future support for the Action Groups could look like.

The evaluation provided evidence that the Action Group programme has been very successful in generating valuable outcomes for farmers. Combining insights from a range of stakeholders has identified the changes that have occurred as a result of Action Group participation, the factors that influence the success of an Action Group, and opportunities for the future of Action Groups.

Successful Action Groups have:

- Increased farmer's confidence to make changes on farm
- Strengthened connection, camaraderie, and wellbeing amongst group members
- Provided a return on investment from group involvement. For every \$1 invested, \$48 is generated in industry profitability.¹

The 'ingredients' of a successful Action Group:

- An effective facilitator who is committed to steering the group with the group's needs at the centre, and who can draw on good networks and source the right people and resources.
- Clear objectives, focus, and purpose. Where these have evolved over time, they have been regularly reviewed with group members to ensure relevance.
- Fit-for-purpose learning and delivery methods, providing access to relevant experts and facilitating effective farmer-to-farmer learning.
- Maintaining farmer engagement and group momentum through variety and refreshing the group.

Opportunities and ideas for the future

There are four areas where stakeholders felt there were opportunities to support Action Groups into the future or could be considered for future small group learning support.

1. **Connect** – develop a central database to provide details of relevant subject matter experts, access tools and information, and coordinate groups with similar objectives.
2. **Share / disseminate** – group members and stakeholders highlighted an incredible amount of learning had occurred that was limited to those directly involved in the groups. A means of sharing / disseminating the 'good stuff' that comes out of these groups was suggested by many.

¹ Results from impact modelling exercise.

3. **Support** – suggestions for increased support included providing a programme coordinator for additional support, creating templates to support the formation of groups, and developing guides on how to transition to self-funding.
4. **Upskill / facilitators and farmer mentors** – as facilitators are one of the most important factors for successful groups, there is an opportunity to upskill more people and support farmers into facilitation and mentoring roles.

Context

Background

Since April 2021, B+LNZ has been overseeing the Action Groups that were created as part of the Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) programme. B+LNZ has adopted the Action Group extension and adoption model to ensure all sheep and beef farmers can benefit from the success of this small group learning approach. The model is an integral part of B+LNZ's Farming Excellence Strategy. The principles of the Action Group model have also been used to support farmers setting up Catchment Community Groups.

The annual grant that B+LNZ supplied to these Action Groups concluded on September 30, 2023. As there are still approximately 50 active groups, B+LNZ were interested in conducting an evaluation to inform how support for Action Groups could effectively be structured going forward.

Objective

The key objective of this evaluation work was to help determine what future support for the Action Groups could look like. This work therefore sought to:

- Evaluate the successes, challenges and lessons learnt from B+LNZ Action Groups
- Make design suggestions for what support could be provided to Action Groups in the future.

Methodology

Several methodologies were used to ensure the recommendations represented the perspectives of those involved in the Action Group programme. This included:

- **Interviews with Action Group members** (N = 42 carried out via 15 focus group style interviews)
 - Active Action Group members (N = 22)
 - Previous Action Group members (N = 20)
- **Interviews with stakeholders** involved in the programme (i.e., those involved in the set up and coordination of the programme from supporting organisations) (N = 7)
- **Online future design workshop with facilitators** (N = 7)
- **In-person future design workshops with Action Group members** (N = 21 across two workshops, one each in the North Island and South Island.)
- **An online survey** (N=298)
 - Active Action Group members (N = 96)
 - Previous Action Group members (N = 121)
 - Supporting roles, e.g., facilitators, subject matter experts (N = 81)

For more information on the methods used see Appendix A: Methodology.

About this document

This document is structured into the following sections:

- **Programme outcomes** – what outcomes have resulted from the Action Group programme?
- **Critical success factors** – what specific features have contributed to programme success?
- **Impact modelling** – updating the model that demonstrates the impact the programme has had
- **Opportunities and next steps** – suggestions that could inform the future for Action Groups.

Overview of Action Groups

Below is a summary of the number of active and self-funded Action Groups over time. By offering funding that requires input from groups, B+LNZ has been able to keep in touch with a greater number of groups over this time. For those groups that have self-funded, it is likely that many are still operating but have not updated B+LNZ of their status. It is therefore expected that the number of active and self-funded Action Groups as of today is underreported in B+LNZ's system and therefore in the figures below.

Table 1: *Summary table of Active and self-funded Action Groups*

	End of March 2021	August 2022	December 2023
Number of active (and self-funded) Action Groups	229	103	50
Number of farm businesses involved	1,096	~875	~425



Action Group programme outcomes

This section highlights the positive outcomes for farmers as a result of their involvement in the Action Group programme.



Results based on research conducted with farmers currently or previously involved in Action Groups, as well as facilitators, SMEs, and programme stakeholders. Data comes from a survey (N=296), interviews with farmer members (N=42), as well as discussions and workshops with programme stakeholders, facilitators and farmers.

1. Confidence to make on-farm change

A key outcome of the programme reported by Action Group members and facilitators alike was the increased confidence farmers had to make changes on-farm, due to access to knowledgeable expertise, and other group members sharing their experiences.



I learn something new every time I go. It gives me the confidence to give things a crack as I gain knowledge and science to back up decisions.

- Active Action Group member

No data to display

2. Wellbeing and connection

Almost all group members interviewed spontaneously mentioned the social benefits of being involved in the group, connecting with other farmers, getting off farm, and sharing in the highs and lows of farming.



The networking and connections were amazing; these are still benefitting our business.

- Previous Action Group member



88%

agree or strongly agree that being part of the group has had a positive impact on the farm business

3. ROI from group involvement

Many group members indicated that the group provided a significant return for the time (and in some cases, self-funding) invested.



Have easily got three times return what it has cost being part of the group. About half of the group have grown their business based on discussions they have had in the group.

- Previous Action Group member

\$48

for every \$1 invested, \$48 is generated in industry profitability

Results from impact modelling exercise, i.e., modelled outcome, not actual.

Action Group programme outcomes

The focus of this evaluation was to provide insight into designing future support for the Action Group programme. It was important in the first instance to understand the general sense of how stakeholders, particularly Action Group members, felt about whether the programme had been successful in delivering positive outcomes.

Feedback about the programme was overwhelmingly positive. The survey results revealed that nearly 90% of active Action Group members felt that being part of the group had a positive impact on their farm business. Over 60% of previous Action Group members felt the same. Despite Action Group members finding it difficult to draw exact linkages between their involvement in the programme and farm business outcomes (i.e., farm profitability), they were very confident in their description of the value they received from being part of an Action Group.

“I get something out of every interaction – every time you go, you pick up value.” (Active Action Group member)

“I wish all farmers could do something like this, it was extremely valuable.” (Previous Action Group member)

“I think [our group will] carry on. The Christmas parties are almost legendary! Seriously we all really value the sessions we have together, there’s been a lot of change for a few of us and drawing on each other’s ideas, connections and experiences has been awesome.” (Active Action Group member)

The value and outcomes described can be boiled down to the following themes. Action Group members felt that the programme:

- Positively influenced connection, camaraderie, and wellbeing amongst group members
- Increased farmer confidence to make changes on-farm
- Provided return on investment for the effort involved.

Wellbeing and connection

Almost all group members interviewed spontaneously mentioned the social benefits of being involved in the group, connecting with other farmers, getting off farm, and sharing in the highs and lows of farming. This was often an unexpected benefit, beyond what the members initially anticipated to get out of the group. Over 90% of survey respondents from active Action Groups felt that being part of the group had a positive impact on them as an individual and over 50% of them felt that that being part of the group had a positive impact on the wider community. Over 60% of survey respondents who had been members of an Action Group felt the group had a positive impact on them as an individual.

Some groups travelled across the region and / or country for trips away. These were highly regarded for the learning and the opportunity to get time away from the farm to connect with others. In many cases friendships had been built that have lasted beyond the life of the group, and instances of group members going on to become business partners were mentioned.

“The group created very good friendships; we know we have people across the country that support us.” (Previous Action Group member)

“It is great to get off farm and connect with others, the trips are great for mental state; It’s amazing what you can learn over a beer.” (Active Action Group member)

“Being open and honest with each other, especially during these difficult years. Sharing the whole story.” (Active Action Group member)

“The networking and connections were amazing; these are still benefitting our business.” (Previous Action Group member)

Confidence to make change on-farm

Both Action Group members and facilitators reported that a key outcome of the programme was that farmers involved had increased confidence to make changes on-farm. Two reasons for this were commonly mentioned:

- Increased access to information and knowledge (i.e., via subject matter experts)
- Other group members sharing what has (and hasn’t) worked for them.

“I learn something new every time I go. It gives me the confidence to give things a crack as I gain knowledge and science to back up decisions.” (Active Action Group member)

“Talking to other farmers is the most useful part, everyone has been through trial and error and used a range of different methods. We had lots of conversations where people shared what they have learnt and what works well.” (Active Action Group member)

“I am getting more done because I have heard what has worked for others. I am gaining years from learning from others, things would have taken so much longer without sharing learnings.” (Active Action Group member)

Despite change being difficult to quantify, nearly 90% of survey respondents currently part of an Action Group felt the group had influenced changes on-farm. 65% of survey respondents who had been part of an Action Group in the past said the group had influenced changes on-farm. Interviewees described major changes because of their involvement in the programme.

“Being part of the group was life changing for me.” (Previous Action Group member)

“The group was a catalyst for a massive change. I moved into a management role on farm and went into business with a connection made in the group.” (Previous Action Group member)

“We all left every session we had being better leaders in the community – this confidence adds value to your own business, this is hard to quantify. It gave us confidence to step up in the community and be a sounding board for others.” (Previous Action Group member)

Return on investment from group involvement

Although B+LNZ provided an annual grant, some group members have been self-funding their group. Many see no issue in contributing financially to their group membership. Programme stakeholders suggested it is preferable for farmers to at least partially self-fund because then they ‘have some skin in the game.’ Others discussed unwillingness for farmers to contribute towards the cost of the group because they are familiar with this programme (and similar programmes) being fully funded.

“Having some skin in the game from the farmers is never a bad thing – it means they will be more invested in the group.” (Programme stakeholder)

“[The group] has disbanded which I thought was a shame. I would have been happy to have paid something toward it carrying on. We were becoming good friends which is a thing in itself, we were meeting people in the industry which opened doors that I am still benefiting from. It was a journey that I thought could have had positive influence in our lives and businesses for time to come.” (Previous Action Group member, group disestablished because funding finished and not enough support within the group to keep it going.)

Discussions about funding and return on investment suggested that farmers were positive about the return they received for their time and any financial investment they put forward. Some group members had been part of a group that started during the RMPP programme – these groups had been fully funded at the beginning. This gave them the opportunity to experience the significant value in being part of their Action Group, meaning they were then willing to self-fund to keep the group going. It may have been more challenging to establish a self-funded model from the outset.

“Have easily got three times return what it has cost being part of the group. About half of the group have grown their business based on discussions they have had in the group.” (Active Action Group member)

“Being in the group makes you review your business constantly – a lot of little things we change here and there all the time. Every little thing adds up over the years.” (Active Action Group member)

“You can't put a value on being in a group with guys that are in a similar position to you. We would pay a whole lot more for what we are getting out of the group.” (Active Action Group member – self-funded)



Key ingredients for successful Action Groups

This section highlights four key ingredients for Action Group success identified by current and previous group members.



Based on 41 interviews with farmers currently and previously involved in Action Groups.

1. Effective facilitation

An effective facilitator was the most frequently mentioned factor for a successful group. Strong organisational skills, comprehensive subject knowledge, and connections with experts were the fundamental requirements.

“ The success is attributed to the facilitator. They pushed our development on and off farm and held us accountable to make sure we made things happen. They also encouraged our partners to get involved which added another layer of value.

- Active Action Group member



of active members rate their facilitator as “effective or very effective”

3. Fit-for-purpose learning and delivery methods

The two most highly rated activities were visiting other farms (i.e., learning from other farmers) and accessing subject matter experts. The small group learning structure with likeminded people proved valuable.

“ Peer-to-peer learning done well is brilliant. It is such a great mechanism, and we should be doing whatever we can for this to continue.

- Programme stakeholder

2. Clear goals and objectives

Setting goals at the beginning of the group held members accountable and was a means of tracking both their personal and business success.

“ Writing down measurable and time sensitive goals was a valuable part of applying for the funding that I wouldn't have done otherwise- most of the measurable goals have been achieved now.

- Active Action Group member

4. Engagement through variety and freshness

Pursuing consistent attendance and maintaining traction with group objectives are ongoing targets that group members and facilitators worked hard to achieve.

“ Figuring out a pathway and where we are going as a group, keeping it fresh and interesting with a range of sessions is important for keeping the group engaged.

- Active Action Group member

Key ingredients for successful Action Groups

The evaluation work revealed that many groups are still running today, more than was initially expected. Almost half of those interviewed were members from disestablished Action Groups, with a view to understand the reasons for the groups disbanding. While there was an expectation that some of these groups faced challenges such as maintaining engagement with group members (particularly in 2021/22 when COVID disruptions occurred), in reality a large proportion of Action Groups disestablished because group members felt they had achieved their objectives. 29% of survey respondents who had been part of an Action Group indicated that the group had finished because the objectives had been achieved; 15% because the funding ended, 15% because of COVID-19 disruption and 8% because of the facilitator. However, 50% of survey respondents who had been part of an Action Group, in a separate question, indicated that the group had achieved their objective, suggesting that this may have contributed to the group disbanding. It wasn't uncommon for interviewees who had been part of an Action Group to express interest in being involved in another group in the future, should the focus of the group be relevant to their business.

Discussions with both current and previous group members identified several critical success factors for Action Group success. These included:

- Working with an effective facilitator
- Setting clear, purposeful goals with clear objectives
- Using fit-for-purpose learning and delivery methods (i.e., practical, farmer-to-farmer learning)
- Effectively managing farmer engagement and group momentum.

Effective facilitation

By and large, an effective facilitator was the most frequently mentioned ingredient of a successful group. Strong organisational skills, comprehensive knowledge, and connections with experts were the fundamental requirements. Great facilitators keep the group coordinated and on track.

“The success is attributed to the facilitator. They pushed our development on and off farm and held us accountable to make sure we made things happen. They also encouraged our partners to get involved which added another layer of value.” (Previous Action Group member)

“They were good at getting subject matter experts and had access to great farmers – they were also very knowledgeable themselves.” (Previous Action Group member)

“They kept us on track at the beginning, we established ground rules – what the group was going to do, what our commitment was. They held us accountable in the group.” (Previous Action Group member)

It was also noted that it was important in the initial stages to ensure the facilitator is the right fit for the group to achieve its outcomes. In some cases, a new facilitator was appointed, and the group members benefitted from this change.

Clear goals and objectives

Setting goals at the beginning of the group helped to hold members accountable and was a means of tracking both their personal and business success. It was noted that this was important in the initial stages to ensure the group objectives were relevant to all group members.

Some members described the value brought about by the exercise of drawing a picture of their aspirations in the early stages of the programme.

“We drew a picture of the life or goals we wanted to get to at the beginning of the group – it forced us to put goals or aspirations down on paper – remarkable where we have ended up after that strategic session.” (Previous Action Group member)

Fit-for-purpose learning and delivery methods

The two top rated activities that groups undertook were visiting other farms (learning from other farmers) and accessing subject matter experts. The structure of the programme (i.e., small group learning) was frequently mentioned by farmers, facilitators, and other programme stakeholders to be the ‘right’ model for learning in the sheep and beef sector.

Small group learning structure

Group members and programme stakeholders alike made positive comments about the benefits of small group learning, and how this structure is well suited to farmers. They felt this format leads to a higher level of trust and openness amongst members, alongside providing more tailored solutions without the prohibitive expense of 1-on-1 consulting.

“There was a lot of openness and honesty and people willing to speak up. This was a really good model; people gain confidence more so in this smaller group model than a larger group.” (Previous Action Group member)

“Great initiative – makes a real difference at an on-farm level and can cater for different learning styles.” (Programme stakeholder)

Farmer-to-farmer learning

Whilst learning from subject matter experts was important, learning from other farmers was often considered to be the most beneficial part of being involved in the programme. Hearing about other’s experiences who are working alongside them in the industry was highly valued.

“Most of the value came out of talking to the other farmers.” (Previous Action Group member)

“Peer-to-peer learning done well is brilliant. It is such a great mechanism, and we should be doing whatever we can for this to continue.” (Programme stakeholder)

“Good opportunity to see and understand challenges farmers face in other regions.” (Previous Action Group member)

Access to experts

There were two important factors raised regarding accessing experts through the programme:

- The ability to pool resources as a group to access SMEs who wouldn’t otherwise have been possible (i.e., impractical to run 1-on-1 sessions)

- Networking and connections, particularly via the facilitators, to identify and coordinate the SMEs the group were able to meet with.

“We have had access to various expertise, B+LNZ have connections at a reasonable or no cost.”
(Active Action Group member)

In some cases, groups working with international experts via webinar, where local knowledge on certain topics wasn't available.

Practical learning

Visiting other farms and seeing what is happening on the ground was an important component for many. A preference for the experience of learning in a practical setting was evident.

“Visiting everyone's farms and seeing best practice and implementing this was great. A practical perspective is better than getting a piece of paper telling you want to do.” (Active Action Group member)

Due to the time requirement to undertake practical learning, being clear about the objective of any farm visits or similar is critical to ensure they add value.

“Some farm visits were lacking an objective which meant we wouldn't gain anything from it.”
(Active Action Group member)

Group makeup / likeminded people

In terms of group makeup, several points were noted:

- Many farmers referred to 'likeminded people' within their groups as a key benefit. Getting the right mix of people who were on a similar path worked well for many groups.

“I was in a really likeminded group of guys that got a lot out of it – I would come away from sessions fizzing, I would look around and think these are the sorts of guys I want to be like. This kept us going.” (Previous Action Group member)

- Involving partners / multiple people from the same farm business worked well for the groups who had this format. Some groups had only a single person from each business due to financial or geographical reasons (or it had not been suggested or encouraged). Some believe it is crucial to have multiple attendees from the same farm business to provide accountability and increase the likelihood of implementing changes. One farmer mentioned the important discussions that occurred on the car trip home from group meetings.
- At the same time, members also often considered a “range of perspectives” to be valuable, so while likeminded people were sought after, in reality having people from different backgrounds or farm contexts was also of benefit to the groups.

“Getting a range of different perspectives to reinforce that the way that we have been doing things or finding better ways to do things is valuable.” (Active Action Group member)

Engagement through variety and refreshing the group

Maintaining engagement and momentum were reported as challenges for some groups. Pursuing consistent attendance and maintaining traction with group objectives are ongoing targets that group members and facilitators worked hard to achieve. Some considerations included:

- The role of the facilitator and the lead farmer in “rallying the troops”
- Navigating the direction and scope of the group in agreement with the member’s needs as the groups evolved
- Geographical proximity to other group members.

“Figuring out a pathway and where we are going as a group, keeping it fresh and interesting with a range of sessions is important for keeping the group engaged.” (Active Action Group member)

“All groups have a use by date – this group will be the same, we been going for 5 years – probably need new members to keep it fresh.” (Active Action Group member)

Other comments

Feedback from farmers indicated that there had been difficulties for some groups in setting up and coordinating the group. Some farmers felt the administrative tasks and burden of communication to and amongst the group members was considerable.

“If they are a new group, they need a template so they can keep things going. It is important to have a good experience at the start, so you don't get off on the wrong foot.” (Active Action Group member)

Some farmers also felt there was a gap in terms of sharing or disseminating learnings from each group. Being able to share these learnings would help ensure that farmers more widely could benefit. In addition, some farmers felt that being aware of what other groups were focused on would be useful. This type of sharing also increased potential opportunities to join other groups for certain activities or share resources on the same subject.

“There are opportunities across the soft skills that are important to pass on, sharing these learnings of general farm profitability.” (Previous Action Group member)

“We do not coordinate similar groups to make them more effective – this could be an opportunity going forward.” (Programme stakeholder)



Opportunities for the future

A range of opportunities for the future of the Action Group programme were discussed and suggested.



Based on two in-person workshops with farmers in mid-Canterbury and Dannevirke, and an online workshop with Action Group facilitators.

1. Connect

A future opportunity is to develop a central database to provide details of relevant subject matter experts, access tools and information, and coordinate groups with similar objectives.

“ Currently, we do not coordinate similar groups to make them more effective – this could be an opportunity going forward.
- Programme stakeholder

2. Share / disseminate

Group members and stakeholders highlighted an incredible amount of learning had occurred that was limited to those directly involved in the group. A means of sharing / disseminating the ‘good stuff’ that comes out of these groups was suggested by many.

“ The knowledge within the group needs to be shared across farms, such as basic mitigation techniques used on farm or how you deal with different issues. We learnt very valuable things that should be shared, a practical farmer perspective is good too.
- Active Action Group member



34%
of farmers involved in the programme haven't shared anything about what their group has done with other farmers.

3. Support

Many mentioned the surprising amount of administration time that was required for successful groups, with some groups facing challenges getting started, and others with transitioning to self-funding.

Suggestions for increased support included:

- Administering a programme coordinator for additional support
- Creating templates to support the formation of groups
- Developing guides on how to transition to self-funding.

“ Developing a template for the formation of the group will be very useful – need the administrative role to drive this, farmers are time poor.
- Active Action Group member

4. Upskill / provide opportunities

The facilitation training provided during the programme was well received; a means of continuing to provide training and upskilling for facilitators was encouraged.

Opportunities for the future

Group members (past and present), facilitators and programme stakeholders encouraged the continuation of the programme.

“I think [our group] will just keep going, I see the group still being together in 10 years’ time.”
(Active Action Group member)

“Probably some of the best possible use of B+LNZ levies.” (Active Action Group member)

B+LNZ are keen to know how the programme could be supported going forward. Future support should be shaped around the critical success factors and areas where opportunities to improve or enhance systems were identified. The small group learning model works well and there is no need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ as highlighted by some stakeholders. Based on feedback from both farmers and stakeholders, B+LNZ could consider focussing on the following key elements:

- Effective facilitation
- Practical, peer-to-peer learning
- Access / connection to / with experts
- Engagement and momentum.

“I hope B+LNZ keeps supporting these programmes. I continue to see the benefits... especially in the programme that trained the facilitators. All my adult life I have supported discussion groups where I can. They were great for me when I was a young hill country shepherd on the East Coast and despite a few gaps in these programmes, they continue to succeed.”
(Programme stakeholder)

“Needs impetus and support from B+LNZ to revive the group.” (Previous Action Group member)

Other areas where group members felt there was room for additional support included:

- The set up and coordination of the groups, e.g. administrative tasks, communication
- Better ways to share / disseminate learnings to ensure farmers more widely went on to benefit
- Awareness of other groups / potential to join or share resources.

Where to next?

A range of opportunities for the future of the Action Group programme were discussed and suggested. The opportunities have been grouped into four areas:

1. **Connect** – groups, experts, extension
2. **Share / disseminate** – the good work coming out of the programme
3. **Support** – with coordination and admin
4. **Upskill / provide opportunities** – for facilitators and farmer mentors

1. Connect – groups, experts, extension

There is potential to better connect Action Groups and their members with:

- Other groups
- Subject matter experts
- B+LNZ's extension network.

Accessing subject matter experts was one of the most valuable activities provided by B+LNZ and others mentioned by members of Action Groups. Identifying the right people to talk to, even some located internationally, was regularly highlighted amongst positive feedback on facilitators. There is an opportunity to create a system, such as a database, to better connect groups with experts on certain topics.

Occasionally members mentioned moving (or wanting to move) between Action Groups. One member talked about initially starting out in a regenerative farming Action Group before realising another group was a better fit. Members of disestablished groups mentioned the potential of joining another group in the future, after the successful achievement of their group's objectives and subsequent group disestablishment. Both active and previous group members discussed opportunities to share resources or experts with other groups where objectives or topics were similar. Providing a means to see where groups exist and their key foci would allow for better connection between groups, and potential for farmers to join groups as appropriate.

A future opportunity in this space is to develop a central database to:

- Reach relevant subject matter experts
- Access tools and information
- Coordinate groups with similar objectives.

“Having access to good people is valuable – being able to get the right people in front of us is important – even farmers with experiences, such as going through drench resistance.” (Active Action Group member)

“Find a way to advertise the groups, to get it out there that the groups are around – so people know what's out there and what their objectives are so they know they can join.” (Active Action Group member)

2. Share / disseminate learnings

Further to (1) above, group members and stakeholders alike also raised the fact that while an incredible amount of learning had occurred that was mostly limited to those directly involved in the group. While this could be considered an incentive to be involved in this programme, to reap the benefits of the learning that occurs, farmers did not like to see good information not being shared more widely. One group interviewed were planning to write a book about their learnings on the specific topic their group focussed on, but this approach was an exception.

A means of sharing / disseminating the 'good stuff' that comes out of these groups was suggested by many.

“The knowledge within the group needs to be shared across farms, such as basic mitigation techniques used on farm or how you deal with different issues. We learnt very valuable things

that should be shared, a practical farmer perspective is good too.” (Active Action Group member)

3. Support with group formation and coordination

There are some key areas where group members felt some coordinated / centralised support could be beneficial. Many mentioned the surprising amount of administration time that was required for successful groups, with some groups facing challenges getting started, and others with transitioning to self-funding.

If funding was available, a programme coordinator to support this work would alleviate pressure on the facilitator / lead farmer to focus on other tasks. However in lieu of this being possible, some templates or resources to outline how to tackle particular issues were suggested. This could include:

- Creating templates to support the formation of groups – what is needed, role clarity, expectations, setting objectives, recruitment etc.
- Developing guides on how to transition to self-funding.

“Developing a template for the formation of the group will be very useful – need the administrative role to drive this; farmers are time poor.” (Active Action Group member)

4. Provide training to upskill facilitators

The evidence from the evaluation was clear – the role of the facilitator is the number one ingredient for a successful Action Group. Group members and programme stakeholders placed a lot of importance on this role and ensuring there is support for this role moving forward. The facilitation training provided during the programme was intensive and well received; a means of continuing to provide training and upskilling for facilitators was encouraged.

An important point that goes together with this recommendation, is the idea of peer-to-peer learning and finding opportunities to bring farmers into facilitation roles. Strong feedback was that focusing on bringing farmers into facilitation leadership roles is the right way to approach this.

Other ideas and opportunities

Below is a miscellaneous list of other ideas and opportunities that were mentioned, or farmers felt should be considered when paving the way forward.

- Potential to finding funding from elsewhere within government
- Potential to clarify the role / better work together with other group learning models (i.e., catchment groups, discussion groups)
- Potential to focus future efforts on the younger generation / initiate more mentoring programmes

“The support received was awesome, however in our case the next generation of farmers need to take up the reins.” (Previous Action Group member)

Challenges to be considered

The focus of this evaluation has been on understanding how B+LNZ can support this programme going forward. There were several other challenges raised through the process of evaluating Action Groups. These were considered when developing the four key recommendations.

Some other feedback and considerations beyond these four areas were also provided that may be of interest to B+LNZ. In the future it may be important to:

- Consider the most appropriate approach for the selection and oversight of facilitators
“[I was surprised by] how much the facilitator was being paid and how many other groups he was also running.” (Previous Action Group member)
- Consider providing a baseline set of rules for effective group governance
“Some IP and business strategy was used as competition in non-farming business.” (Previous Action Group member)
- Consider how farmers who don't suit this learning format can be supported.
“As important as small groups are, there are many farmers who are not group joiners, or consultant users. How might we meet their needs?” (Programme stakeholder)

Modelling the impact of Action Groups – 2023 update of the Action Network impact model

Introduction

In 2021, Scarlatti undertook an evaluation of the RMPP programme and its various investments – including the Action Network. The evaluation included the development of an economic model to quantitatively estimate the Network’s impact on the profitability of participating farmers and aggregated across the industry. B+LNZ – as part of this evaluation – were interested in understanding how the modelled impact of the Network has changed in the last two years (measured as \$/ha). As part of this evaluation, we have reviewed several key inputs to the model that have changed to provide an updated estimate of the programme’s impact.

Updates to the inputs and changes to the modelled benefits are presented below. The 2021 evaluation of the RMPP Action Network – along with more details on the methodology to develop the economic model and the assumptions used – is available in a September 2021 report (contact Scarlatti to access).

The impact model developed to evaluate the Action Group programme in 2021 is complex and includes a range of variables associated with capability development. However, the findings of the model are mostly driven by just two inputs. These are:

- The number of Action Groups running
- The extent to which Action Groups were effective at facilitating capability change.

The focus of the review is to update these two inputs that reflect changes made to the programme over the last two years. This will refine our estimate of how farm and industry profitability is expected to improve through to 2040.

Updates to the economic model

The economic model uses a range of inputs and assumptions to model the Action Network’s impact on industry profitability. The following inputs have been updated, drawing on findings from workshops run as part of the evaluation review, and data recorded over the past two years:

Number of Action Groups

The number of Action Groups established annually from 2022 is according to the following schedule:

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027+
Before	20	20	20	20	20	20
Now	4	3	0	0	0	0

Fewer groups have commenced than expected. It was previously assumed 20 Action Groups to establish annually. However, this looks increasingly unlikely given the 2022 and 2023 establishment rates. It is therefore assumed no Action Groups establish from 2024 onwards to not overreach on the modelled benefits attributable to the investment made.

Effectiveness of improving capability

The effectiveness of Action Groups at improving the capability of farmers is calibrated by facilitators and participants' judgements about how participation in an Action Group shifts a participant's capability along a hypothetical continuum from the least capable, to the most capable, farmer in the industry. In 2021, and for this update, we ran a series of workshops to 'crowdsource' this expert judgement. For this update, we used a slightly different approach to run these workshops – one that we judged to be more rigorous. This is significant because the updated results found that the effectiveness had increased by approximately 300% compared to the previous model's inputs.

Both in 2021 and in this update, we use the long-run change in farm profitability as a check on the model findings. That is, we consider how many years of 'business as usual' profitability gains the effect of the Action Network is equivalent to. Using this check, suggests that our workshop participants may have been somewhat optimistic about the shift in capability i.e. the 300% lift from 2021 may be overstated. Accordingly, we have treated the results from the workshops as relating to a 'best case' scenario.

2023 model outputs

When considering the overall industry impact due to the Action Network we have outlined three possible scenarios:

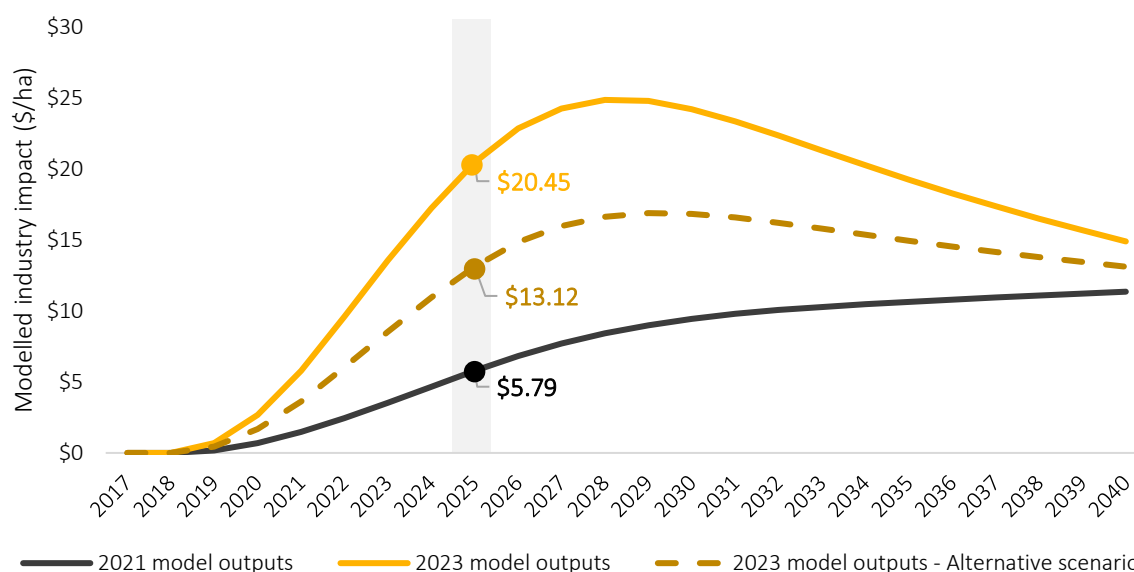
- **The model outputs from 2021** – our first attempt at modelling the economic benefits using the information and assumptions made in 2021.
- **The model outputs from 2023** (aka 'best case' scenario) – a revised model incorporating the two revised inputs as described above (number of groups and effectiveness of improving capability).
- **An alternative scenario** – a midpoint between the above two scenarios, which is a more conservative interpretation than the 2023 scenario.

Annual economic benefits

Under the 2023 scenario, the average improvement in profitability (\$/ha) received by participating farms has increased from \$24.60/ha to \$96.10/ha in 2025; an increase of 390%. For the average Action Network farm (830 hectares) we are now modelling a total profitability improvement of \$84,500. At an industry level, this means an annual improvement in profitability of \$169.8 million in 2025, or \$20.45/ha when averaged across the industry's 8.3 million hectares, yellow curve).

As discussed above, we have modelled an additional scenario as a more conservative interpretation of the inputs updated during this review, yellow dotted curve). The annual modelled improvement in profitability under this scenario is \$108.91 million in 2025, or \$13.12/ha. This scenario reflects a midpoint between our initial 2021 outputs and the updated 2023 outputs.

Figure 1: Overall industry impact due to the Action Network (\$/ha)



In the 2023 model updates, we see a gradual decline in the annual profitability generated from Action Group farmers for two reasons. First, we have revised our assumptions on the number of the Action Groups established annually meaning no ‘new’ benefits will be generated in the industry from about 2028. Secondly, our model considers a constant rate of attrition of farmers from the industry meaning that about 5% of farmers who have engaged in Action Groups are modelled to leave the industry annually. Over time, these two factors mean we model less farmers operating in the industry that have engaged with an Action Group previously and are therefore continuing to realise the associated profitability benefits.

The numbers sitting behind Figure 1 are provided in a summary table below.

Table 2: Summary table of modelled outputs

Scenario	Annual industry impact (\$M)		Annual industry impact (\$/ha)	
	2025	2040	2025	2040
2021 model outputs	\$48.06	\$94.25	\$5.79	\$11.36
2023 model outputs	\$169.76 +\$121.70	\$123.58 +\$29.34	\$20.45 +\$14.66	\$14.89 +\$3.53
2023 model outputs – Alternative scenario	\$108.91 +\$60.85	\$108.92 +\$14.67	\$13.12 +\$7.33	\$13.12 +\$1.77

Return on investment (ROI)

The 2023 updates to the impact model indicate the 2017 present value of industry profitability generated through to 2040 is approximately \$1,240 million: an increase of about \$755 million. The ratio of this benefit to the combined investment by RMPP and B+LNZ (\$17.85 million) is 70:1 – that is for every dollar invested, \$70 in industry profitability is generated. This is roughly a \$42 increase per invested dollar from the 2021 modelled outputs.

The 2023 alternative scenario is modelled to have a 2017 present value of industry profitability of approximately \$863 million. The ratio of this benefit to the combined investment made is 48:1. This is roughly a \$21 increase per dollar invested from the 2021 modelled outputs.

In both cases, the 2023 model outputs are showing an improvement in the return on investment generated for the investment made in the Action Network programme. This improvement is primarily driven by an increase in the strength of the shift function following feedback from the workshops. The extent of the improvement is up for discussion; however, we would recommend erring on the side of caution and aligning communications regarding the benefit of the Action Groups with the outputs for the alternative scenario rather than the best case.

A summary of the ROI metrics discussed above is included below.

Table 3: Summary of ROI metrics

Scenario	Present value of benefits (\$M)	Investment (\$M)	Benefit-cost ratio
2021 model outputs	\$485.50	\$17.65	27.5:1
2023 model outputs	\$1,241.35 +\$755.85	\$17.85	69.5:1 +\$42.00
2023 model outputs – Alternative scenario	\$863.42 +\$377.92		48.4:1 +\$20.90

Non-economic and unquantified economic benefits

In addition to the improvements in industry profitability, the 2021 evaluation of the Action Network identified the following additional benefits. While these are not quantified in the impact model due to them being too diffuse to attempt quantification with, they are still important to acknowledge as benefits of participation. They include:

- **Non-economic benefits** such as improved farmer wellbeing, environmental outcomes, social licence to operate, and succession.
- **Unquantified economic benefits** such as an enduring ability to drive change, and diversification and economic resilience.

Conclusion

This work provided evidence of the value of the Action Group programme, both in terms of adding value to farm businesses and to the lives of those who run them. Wellbeing², connection and confidence were mentioned just as frequently as business success and progression.

“These groups have been one of the most positive things in New Zealand agriculture in the last 20 years and I hope the funding continues to make them accessible to all farmers.” (Active Action Group member)

Two inputs were updated to the impact model that was first generated in 2021. An even better return on investment is now evident compared with what was initially modelled in 2021, demonstrating an expected return on investment of 48:1.

Key areas to consider support moving forward were identified and were consistent across the different research participants and data collection methods. B+LNZ can provide support to the programme by acting as the central connection point for Action Groups, providing support and guidance around the administration of the groups, and continuing to champion the role of the facilitator.

“Top work team - it may not always seem like it, but you are making a difference.” (Programme stakeholder)

² See also, B+LNZ Hill Country Futures farm salus work.

Appendix A: Methodology

Survey

A survey was undertaken to gather feedback on the Action Group programme from active and previous group members. 298 people responded to the survey, comprising 96 active members, 121 previous members, and 81 people who have supported Action Groups.

Interviews

Seven interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved with the Action Group programme from B+LNZ, Silver Fern Farms, Rabobank, ANZ, and ANZCO. This provided an understanding of the key successes and challenges of the programme for the organisations and wider industry perspective.

15 semi-structured qualitative focus group interviews were conducted with 42 farmers involved with Action Groups to understand the successes, challenges, and lessons learned, with a future focused lens. To ensure an accurate representation of perspectives were captured, this included both members of active (N=22) and disestablished (N=20) Action Groups.

Note: In an ideal world it would be helpful to quantitatively measure the value the programme has had for farmers by assigning financial values to reported changes on-farm. These interviews were not structured in a way that made that possible – instead farmers provided an overall view of the value their involvement in the programme had, and where possible, described specific changes on-farm or in their personal skills that they felt held value. To look at specific financial benefits, individual case study analysis would be required.

Workshops

An online workshop was conducted with seven Action Group facilitators to capture their highlights and challenges of being an Action Group facilitator, as well as what they think the future support of Action Groups could look like.

Two in-person workshops with farmers who were currently or had previously been involved in the Action Group programme were carried out. These took place in Ashburton and Dannevirke to represent both North and South Island group members.

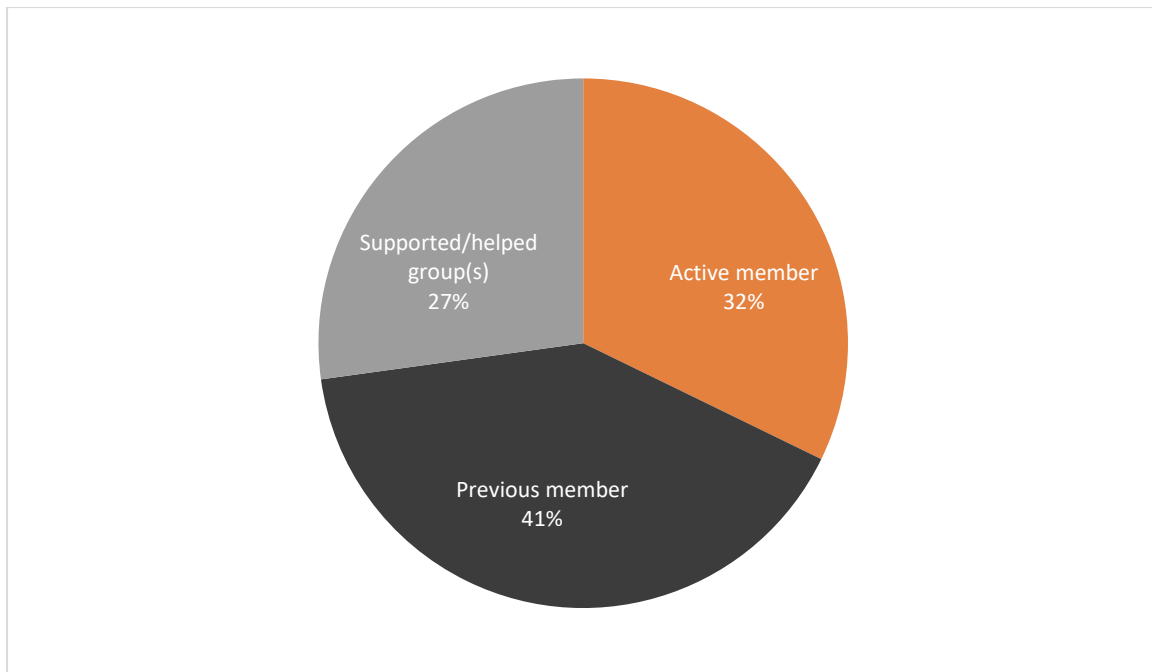
Impact model

As an activity within the workshops, insights were gathered from both facilitators and farmers about the expected capability shift that occurred as a result of farmer's involvement with an Action Group. This contributed to the updates to the impact model developed for the RMPP programme. The impact model was updated to reflect the last two years using these insights, as well as the updated number of active Action Groups.

Appendix B: Survey results

Overall

Figure 2: Survey participants by programme involvement (N= 298)



Supported / helped Action Groups

Figure 2: What involvement have you had with action groups? (N = 81)

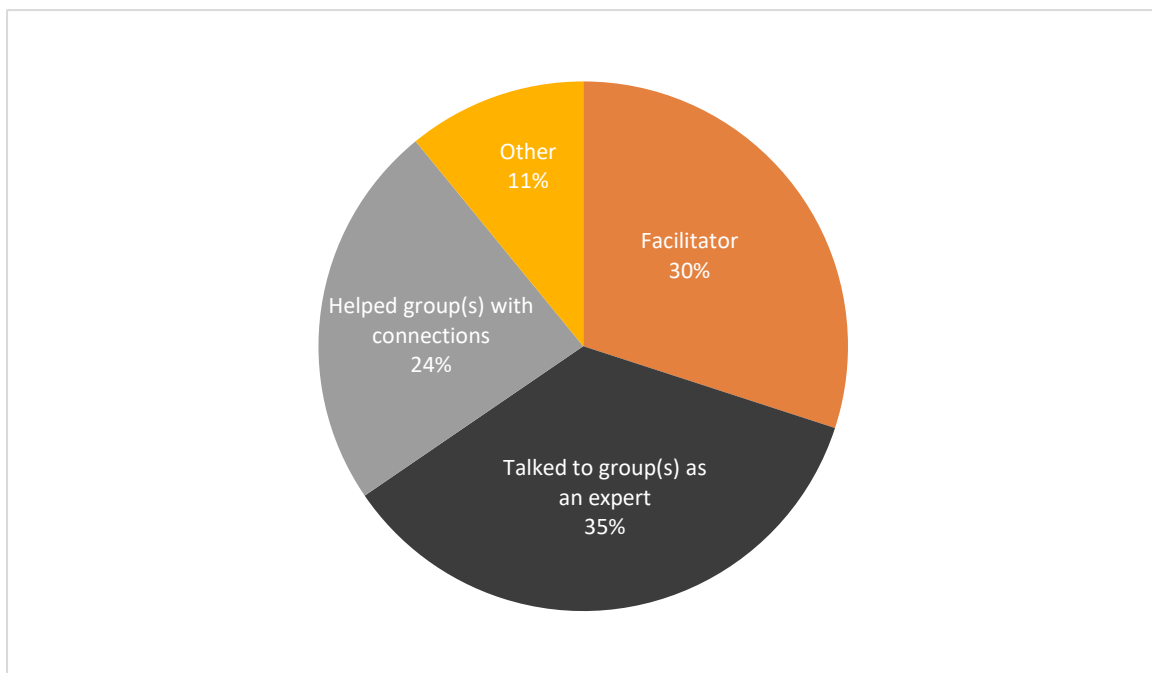


Figure 3: How many action groups have you supported? (N = 81)

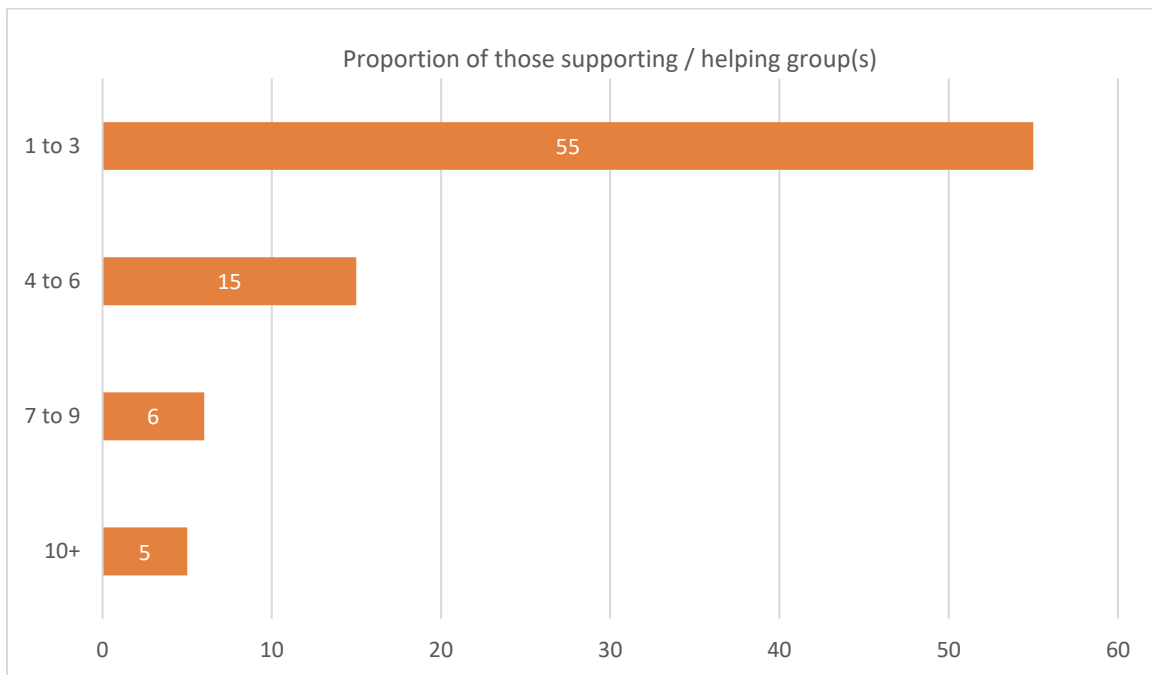
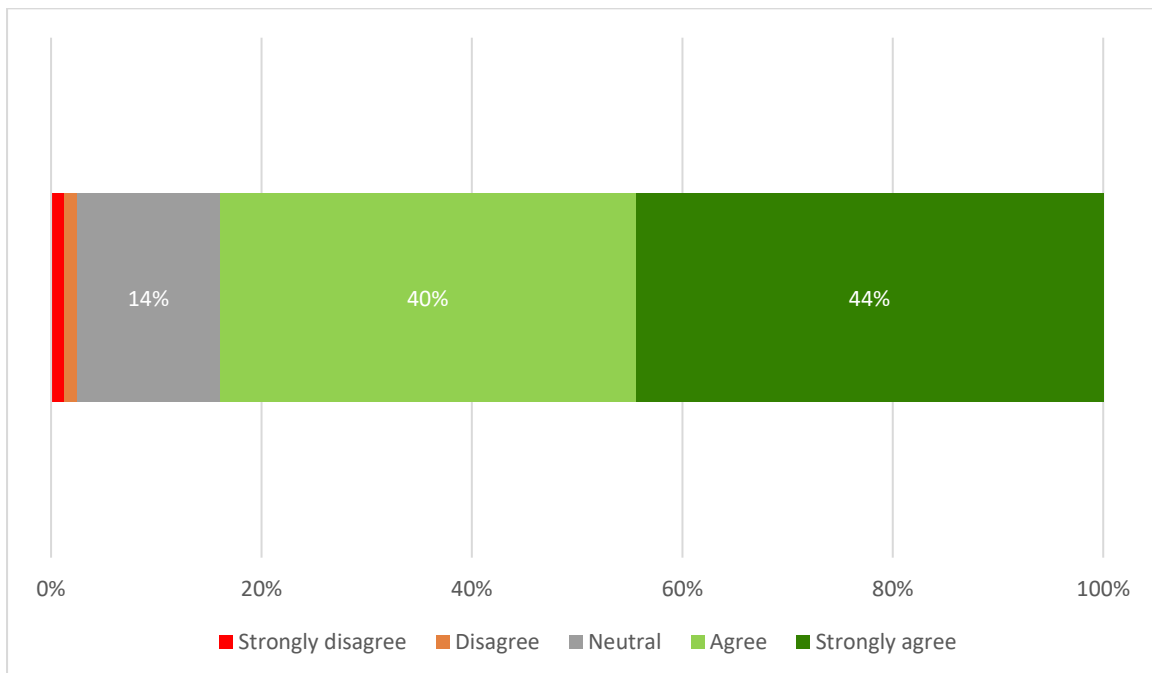
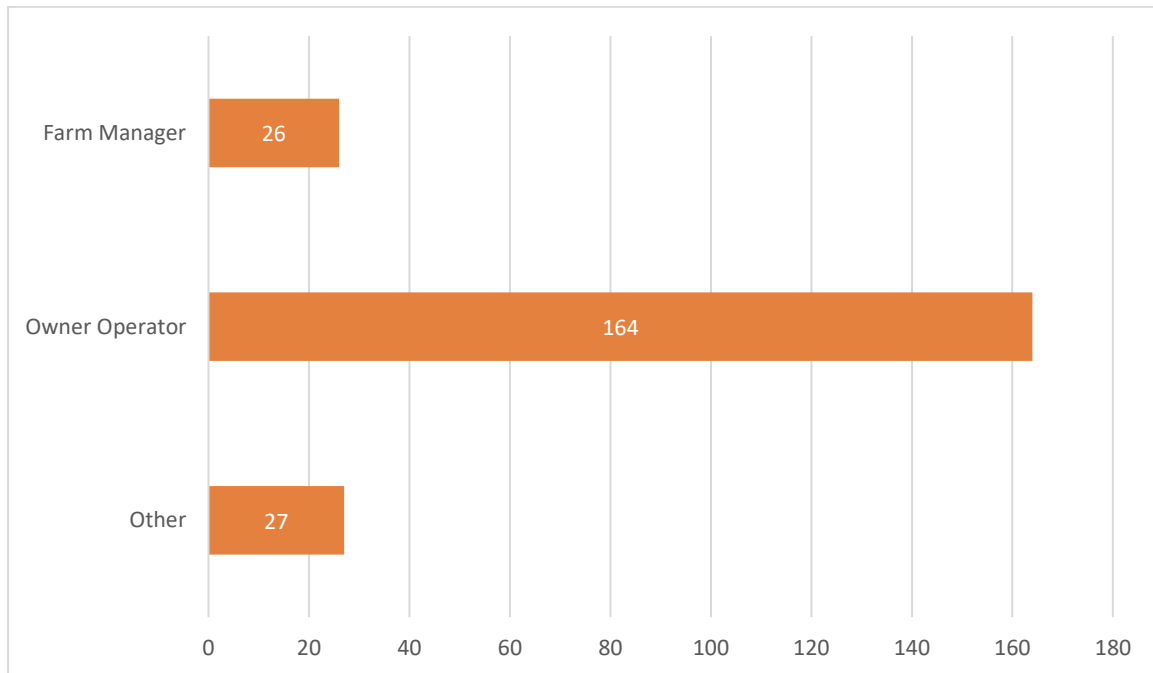


Figure 4: To what extent do you agree that supporting / communicating with groups has been valuable for you? (N = 81)



About participants / group members (active and previous)

Figure 5: What is your role on-farm? (N = 217)



(Other includes Head Shepherd, Stock Manager and General Hand)

Figure 6: What region is your farm located in? (N = 217)

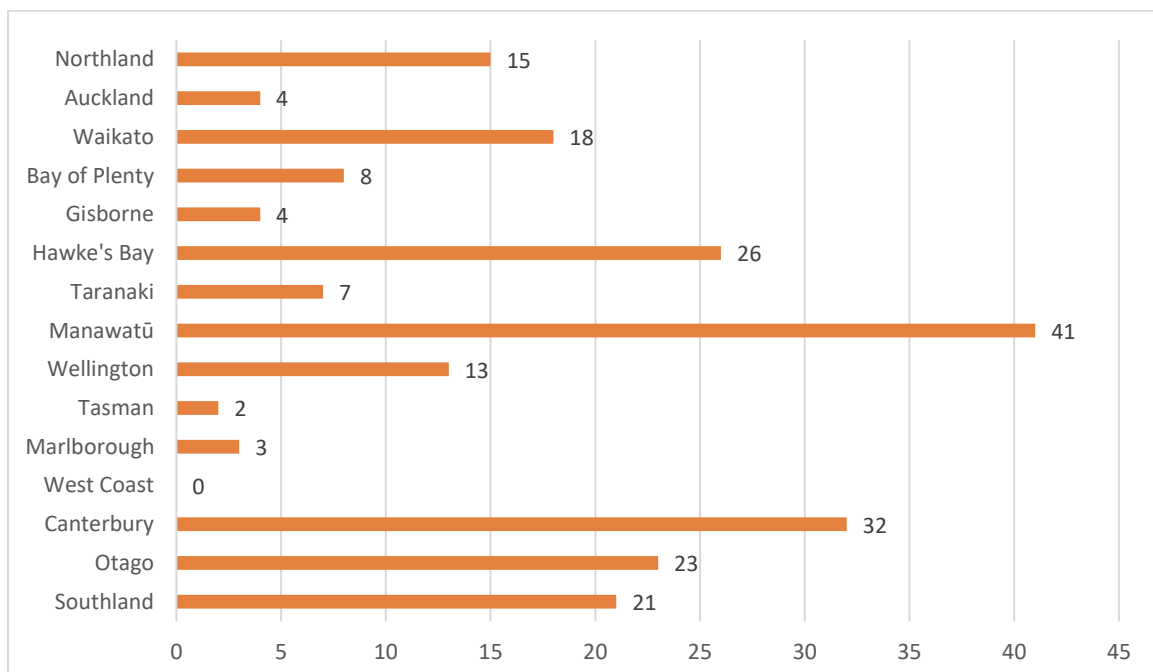


Figure 7: What is your farm class? (N = 217)

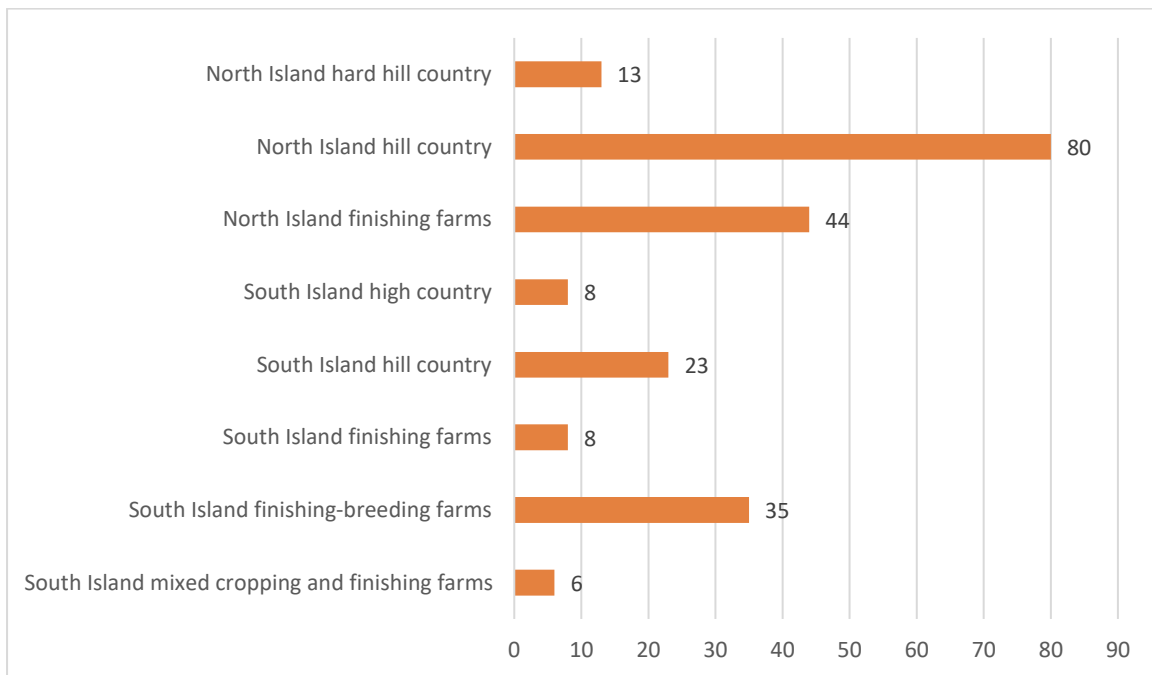


Figure 8: What livestock is the focus of your business? (N = 217)

This question was multi-response.

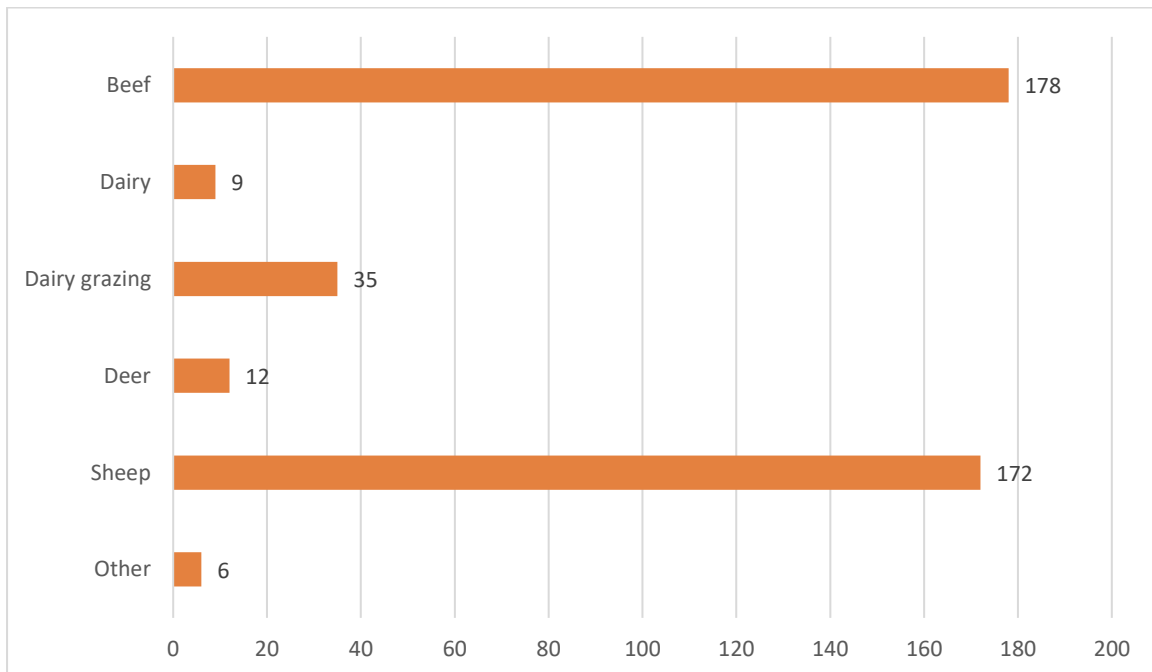


Figure 9: What is the ownership or management model of your property? (N = 217)

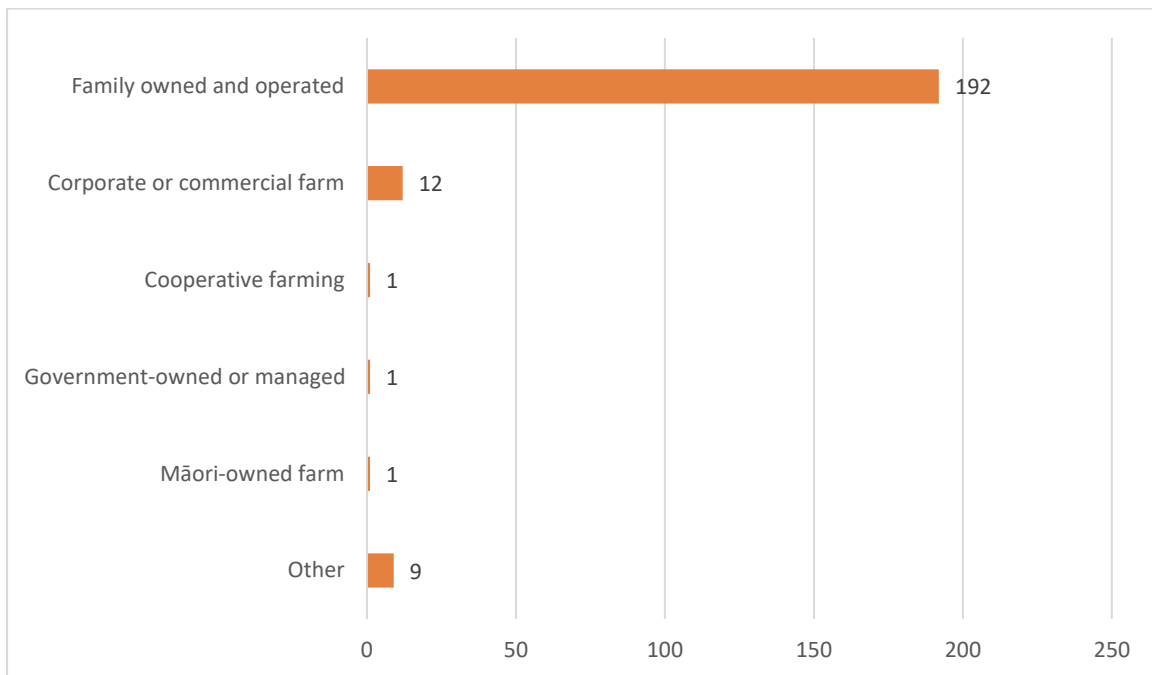


Figure 10: Number of full-time employees on farm (excluding owner operators and family members) (N = 217)

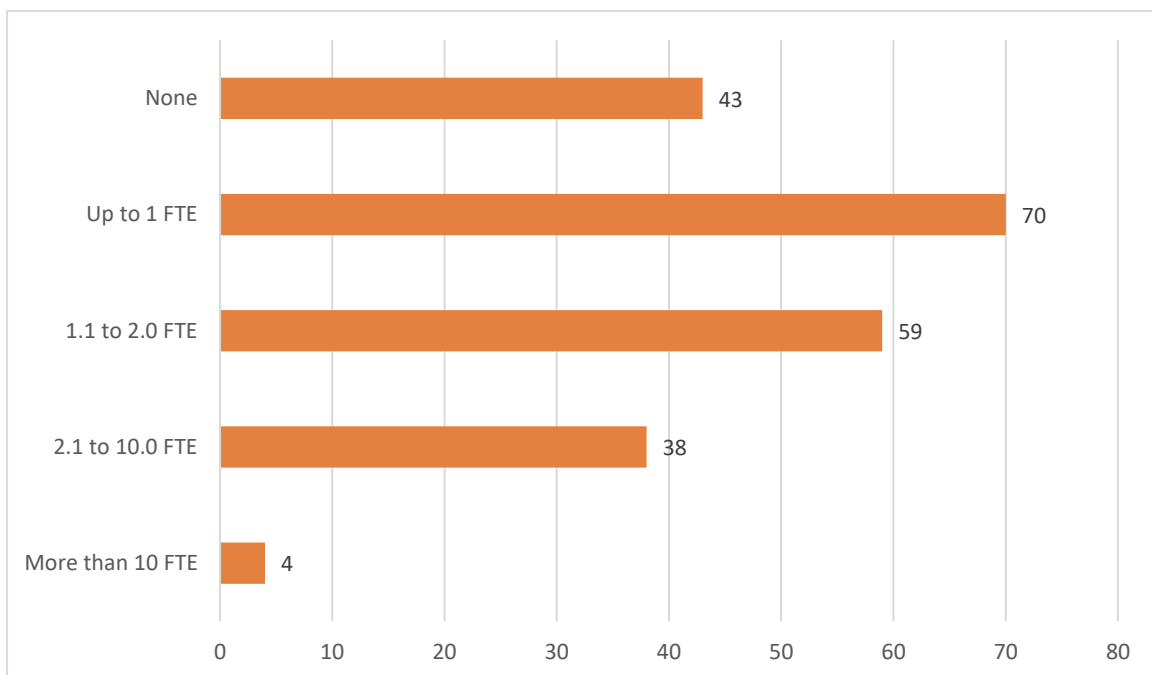
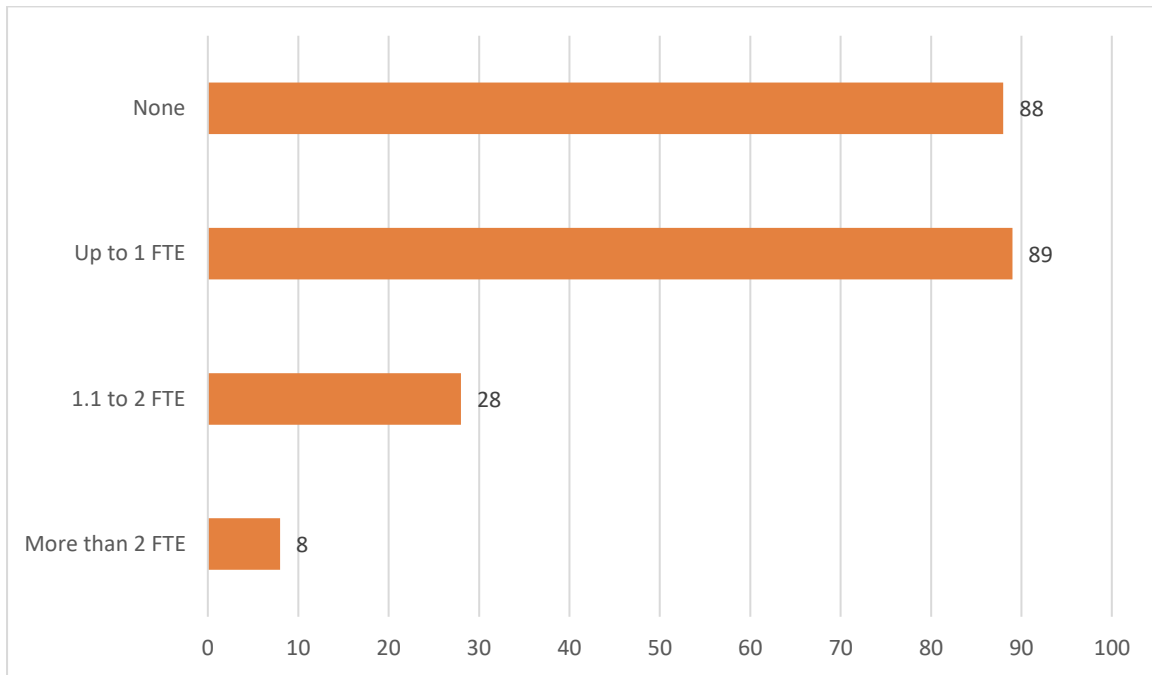


Figure 11: Number of part-time employees on farm (excluding owner operators and family members) (N = 217)



Feedback on the programme (active and previous members)

Figure 12: How often did your group meet on average? (N = 217)

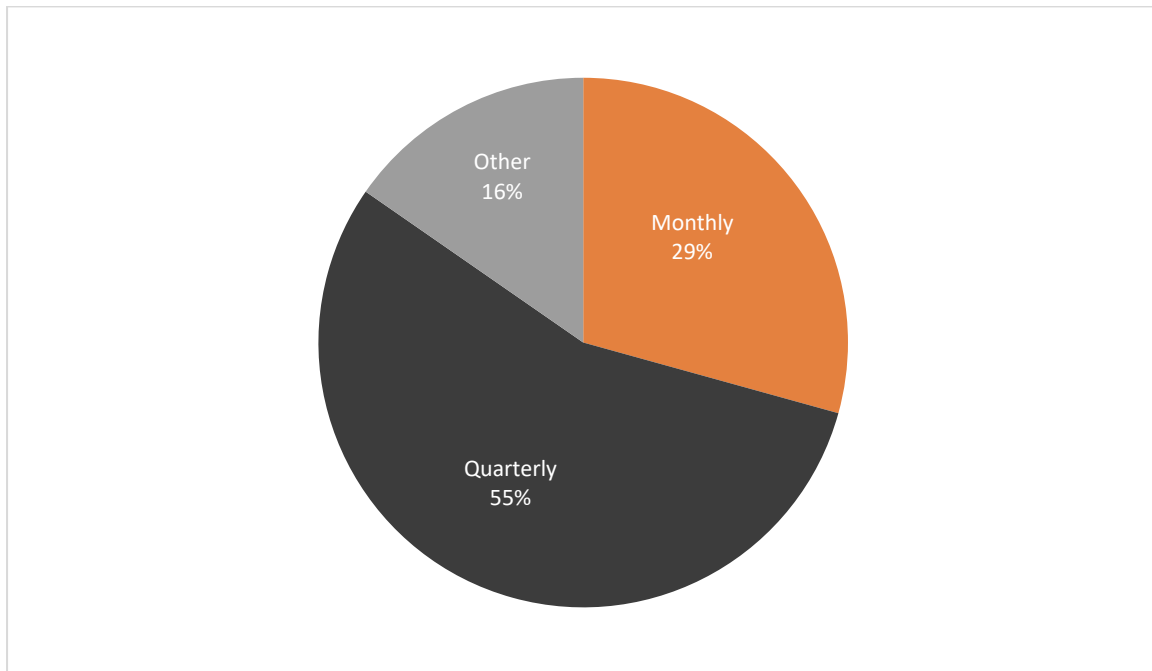


Figure 13: What types of activities did you engage in as part of the action group? (N = 217)

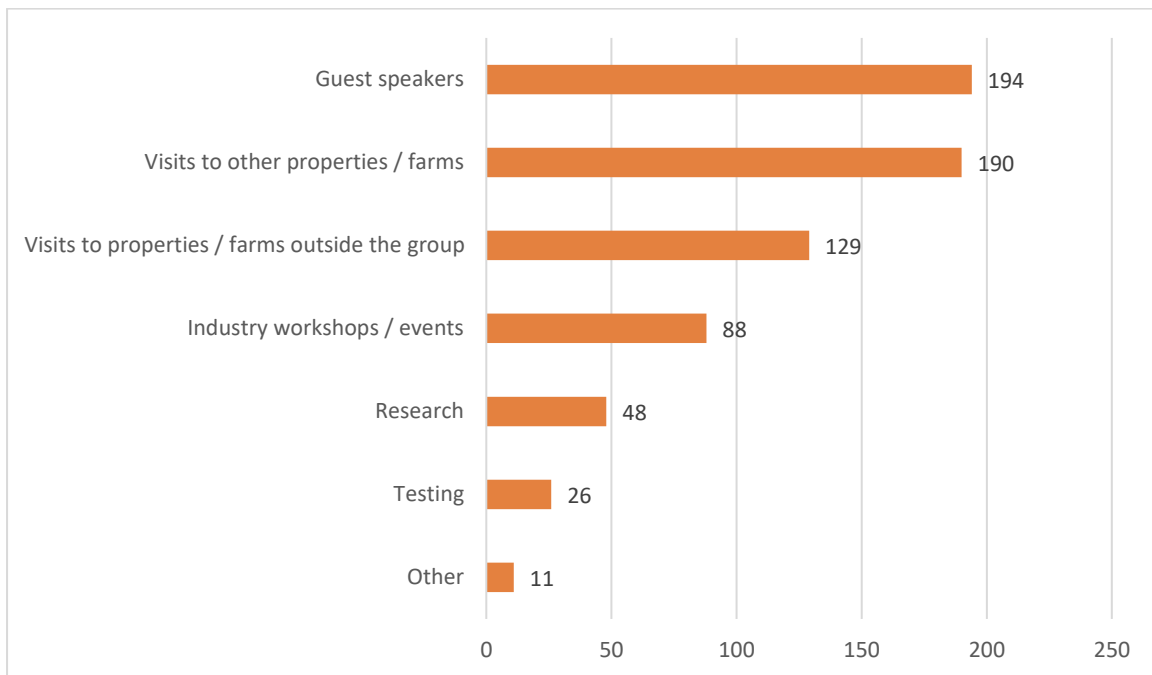


Figure 14: Please rank the types of activities based on how valuable they were for your group (N = 217)

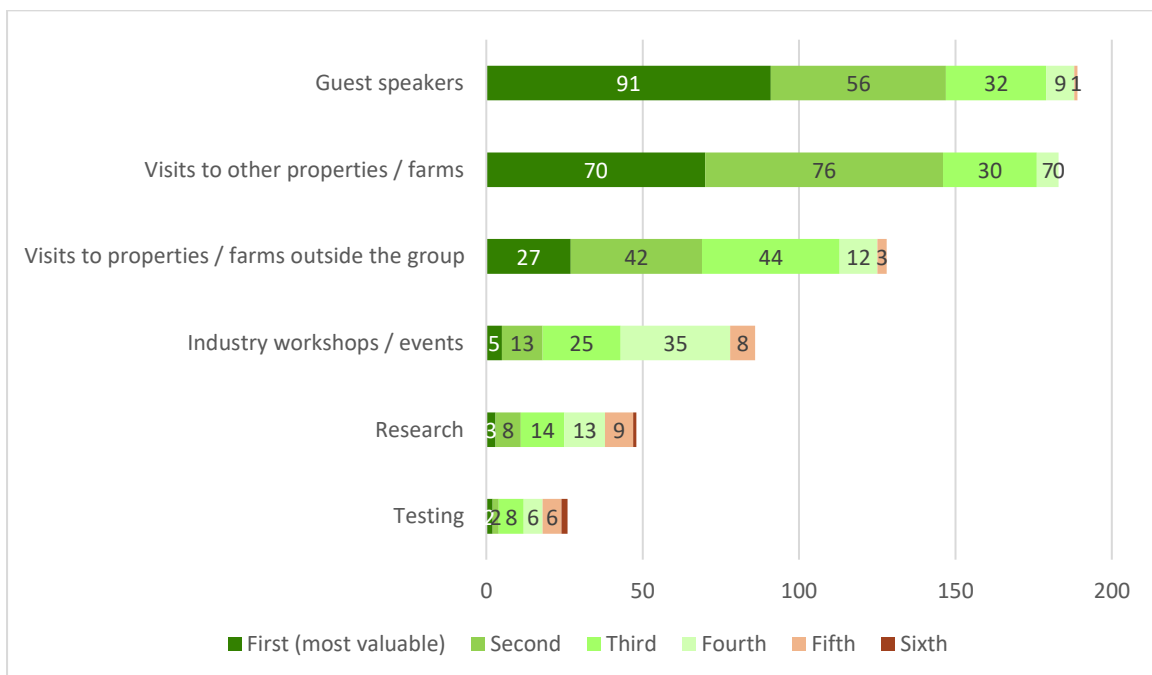


Figure 15: How would you rate the effectiveness of your group facilitator? (N = 217)

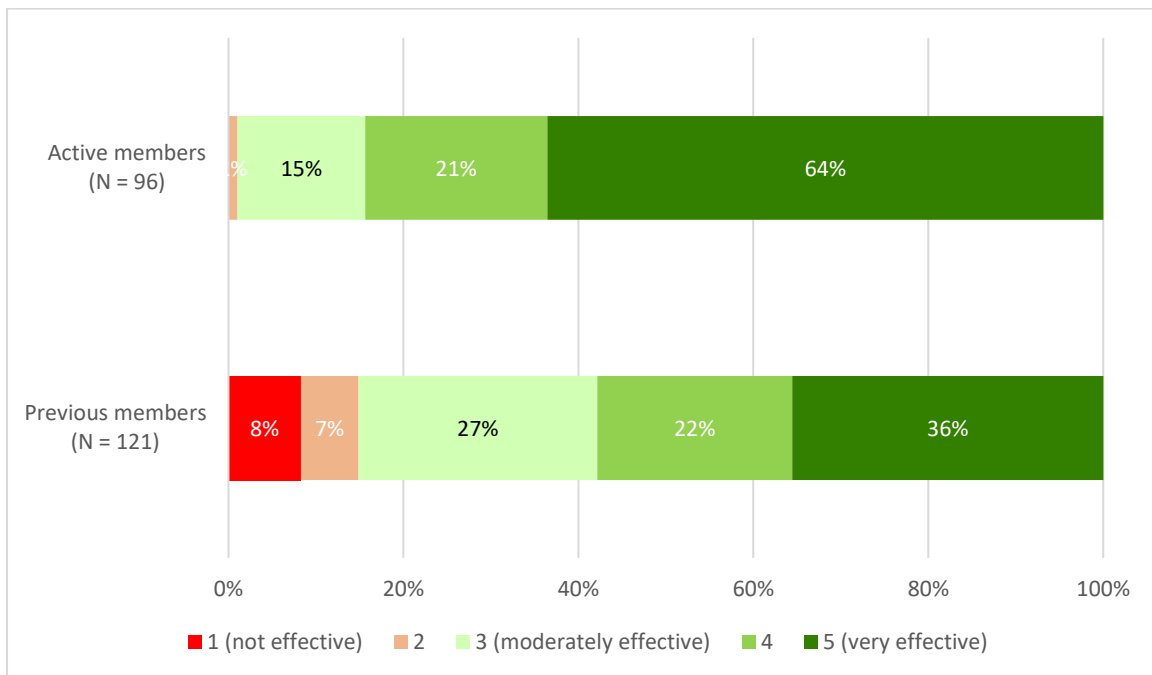


Figure 16: To what extent do you agree that the group has achieved the objective(s)? (N = 217)

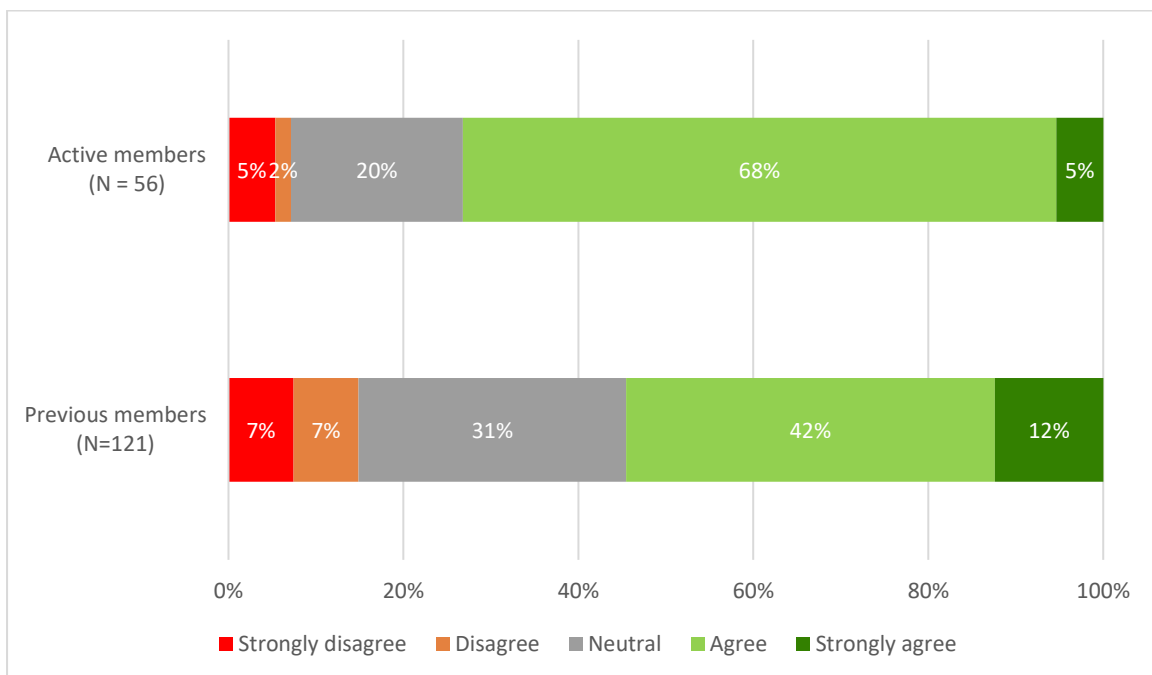


Figure 17: To what extent do you agree that the group effectively addressed any challenges? (N = 217)

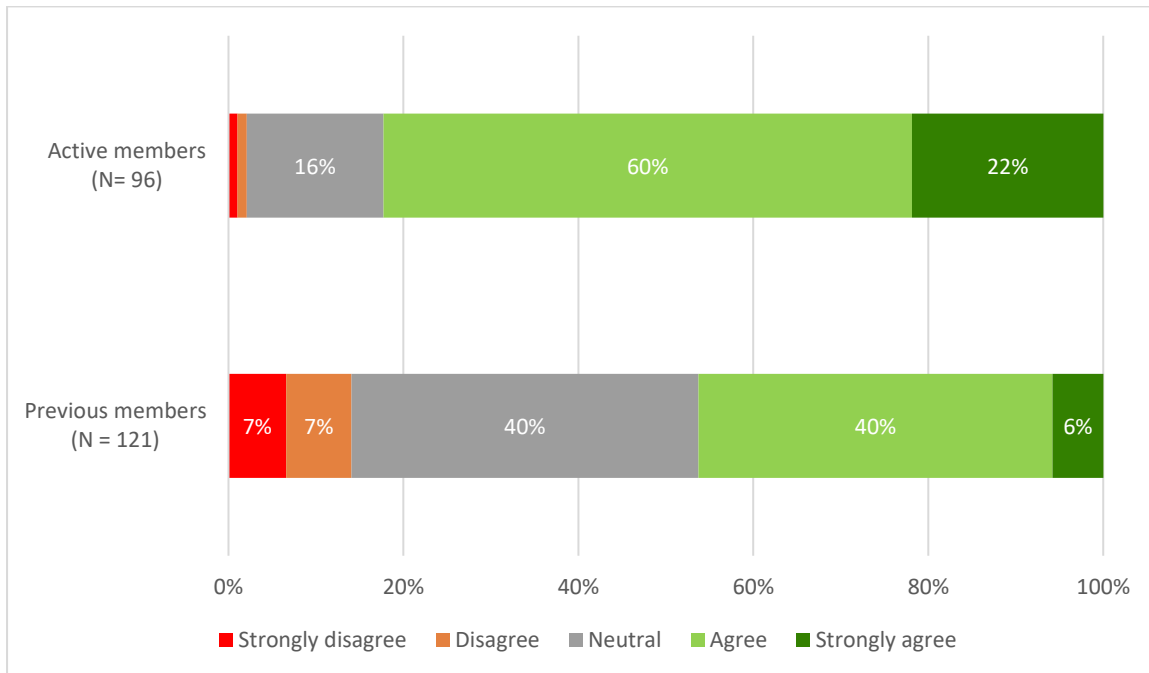


Figure 18: To what extent do you believe the group influenced the changes you made on-farm? (N=215)

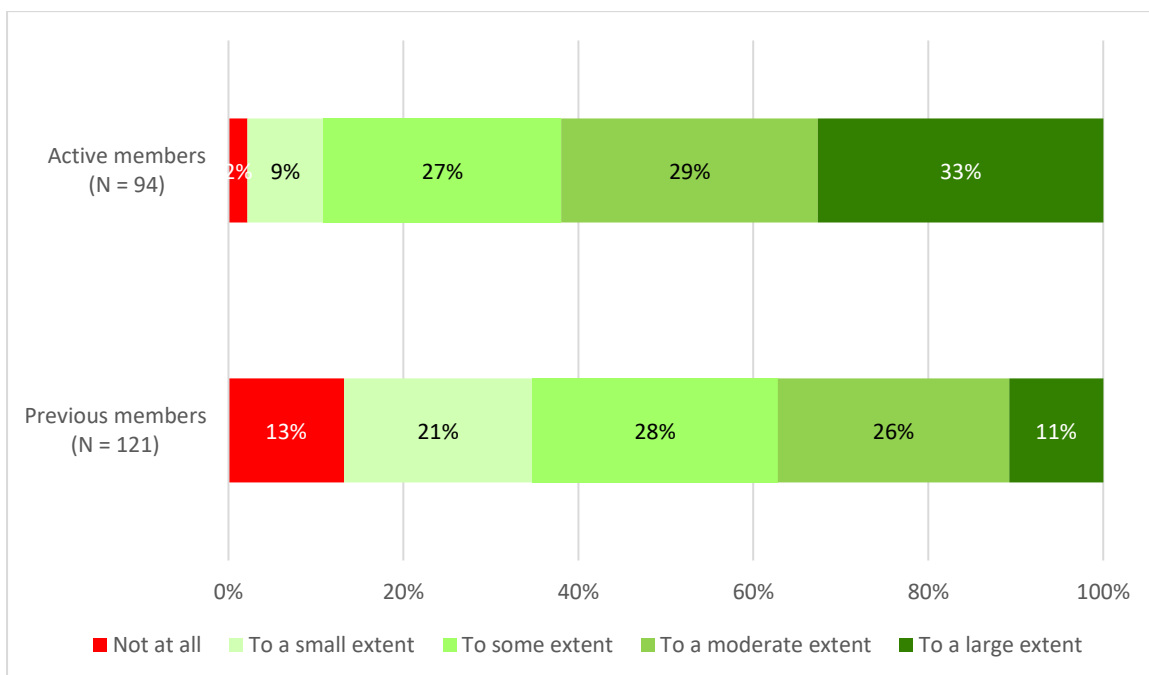


Figure 19: To what extent do you believe that being part of the group has had a positive impact on you as an individual? (N = 215)

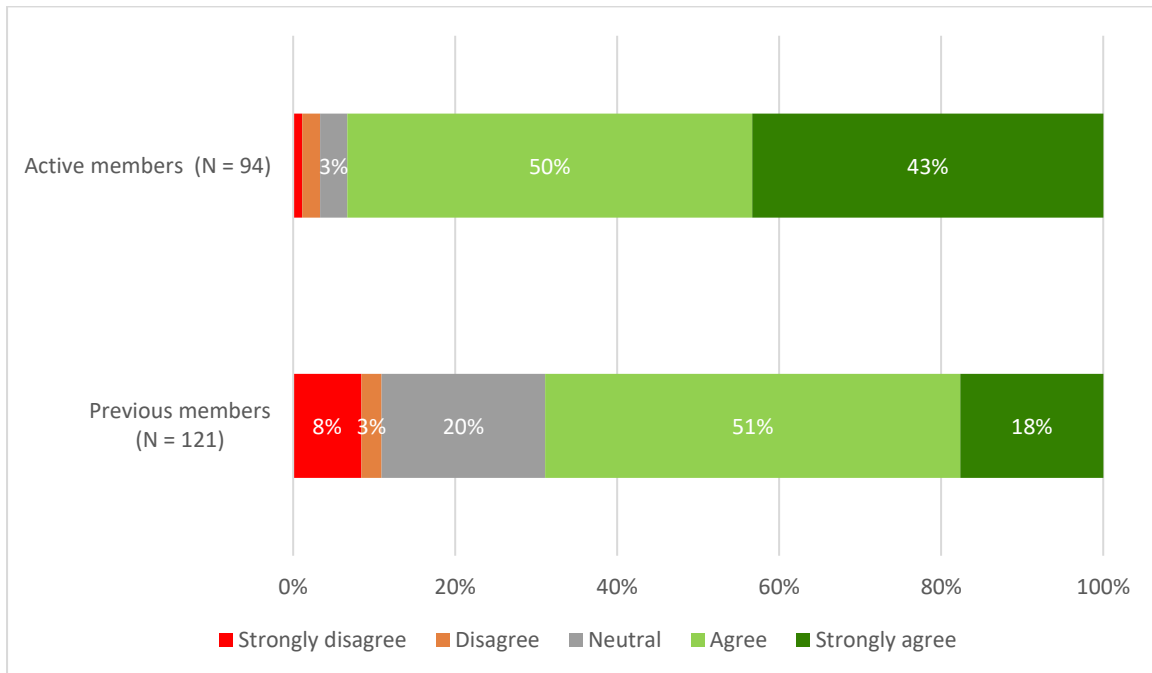


Figure 20: To what extent do you believe that being part of the group has had a positive impact on the farm business? (N = 215)

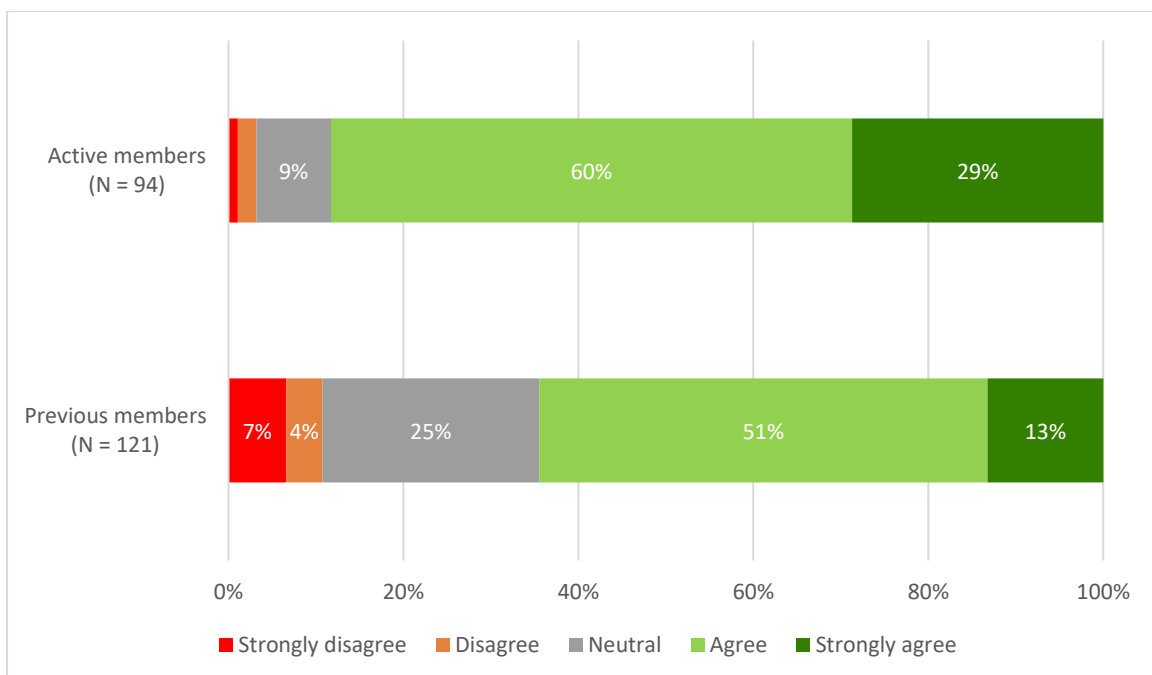


Figure 21: To what extent do you believe that being part of the group has had a positive impact on the wider community? (N = 215)

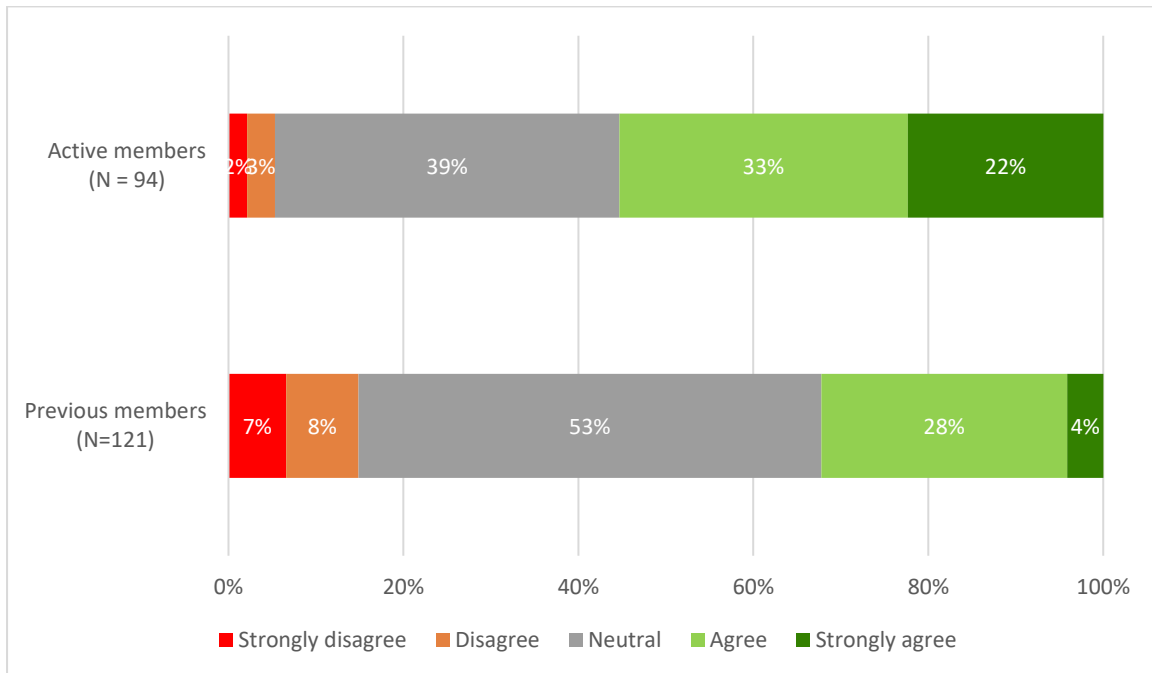


Figure 22: Why did the group become inactive? (N = 122)

(Previous group members only)

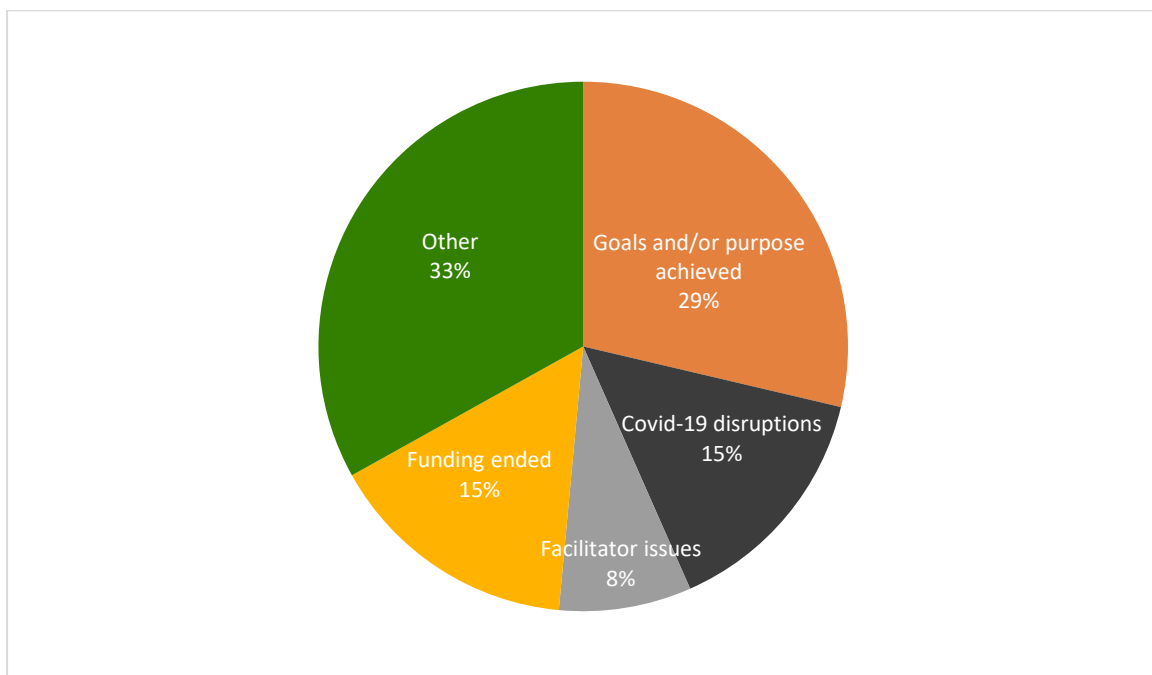


Figure 23: Have you shared what you have learnt / done in the group with others outside your group and / or industry? (N = 215)

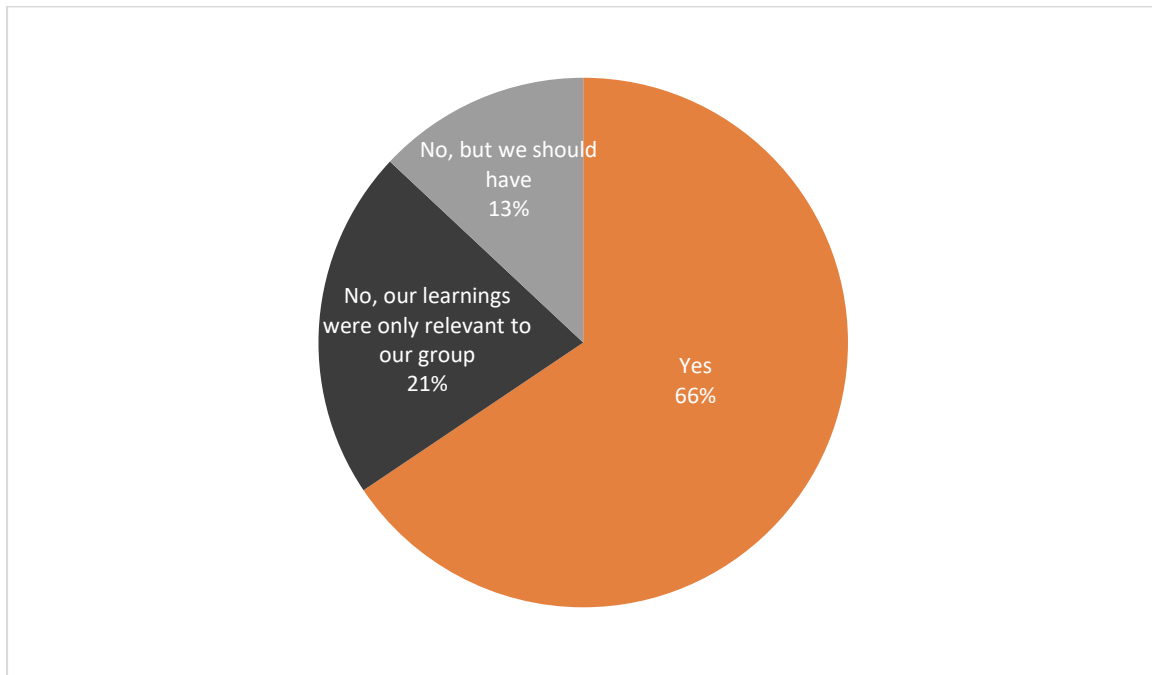


Figure 24: How did you share this information? (N = 141)

