



# Research into the impact of ADEPT

A report from Shared Intelligence

November 2021

# Contents

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1	Executive Summary.....	2
2	Introduction .....	3
3	Information and Support .....	4
4	Networking.....	6
5	Influencing.....	8
6	Perceptions of ADEPT .....	11
7	Perspectives from Corporate Partners .....	12
8	Recommendations .....	14
	Appendix: Analysis of the survey of ADEPT members .....	15

# 1 Executive Summary

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- 1.1 ADEPT commissioned Shared Intelligence to carry out research into the impact of the Association in terms of the service it provides to members, how it is perceived by members, the relationship it has with key stakeholders and its success in influencing government and key agencies. This builds on a similar report we produced in January 2019 based on research carried out in summer/autumn 2018. This report draws on two sources of evidence: an on-line survey of ADEPT members; and 25 non-attributable interviews with members, non-members and key stakeholders.
- 1.2 Our research has revealed high and increasing levels of satisfaction with the information and support provided by ADEPT to its members. More members say they are using the material in their work. Levels of satisfaction with ADEPT events and meetings remains very high. There is an appetite for regional meetings and topic boards to continue to meet online or in a hybrid format, but members want to see a return to in person conferences.
- 1.3 ADEPT members and stakeholders perceive that ADEPT has continued to strengthen its influencing work and that it is having more impact on Whitehall. Our research has found that ADEPT corporate partners are broadly satisfied with their membership and particularly value information sharing and the networking opportunities that ADEPT provides. It is clear however that ADEPT continues to have more impact on and better relationships with some departments than others. The key ingredient is the department's confidence in having informal discussions with a sector leader from ADEPT. This depends on there being consistency in the main point of contact with the association.
- 1.4 Our overall conclusion is that ADEPT should continue with the actions it is already taking to continually improve its member offer and influencing work. We also recommend that the Association should:
- Continue to use online technology for the delivery of regional meetings and topic boards;
  - Support members' PAs as an important link in the association's communications chain;
  - Promote and regularly refresh the leadership development offer;
  - Establish a senior lead point of contact from the association's membership for departments and directorates with which it is seeking to establish a closer relationship;
  - Build on its members' place roles by convening pan government conversations on place-based policies in the context of the government's focus on levelling up.

## 2 Introduction

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2.1 Shared intelligence was commissioned to carry out research into the impact of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT). This report builds on previous research we carried out in 2018 and explores how perceptions of ADEPT's offer to its members and its impact have changed over the last three years, its relationship with key stakeholders, and its success in influencing government and national agencies.

2.2 We have adopted a similar approach to the one used in our earlier research to show how members' perceptions of ADEPT have developed over that period. The core elements of this research involved:

- An on-line survey of ADEPT members;
- 25 non-attributable interviews with ADEPT members, non-members and key stakeholders it is seeking to work with and influence.

2.3 The questions in the survey and interviews were informed by initial scoping conversations with three members of ADEPT's leadership team and secretariat. As a result, this research explores two issues that were not addressed in our previous work: the balance between virtual and face-to-face meetings in light of Covid-19, and perceptions of ADEPT's two leadership development programmes.

2.4 In this report we present the findings of the research under four headings:

- The information and support provided by ADEPT;
- The association's networking activities;
- The impact of ADEPT's influencing work;
- The views of ADEPT's Corporate Partners

We then draw some overall conclusions about how ADEPT is perceived and identify a number of key issues for the association to consider.

A full analysis of the results of the survey is included in the annex.

## 3 Information and Support

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- 3.1 There is a high level of satisfaction with the information ADEPT provides to its members. Overall, 90 percent of respondents agreed that they were well informed about ADEPT's activities. This is 20 percent more than in 2018, suggesting that member satisfaction in this area has increased considerably in the last 2 years. There has also been an increase in the proportion of respondents (74 percent) who reported using information from ADEPT in their work, compared to 60 percent in the last survey. Similarly, respondents showed strong engagement with ADEPT's various communication vehicles – 88 percent said they read or accessed the monthly newsletter, 80 percent engaged with email updates and a further 50 percent visited the ADEPT website. Again, this is an increase since our previous research.

“I engage with ADEPT's communication vehicles. It's a menu approach so you can pick what's useful for you”

City Council member

“I think it is useful. I don't read all of it, but I filter it and send it onto people, and it gives them insight into things they may have not seen before. People in my department find it useful”

City Council member

- 3.2 A majority of the interviewees said they found ADEPT's information and material useful and tried to engage with it as often as possible. Several interviewees stated that what they valued most about their membership was access to new material, knowledge sharing, as well as having access to support if they needed it. However, several issues prevented broader engagement, including:
- Some interviewees said they only engage with ADEPT's material when it meets a specific need;
  - Time pressures meant that interviewees had to be selective about what they access on a day-to-day basis, and this sometimes led to ADEPT's material being side-lined in favour of other sources. One interviewee remarked how there simply wasn't enough “bandwidth” to sort through all material.
  - Several interviewees said that whilst they read ADEPT's material, they didn't always make best use of it in their roles.
- 3.3 Some interviewees referred to the role their PAs played in circulating ADEPT material to assistant directors, heads of service etc. In many councils the role of PAs is an important link in ADEPT's communication chain.
- 3.4 A small number of interviewees said that ADEPT could do more to capture and disseminate examples of good practice. This was seen as an important element of its influencing work. Some

members said they would be incentivised to get more involved if they thought ADEPT's material was directly relevant to the current priorities and pressing issues in their "day job". There was a recognition however, that this would require more active involvement from members which was seen as a challenge because of resourcing and capacity issues.

"Fundamentally, ADEPT is doing really useful stuff but there is always more we could do. My observation is that people don't have enough time and we won't get involved in things that aren't part of our core work because of resourcing.

This is not necessarily a tension, but a challenge"

County Council member

## 4 Networking

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- 4.1 Networking is one aspect of the ADEPT offer with which members are particularly satisfied. Over 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “ADEPT enables and promotes networking opportunities between directors and others working in place-based services”. Interviewees felt that the use of tools such as Zoom and MS Teams had improved attendance at regional meetings and topic boards. This is reflected in the fact that 70 percent of respondents said they would prefer most events and meetings to continue to be delivered virtually. Over 50 percent said they strongly supported ADEPT meetings being made available in hybrid form. There was, however, very strong support amongst interviewees to keep the national conferences face-to-face. They saw this as an extremely valuable opportunity to connect with peers, discuss similar issues and challenges, and have a ‘break’ from the day job. Some interviewees also said that networking at ADEPT events brought direct benefits to their local authority.

“I don’t think large conferences work through webinars. The regional activity is different, I think our interaction has improved during Covid”.

County Council member

“Conferences should be face-to-face, it’s an annual event where we get together. It’s not easy to do the conferences virtually. With the boards we have actually noticed better engagement when they are done virtually”

County Council member

- 4.2 Several members did not have the capacity to participate in regional meetings or topic boards, however those who did found them useful and engaging. One interviewee said how during the height of Covid-19, the topic boards were a really helpful way for likeminded people to get together and discuss common challenges they were facing during the pandemic. There is scope to improve participation. A significant minority of respondents said they never attended ADEPT’s national events (17 percent), regional boards (24 percent), subject boards (26 percent) and working groups (31 percent). Those who do not participate in ADEPT’s events quote time pressures, squeezed budgets as well as having limited understanding of what ADEPT does. Some interviewees suggested that ADEPT could ‘promote’ themselves more.

“The conferences ADEPT hold twice a year are good but I haven’t had the bandwidth to do any of the regional boards or subgroups. But then in terms of the overall feedback that comes out of them, it’s all useful stuff”

Unitary Council member

- 4.3 In general, we received positive responses from interviewees about the ADEPT Leadership Development Programme. Those who attended said they found it really useful and were hoping that modules would be delivered face-to-face in the future. One interviewee enjoyed being the less

experienced person on the programme and learning from others. Several interviewees in more senior positions said they encouraged their staff to join the programme to support and develop the next generation of leaders.

“I’ve pushed people into the leadership programme...but it’s taken 3 years to get one of our first team on there...I’m hoping he’ll become an advocate”

County Council member

- 4.4 Survey responses suggest that there is still more work to be done to raise the profile of the ADEPT Leadership Development Programme and the Excellence in Place Development Programme. A significant number of respondents (66 percent) said they have not attended either programmes. Most members, however, (76 percent) saw them as an important part of the ADEPT offer.

## 5 Influencing

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- 5.1 In our January 2019 report on the impact of ADEPT we reported a divergence of views among the people the association seeks to work with – particularly between those who felt that its broad remit was a challenge and those who saw it as an advantage. Three years later a majority of stakeholders see ADEPT as being exceptionally well-placed to work with government on the place agenda and are keen to see the association do so. They are also confident that there is a gap in the influencing world which ADEPT could usefully fill. This is particularly important given the focus on place generally and the current government’s levelling-up agenda.
- 5.2 Many of the officials we spoke to recognised that ADEPT had strengthened its influencing work but considered that it could and should act to increase its influence and impact. Some interviewees said that the discussion at an ADEPT board was like a public meeting and was not amenable to informal debate. For some civil servants in important departments ADEPT is not on their list of people to contact first.
- 5.3 We heard similar messages through our survey of and interviews with ADEPT’s members. Some of the members we interviewed were keen for the association to be louder and to participate in potentially difficult discussions. They recognise that this requires time and effort by members as well as the small secretariat. The gradually increasing membership and the range of types of authority involved is seen as a way building the association’s capacity and credibility.
- 5.4 The strengths of ADEPT, referred to by both members and stakeholders, include its network of expertise and technical knowledge, its ability to bring a council perspective to national discussions and the breadth of services and issues that many of its members are responsible for. There is, however, still some confusion among senior local government officers about the balance ADEPT wishes to strike between networking and influencing.

**“ADEPT should be less of a club. It should be the go-to place for the key government departments.”**

County council member

**“There is an opportunity to be more influential....There is a space they could occupy”**

Senior civil servant in a department with which ADEPT does not work closely

- 5.5 Significantly ADEPT’s members are more positive about its influencing work now than they were three years ago. Almost 85 percent of the members who replied to our survey agreed that ADEPT is successful in its influencing work compared with 61 percent previously. The proportion of people who strongly agreed remains at just over 15 percent. An increased proportion of members also recognised continuing improvement: three years 66 percent of members perceived that ADEPT was strengthening its impact compared with almost 85 percent today. In interviews members referred to

the key role that ADEPT plays in representing their interests and their confidence that it is taken seriously.

**“We know ADEPT is fighting our corner”**

County council member

**“Access to influence through ADEPT is invaluable”**

Unitary council member

- 5.6 Our previous research reported that perceptions of ADEPT are far higher within some departments and directorates than others. That remains the case today. ADEPT’s contribution is far more highly regarded in the Department for Transport (DfT), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and parts of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) than in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) or the Treasury (HMT).
- 5.7 This spectrum of influence is recognised by ADEPT’s leadership and membership. Just over a quarter of the members who replied to our survey (26.83 percent) felt that ADEPT had most impact on the DfT compared with 10.81 per cent on DEFRA, 5.71 percent on MLUHC and BEIS and 2.94 percent on HMT. One member described ADEPT as being in the “foothills” of BEIS and the Treasury.
- 5.8 What is different now, however, is that senior officials in departments who work with ADEPT say that they are keen to see ADEPT develop closer relationships with other departments. They see such relationships as being valuable to their departments and are willing to help ADEPT to develop them. Similarly, senior officials who do not currently have a close relationship see the value of building that relationship and are prepared to put some effort into doing so.

**“It is in our interests that other departments work more closely with ADEPT”**

Senior civil servant

- 5.9 This enthusiasm is driven by the importance of place, the levelling up agenda and the appetite among officials to engage with an organisation which understands and has responsibility for the wide range of relevant policy and services areas. It is important to add that senior people in organisations with which ADEPT works make similar points and see the potential of ADEPT to build those relationships and contribute to the place agenda nationally. There is an appetite among senior people in Whitehall and partner organisations for ADEPT to convene pan Whitehall conversations on place and levelling up. The zero carbon/green growth agenda is also seen by many people as one in which ADEPT could and should be more influential.

**“ADEPT could be more challenging and get into spaces that are a bit awkward.”**

Unitary council member

**“I think it is taken seriously, it is an organisation focused on place.”**

## Unitary council member

- 5.10 Our interviews shed significant light on the steps that ADEPT must take if it is to build these wider relationships. Senior officials in the departments with which ADEPT has a close relationship stress ADEPT's expertise and its ability to communicate the real world in which its members work. They said that they felt confident having informal conversations with representatives of ADEPT. One official named the chair of one of ADEPT's boards as a key contact with whom he has frequent informal conversations. We interviewed that ADEPT member for this research, and he referred unprompted to this relationship and its importance to the association and the department.

“It is possible to have an expert conversation with ADEPT...We can trust them and test our thinking out with them.”

## Senior civil servant

- 5.11 This is precisely the type of relationship that officials in other departments say they would like to establish with ADEPT. Several senior civil servants said that they were looking for opportunities to test out ideas and thinking with people in a confidential setting and to get an honest, informed local government perspective. One official, for example, said: “The department is totally lacking a grown-up conversation with local government.”

“The department approaches me personally and that is really important. That is where you can add real value”

## Chair of an ADEPT Board

“There must be consistency and the people we meet must be the big players in the sector who can talk on behalf of the sector, not just their council.”

## Senior civil servant not currently close to ADEPT

“ADEPT is absolutely useful. I am able to have trusting conversations. It works both ways.”

## Senior civil servant who works closely with ADEPT

- 5.12 A key factor in the minds of many officials is the ability to develop a long-term relationship with one or two individuals. Trust is critically important, and continuity is widely seen as being an essential contributory factor. Senior civil servants say that they are also looking for what two of them described as “policy heft” and need to be confident that the association is representing the views of its members in an accurate and informed way.

## 6 Perceptions of ADEPT

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- 6.1 There are two well-established perceptions of ADEPT among its members, potential members and stakeholders and an emerging perception of the organisation's potential. Which of the first two perceptions a person holds depends on how well they know the organisation.
- 6.2 The first perception, which we could call "the club", is held by people who do not know the organisation well and are not very engaged with it. This perception sees ADEPT primarily as a networking organisation. In so far as it has influence with government, it is seen as having good links with a few departments, particularly the Department for Transport, essentially as an extension to its local government network.
- 6.3 The second perception, "the influencer", is becoming the dominant perception within local government and some parts of government. This perception sees ADEPT as an effective local government officers' society, part of the "family" alongside ADPH, ADASS and ADCS. It is seen as having a good member offer and working closely with key government departments which see it as providing two-way communication and a route to informal conversations with sector leaders. There are still significant parts of Whitehall which do not have this perception, most notably MLUHC and BEIS.
- 6.4 The emerging perception recognises what many ADEPT members see as their unique strength – their place role. There is a widespread acknowledgement of the fact that, if it to be effective, action on place must mobilise a wide range of council services, many of which ADEPT members are responsible for. It also involves several government departments, with which ADEPT has or is seeking to establish a good relationship. Many of our interviewees believe ADEPT has the potential to convene valuable pan-government discussions on this increasingly important topic.

## 7 Perspectives from Corporate Partners

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- 7.1 As part of our research, we interviewed several corporate partners who support ADEPT by sharing expertise, developing networks and fostering relationships. Overall, partners provided positive but constructive feedback on ADEPT's level of influence and impact. What they valued most about their membership was the opportunity to gain insight into the challenges faced by public sector bodies and the opportunity to participate in discussions that contribute to the national agenda. They cited intelligence sharing, networking, and cross-sector connectivity as the key strengths of ADEPT.

“It’s about sharing intelligence – that’s the strength of something like ADEPT. They give the overall sector connectivity because it can be easy to retreat into your own shell. So, it’s always good to step out of that immediate context.”

ADEPT Corporate Partner

- 7.2 Partners also saw ADEPT as providing a valuable ‘safe space’ for a range of stakeholders to come together and discuss key issues in confidentially and with honesty.

“ADEPT is a very safe zone for people to discuss politics and policy, and that’s a great thing – we shouldn’t lose that”

ADEPT Corporate Partner

- 7.3 Whilst partners were broadly satisfied with their membership, they also offered some advice on the steps ADEPT could take to increase their influence and impact. This includes having varied speakers and thought leadership at conferences to promote different arguments and ways of thinking. Partners also suggested that ADEPT could do more in terms of anticipating future challenges and developing appropriate responses to ensure it is being proactive as opposed to reactive.

- 7.4 Inevitably, some Corporate Partners are more engaged in ADEPT than others and this has implications for their perceptions of the organisation. One Corporate Partner felt that ADEPT could do more to engage with them on a regular basis. Another wanted to see ADEPT doing more to craft a unified voice that can be leveraged in discussions with central government, but they also recognise the limited resources available to the association and its members. Issues such as recovery from Covid, climate change and digital transformation are among the themes that Corporate Partners think ADEPT should address.

“What ADEPT is seeking to influence requires a strategic plan that will be in place for decades. The challenge is to keep getting the message across. You need to chime with the current worldview, keep the agenda refreshed. It comes down to tactics – strategy has to be long-term, not short sighted.”

ADEPT Corporate Partner

“We are entering into a very complex period with environmental and digital challenges. If we don’t work in teams, we will not benefit from what’s going on at a strategic level”

ADEPT Corporate Partner

7.5 In common with other members, Corporate Partners think there is a continuing role for some virtual meetings, but they are also looking forward to returning to face-to-face interaction, particularly at the national conferences and large group discussions.

“Virtual works okay in one-to-one discussions but not in a group session, certainly not when you are debating policy. A mixture of both, a hybrid would be ideal.”

ADEPT Corporate Partner

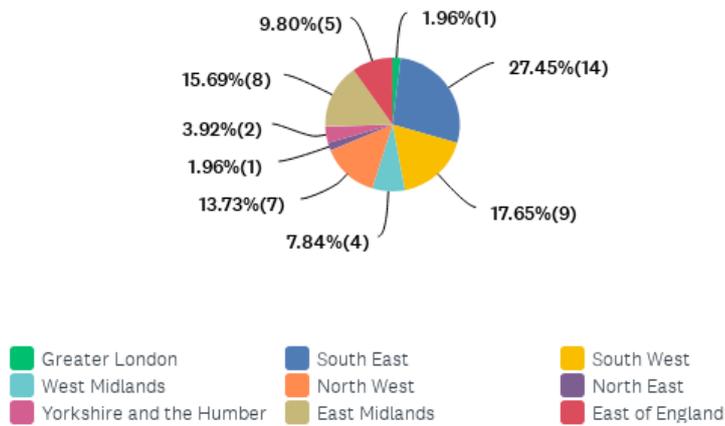
## 8 Recommendations

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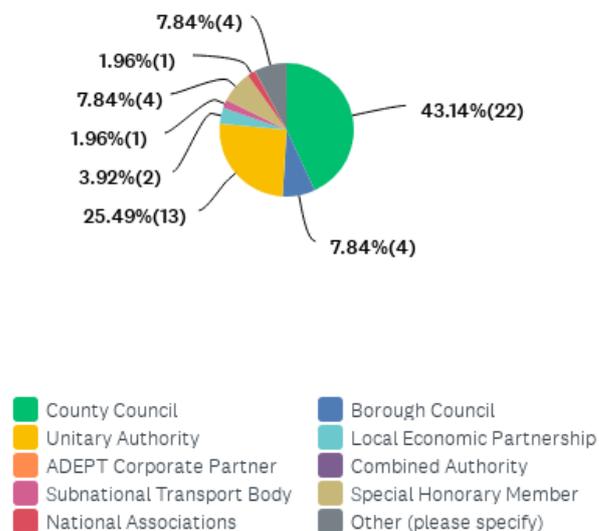
- 8.1 Our research shows that member satisfaction with ADEPT is increasing, and it is widely perceived to have strengthened its influencing work. Our core recommendation is that the association should continue to pay attention to its membership offer and to developing relations within Whitehall. There are, however, a number of specific recommendations emerging from our research.
- 8.2 In relation to services to members there are three areas which the association should address.
- 8.3 First, the balance between in person, online and hybrid meetings. There is a near unanimous appetite for the two national conferences to be in person whenever possible. It is also clear, however, that engagement in regional meetings and topic boards has increased as a result of the use of technology such as Zoom and MS Teams. A majority of members are keen for this to continue. There is also support for hybrid meetings.
- 8.4 Second, we have been struck by the emphasis several interviewees placed on the role of directors' PAs in circulating ADEPT material within their departments. This is important in terms of both disseminating useful information today and attracting potential members of the future. In order to support PAs in this role ADEPT should consider hosting an annual on-line briefing session for PAs to ensure that they are aware of the range of ADEPT material, the people who are likely to be interested in it, current issues and the implications for material and information over the coming year. This would help to strengthen this important communication route for the association.
- 8.5 Third, ADEPT's leadership development offer has been well received. It is important that the offer is well-promoted and regularly refreshed.
- 8.6 Our recommendations on ADEPT's approach to influencing reflect a clear message from the stakeholder interviews about the importance of sustained relationships with senior officers who can talk informally on behalf of the sector. In order to pursue this ADEPT should: identify the departments and/or directorates within departments with which it is keen to establish a closer relationship; match each department or directorate with an ADEPT member who is prepared to act as lead contact with that department for a period to two to three years; and secure the necessary introductions. It is also important for ADEPT to continue to engage in the debates about high profile policy issues and to be seen to do so. These include levelling up and devolution, climate change/net zero and digital technologies.
- 8.7 Finally, we recommend that ADEPT should convene a pan-Whitehall conversation on place. The precise focus of the conversation and structure should be decided in light of the contents of the levelling-up white paper and discussions with the association's existing contacts in Whitehall.

# Appendix: Analysis of the survey of ADEPT members

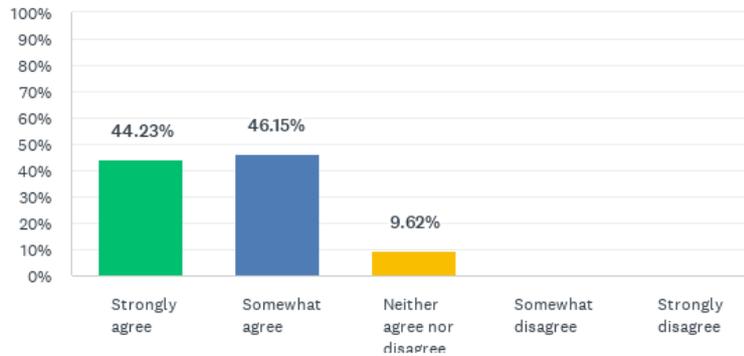
## Q1 What region do you work in?



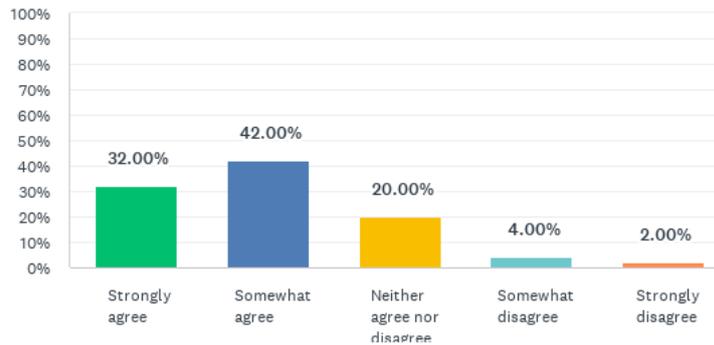
## Q2 What type of organisation do you work for?



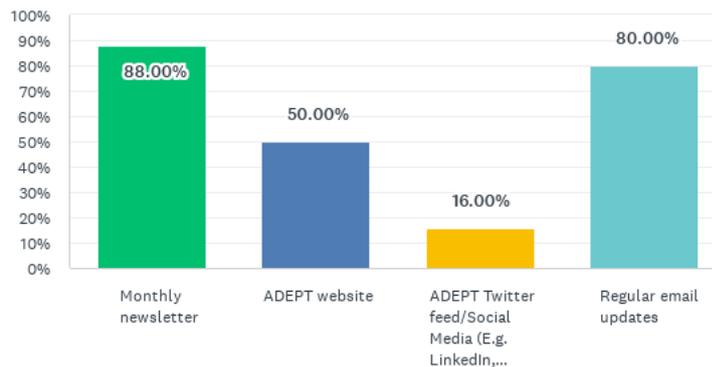
Q3 'I feel well informed about the activities and policies of ADEPT'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



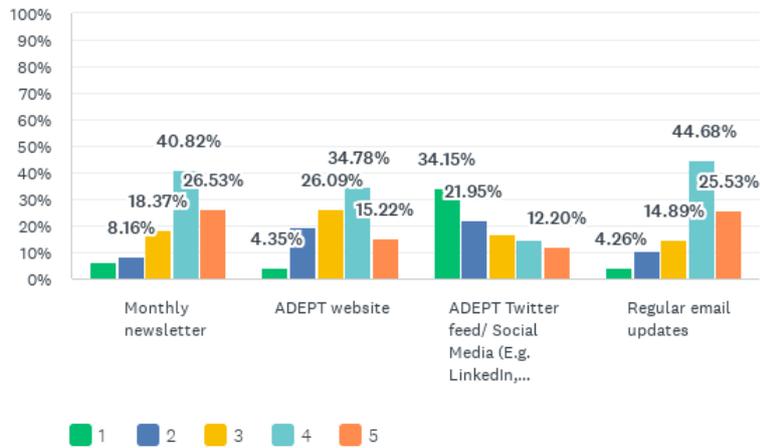
Q4 'I use information from ADEPT regularly in my work'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



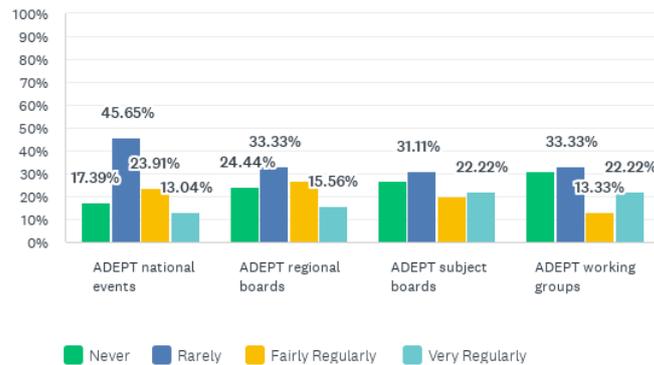
Q5 Do you read or access the following ADEPT vehicles? (Please tick all that apply)



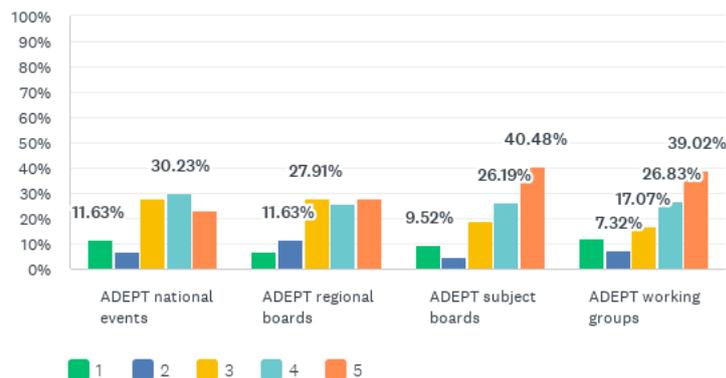
Q6 Please rank the following forms of communication with ADEPT by how much you value them (1:least valued 5:most valued)



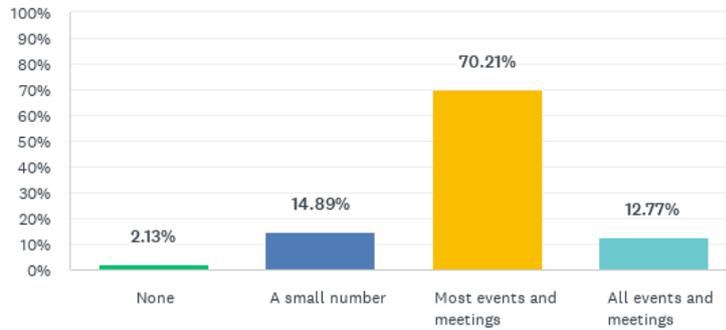
Q7 How regularly do you attend the following ADEPT events?



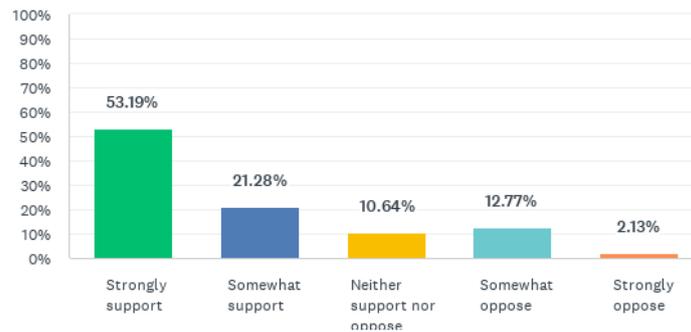
Q8 Please rank the following ADEPT events by how much you value them (1: least valued 5: most valued)



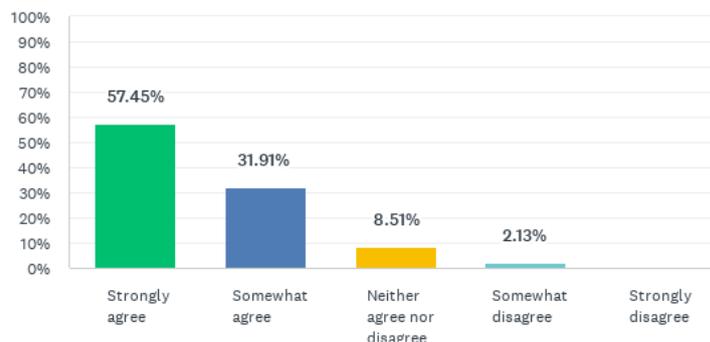
Q9 What proportion of ADEPT events and meetings do you think should continue to take place virtually (using platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams)?



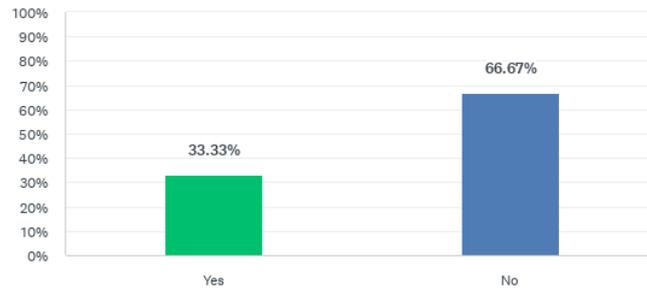
Q10 Would you prefer ADEPT and meetings to be made available in a hybrid form (i.e. both physical and virtual events)?



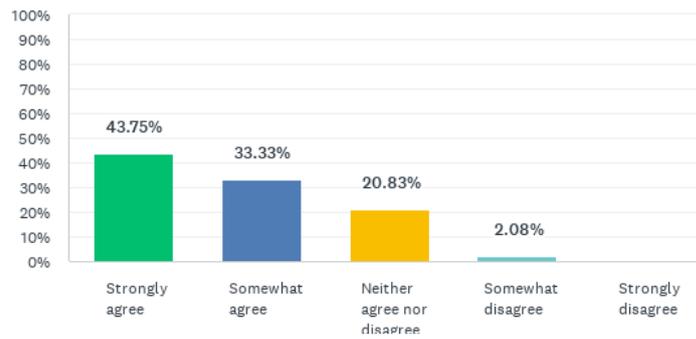
Q11 'ADEPT enables and promotes networking opportunities between directors and others working in place-based services'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



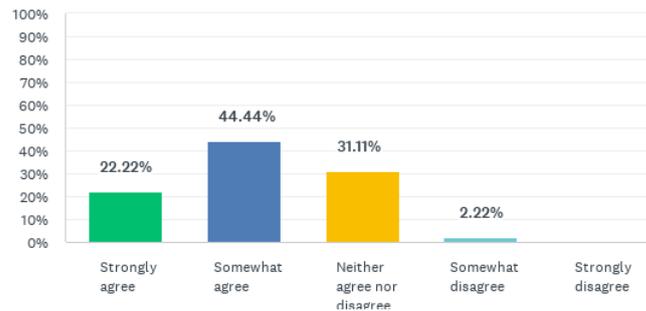
Q12 Have you or a colleague attended the ADEPT Leadership Development Programme or the Excellence in Place Development Programme?



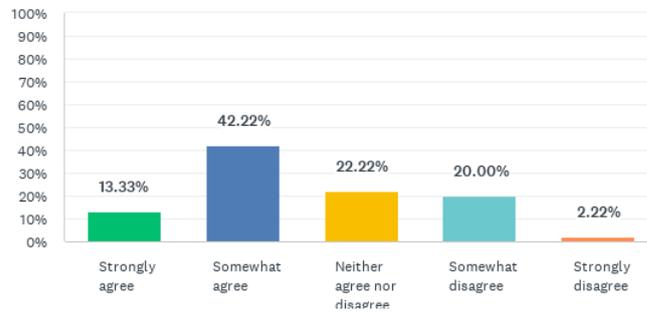
Q13 Do you agree that programmes such as these are an important part of the ADEPT offer?



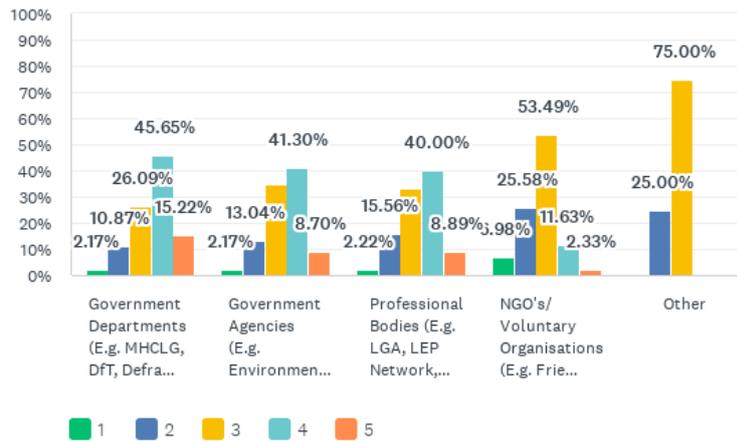
Q14 'I feel supported by ADEPT in my role as a place director'. To what extent do you agree with this statement? (For LEP directors and ADEPT business partners please respond to this question in relation to your role)



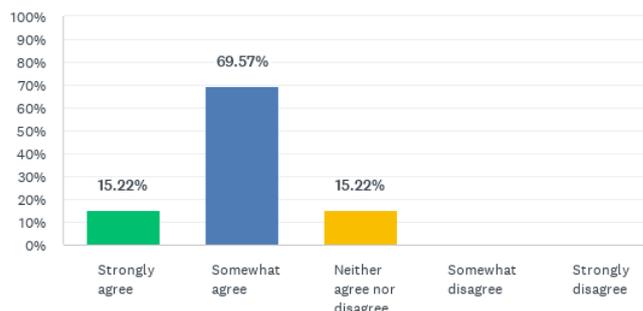
Q15 'ADEPT is my first port of call if I want to share intelligence or contact another Director'.  
To what extent do you agree with this statement?



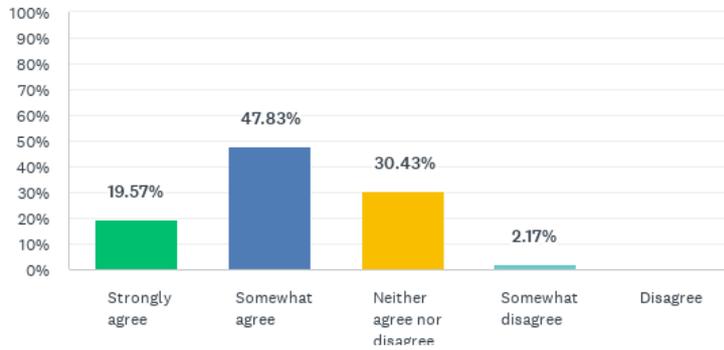
Q16 Please rate the impact you think ADEPT has when it comes to influencing or working with the following organisations (1:least impact 5:most impact)



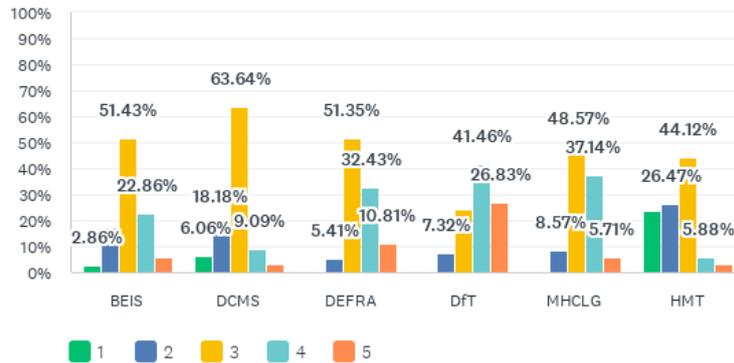
Q17 'ADEPT is successful in influencing the individuals and organisations it seeks to work with'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



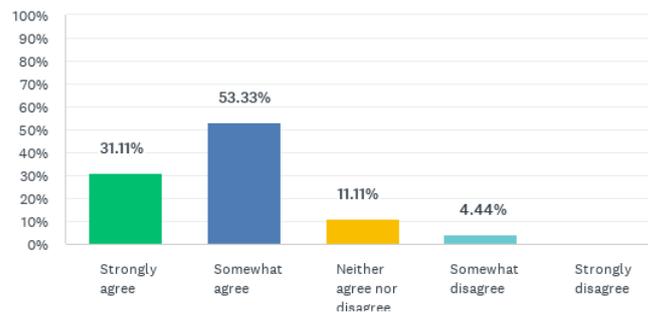
Q18 'ADEPT is strengthening its influence with government departments'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



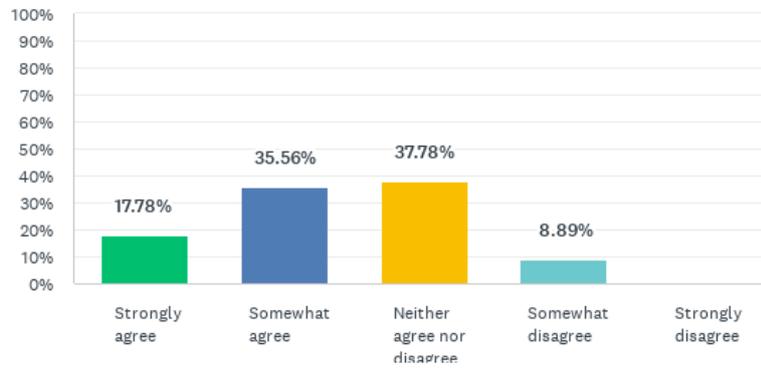
Q19 Please rate the impact you think ADEPT has in influencing or working with the following government departments? (1:least impact 5:most impact)

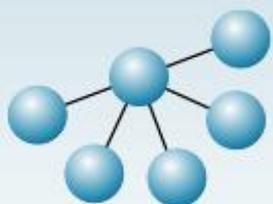


Q20 'ADEPT is perceived well by the organisations it seeks to work with' To what extent do you agree with this statement?



Q21 'ADEPT punches above its weight in the eyes of the organisations it seeks to influence'  
To what extent do you agree with this statement?





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