



ADEPT member perceptions 2023

A report from Shared Intelligence

May 2023

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Executive Summary

ADEPT is the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport who are commonly referred to as “place directors”. They are the executive directors in local government responsible for providing day-to-day services such as local highways, waste and recycling, and planning as well as developing the longer-term strategies, investment and infrastructure.

In late 2022 ADEPT commissioned Shared Intelligence to conduct research into how and why its members engage with the association and understand if engagement is changing. This report also investigates disengagement and whether place directors are delegating participation in ADEPT activities to more junior colleagues, or whether they are doing so more often than before.

This work builds on two previous reports we have produced, in [2019](#) and [2021](#). We completed 26 in-depth interviews with ADEPT members and leads from other membership organisations and conducted a short online survey, which received 77 responses.

Our research found that the ADEPT membership values the current offer, and they find particular value in networking opportunities between peers, and access to expertise. Members also recognise and value ADEPT’s ability to influence central government. There were also several challenges preventing members from engaging with ADEPT which included time, capacity, local politics, and competition with other organisations. We have found that *delegation* by place directors, rather than a decline in engagement, is largely due to a lack of time and capacity. When place directors do engage they have also become more selective about what they attend, focusing most on national or strategic discussions.

Our research highlighted potential for improvement to ADEPT’s internal communication structure. Some members wanted an overall picture or ‘helicopter view’ of ADEPT. Further, members were sometimes unclear about how their engagement with ADEPT influences policy advocacy and central government. Therefore, we make some recommendations around formalising a communications approach, to ensure policy wins are effectively communicated with the wider membership.

Our conclusion is that members value ADEPT and its offer and the challenges we present can largely be solved through a series of small and subtle – although important - changes, which we have spelled out in our recommendations.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 ADEPT is the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport who are commonly referred to as “place directors”. They are the executive directors in local government responsible for providing day-to-day services such as local highways, waste and recycling, and planning as well as developing the longer-term strategies, investment and infrastructure.
- 1.2 ADEPT supports its members by:
- developing collaborative relationships with government, public agencies, commercial partners and other professional organisations,
 - creating spaces for peer networking and learning, to share best practice and drive innovation,
 - providing leadership development and training, for current and future directors, and
 - influencing policy development, making the case for joined up policy and advocating on behalf of locally government, for improved funding and greater devolution powers.
- 1.3 In late 2022 ADEPT commissioned Shared Intelligence to conduct research into how and why its members engage with the association, and to understand if and how that engagement is changing. This report also investigates whether members are *disengaging* and whether place directors are delegating participation in ADEPT activities to more junior colleagues, or whether they are doing so more often than before.
- 1.4 This report builds on two previous pieces of research we have conducted for ADEPT, in 2019 and 2021, which explored the perception of the membership offer, perceptions of ADEPT’s influence on partners and central government, and perceptions of the impacts of ADEPT. Our previous work also brought in the views of corporate partners and wider stakeholders, including civil servants and professional bodies, to understand the wider impact of ADEPT.
- 1.5 From our findings we draw conclusions about membership engagement and present 10 recommendations to strengthen engagement.

2 Methods

2.1 We have used similar methods to those used in our previous research into the perceptions of ADEPT's members, that is interviews and a survey. However, this research sought to answer different questions with a concentration on local authority member engagement and disengagement.

2.2 The questions we sought to answer were:

- What are the drivers of disengagement?
- What are the drivers of engagement?
- What are the needs of place directors which ADEPT does or can potentially meet?

The core data came from:

- Twenty-six non-attributable interviews. Interviewees were selected to provide diverse perspectives:
 - Both engaged and less engaged members of ADEPT, to understand differing levels of engagement and to understand their reasons for engaging.
 - Members we had spoken to in 2019 and 2021, to see if and how their engagement has changed overtime.
 - A spread of regions, both in terms of geographical location, as a well as spread between metropolitan and rural areas.
 - An even split of unitary and county councils.
 - Men and women to reach an inclusive cohort.
- Other local government membership organisations were also interviewed to understand their current approach to membership engagement and further explore disengagement and delegation.
- An in-depth analysis of the interviews informed survey question design, and the survey was used to test key themes from the interviews.
- An online survey of ADEPT local government members repeated some questions from 2019 and 2021 to enable comparison over time. Seventy-seven survey responses were received although some were incomplete. The regional spread of respondents was similar to the 2019 and 2021 surveys, and three-quarters (73%) were from either County or Unitary authorities (see Figure 4 for full breakdown). Most respondents worked at managerial tiers below executive director level.
- Sensemaking with ADEPT's Leadership Team over findings and report considerations.

3 Findings

Engagement and added value

“Personally, I value the building of networks with colleagues”.

- Place director, chair of a regional board

How do members engage and why do they engage?

3.1 This year’s survey shows that besides the newsletter, which nearly three quarters (73%) say they have engaged with in the past year, there are five types of meetings, groups and boards which respondents say they have engaged with (see Figure 6 for full breakdown):

- National subject boards (37%).
- Workshops and webinars (35%).
- Regional boards (33%).
- Lunch and learns (33%).
- Working groups (33%).

3.2 Among survey respondents 84% agreed that ADEPT enables and promotes networking opportunities (see Figure 12). Data from interviews indicate that ADEPT members see ADEPT meetings as an important opportunity for informal conversations between place directors. Members also contact individuals they know through ADEPT for one-to-one discussions outside of ADEPT events and meetings. Issue-sharing and resolving, peer-to-peer support and learning were highly valued aspects of networking and the wider ADEPT offer.

3.3 Members also indicated in the interviews that by engaging with ADEPT, they were able to play a part in influencing Central Government. The survey shows a dramatic jump in members’ views about ADEPT’s influence since our 2021 and 2019 reports. Eighty per cent (80%) of survey respondents now agree that ADEPT has an influence on government departments and agencies (see Figure 15) compared to just 13% for the same question in 2021, and 15% in 2019.

3.4 Some members also referred to ADEPT working with its sibling professional membership organisations (ADASS, ADCS and ADPH), to create a group formed of the presidents from each organisation plus the Chief Executive of the LGA, to influence central government collectively. ADEPT members who were aware of the group spoke positively of it. However, it was recognised by ADEPT members and other membership organisations that this group needs to have a clear purpose and direction to be of value and a productive use of time for each organisation.

What are the challenges to engaging with ADEPT?

3.5 The survey data shows an increase since 2019 in the proportion of members who say they regularly attend working groups and subject boards (which now meet virtually), and a decrease in the proportion who say they regularly engage in national events (which are still face-to-face) (see Figure 10). Place directors say this is due to time and capacity to engage. The interviews confirmed that the

option of online attendance at working groups and subject boards has allowed members to remain engaged despite limited time and capacity.

3.6 The interviews with place directors indicate four key challenges in engaging with ADEPT.

- **Time and capacity:** Place directors have limited time and capacity. Whilst they would like to engage, and acknowledge the benefits of engaging, many are unable to attend as much as they would like.
- **Portfolio:** ADEPT tries to reflect the broad portfolio of place directors, with four national subject boards and a number of technical working groups. However, there is a perception from some interviewees that ADEPT retains a core focus on transport and engineering, and for some outside those areas (or who came into their role via other service routes) this can deter engagement.
- **Saturated market:** On a very practical level, ADEPT members have several other organisations vying for their attention including SOLACE, APSE and CEDOS.
- **Local politics:** Chief executive or elected member support and recognition of place services was crucial for place directors to engage with ADEPT. Some interviews highlighted that if a chief executive of a council is unclear about the added value of ADEPT, they might be less willing for their directors to spend their limited time engaging with the organisation.

Delegation and disengagement

“Both views of directors and those less senior are valid and important.”

- A senior lead in another membership organisation.

Why is delegation happening?

3.7 Interviews highlighted two primary reasons why place directors might delegate attendance to a junior colleague:

- Place directors are more interested and are better able to contribute to higher-level, more strategic conversations within ADEPT, rather than more detailed/policy specific conversations. This can mean they delegate attendance at subject boards for example.
- Place directors also lack time and capacity to engage with policy-specific, detailed parts of ADEPT and rely on their managers to feedback relevant information to them.

3.8 Some place directors viewed delegation as an opportunity for professional development of their direct reports and wider teams, including a chance for tier 3 and 4 managers to network with their peers and have similar opportunities as directors.

Factors to consider with delegation.

“Working groups for instance should have practitioners but certain things need to be clear that it is for the directors”.

- Place director and chair of a subject board.

3.9 Delegation is not an issue unique to ADEPT. We spoke to several other membership organisations and almost all of them had seen increasing delegation. To address this, other organisations have taken steps:

- Some have set strict boundaries on who can attend certain events or take on certain roles. This means there are some activities which only the most senior members can take part in, for example taking on the role of chair, or joining a national board.
- Some have a support offer explicitly geared to different tiers of management – and we note ADEPT already offers a leadership development programme for aspiring place directors.

3.10 Delegation was often described in a positive light and there may be opportunities if delegation is balanced with the need for seniority. Some interviewees highlighted that practical and less senior voices provided additional insight and knowledge on specific areas that directors may not be able to. This detail needs to be balanced with a higher-level view.

Communications

“I quite often hear about things through twitter and LinkedIn, not necessarily through ADEPT”.

– Director of Place from the Midlands.

“Is it [communications] strategic and relevant”.

– Interviewee from another membership organisation.

3.11 Communication from ADEPT to its membership happens through a monthly newsletter, website and email updates plus social media. There is also intra-organisational communication (both formal and informal), and communication and networking between members.

The Newsletter

3.12 The survey showed that the newsletter was overwhelming the most engaged aspect of ADEPT, with 78% of respondents engaging with it in the past year (see Figure 6).

Survey respondents mentioned a desire for tailored newsletters (see

3.13 Summary of open text responses). However, members in both the survey and the interviews recognised a need to ensure communications did not become siloed as a result of tailored communications (e.g. members with an interest in recycling only getting news about recycling). Combining tailored and general communications would provide a good overview of the organisation’s work, as well as connecting the different boards and support offers.

Communication of events

3.14 Some of the interviewees expressed frustration about the current communications approach for events and meetings. Some felt that there was not enough time between the announcements of events and the actual date, although in reality ADEPT routinely sends notification of major events in advance. Place directors, with their limited time and resources, find it difficult to engage with events at short notice and appeared to be missing the initial announcements. Some interviewees said they needed at least three months’ notice to ensure they can dedicate time to events they would like to attend.

Lessons from other membership organisations

3.15 From our interviews with other membership organisations, we heard a range of communications approaches:

- Being clear about seniority of members who can attend certain events.
- An induction process for new members which includes phone calls, emails, option to join subgroups and follow-up conversations.
- Sending out a “headlines document” (or short, high-level newsletter) where key updates are communicated to members, and which encourages feedback and interaction.
- Offering a mentoring scheme for new joiners to ADEPT and/or to a director role (e.g. new directors of place).

3.16 The examples above are from membership organisations with larger staff teams and ADEPT does not necessarily have the infrastructure in place to implement exactly what is suggested above. The recommendations section takes this into consideration.

4 Analysis

“Although a member for four years, I don’t really know how ADEPT works.”

– Director of Place from the Midlands

Helicopter view

- 4.1 Our interviews found some members felt they did not have an overall picture or “helicopter view” of ADEPT and its offer, and this is something they would like. Similarly some members said they would like a clearer sense of ADEPT’s balance of activity between working as an advocacy organisation, an organisation to share best practice, and an ideas and innovation organisation. The ADEPT offer has evolved and the big jump in members’ recognition of ADEPT’s influence with government (80% saying ADEPT influenced government) is a sign of this. But some members said they had not seen this clearly articulated. ADEPT has taken steps to address this, for example with the Strategic Plan 2023-26 (publication May 2023) clearly setting out the vision for ADEPT, and how it aims supports its members through advocacy, networking, innovation, policy and leadership development.
- 4.2 These reactions may relate to ADEPT’s evolution from the County Surveyors Society to an organisation with a much broader issues and membership base. It may reflect a residual tension between a ‘transport guys in suits’ identity and being an organisation concerned with place shaping.

Feedback loop

“Disengaged and non-members might not know the routes in and who to contact (to influence Central Government)”

– Place Director from the Southwest

“[ADEPT] have some interesting and valuable discussions but I don’t see how they connect”.

– Assistant Director of Growth from the Midlands

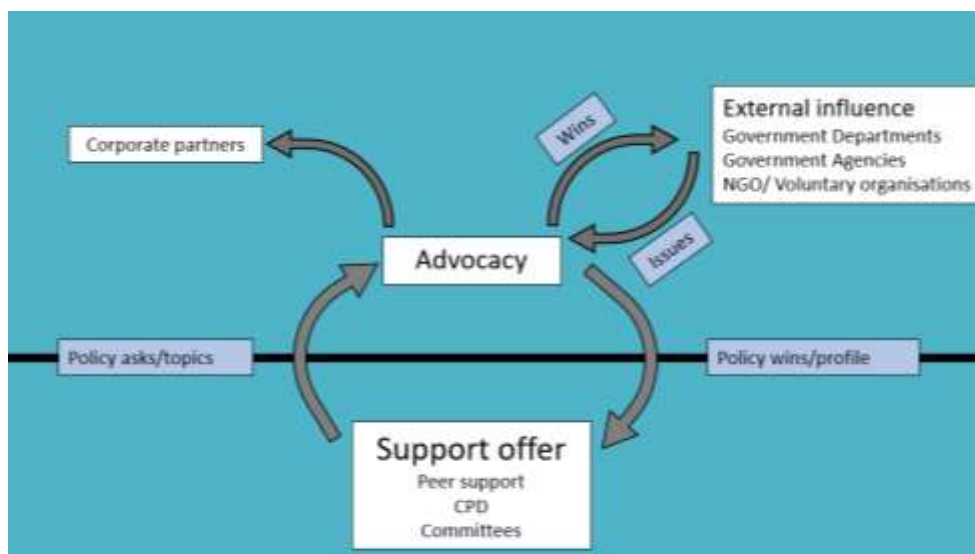


Figure 1

4.3 We also heard in interviews that some members do see the link between the activities they are involved in themselves, and ADEPT's more visible national advocacy. We have illustrated this as being like an iceberg (see Figure 1), with the subject boards, regional boards, workshops and working groups being the main activity but out of sight below the waterline, while policy action and engagement with central government and other organisations is much smaller, but much more visible above the waterline.

4.4 The interviews also revealed a risk of disconnect between the activities the members are involved with themselves, and what they see ADEPT involved with through the Leadership Team and senior members of the organisation, and national advocacy. This lack of clarity has contributed to a gap between of what members remember and see, and what ADEPT does. There were things members said they would like to be informed about, which had in fact been featured in newsletters and other ADEPT communications, sometimes on multiple occasions. What this shows is that messages need to be repeated in order to get noticed, and it might also point to a need for more tailored communications so that members see the content most relevant to them first, rather than in amongst other messages.

Communication of policy wins.

4.5 Similar although less dramatic than for question of influence, the survey shows that the proportion of members who believe ADEPT punches above its weight has increased from 36% in 2019 to 51% in 2023 (see Figure 22). However, the interviews highlighted that members are not always clear that the issues ADEPT is taking up at the national level come from the detailed work of the subject and regional boards. Where there are policy wins or successes some members do not see how those issues came from grassroots work, or how the outcome will benefit individual members. Again this points to the need for more explicit communication about the feedback loop to address what seems to be a gap between the boards and wider membership when it comes to information about how their involvement has affected ADEPT's national agenda and policy work.

4.6 The risk of not closing this loop is that members might see ADEPT as growing in influence, but they will not see that influencing role as being driven by *their issues*, and delivering policy wins which benefit *their work*.

"If I stopped being a member, what do I lose?"

–Director of Place from East of England.

4.7 The recommendations below aim to address some of the gaps in the feedback loop to help communicate the overall picture of the beneficial work that ADEPT is doing for its members, both internally through its support offer, but also externally through its advocacy.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Throughout this report we have described how ADEPT's members value the support available to them. Member engagement with ADEPT's various boards and groups is high. The fact many activities are now hosted online enables members to take part who would otherwise struggle to find the time. Members believe ADEPT's activities provide networking opportunities and they value this greatly, especially the core audience of place directors.
- 5.2 Delegation of attendance to colleagues at lower tiers of management is happening within the membership but is not exclusive to ADEPT. Delegation is common across other local government membership organisations. With the limited capacity of place directors and wider pressures on local government, it is likely that this trend will continue. This is not inherently a negative thing and can present opportunities to engage and develop lower tiers of staff, i.e. it serves the sector's talent pipeline. However, ADEPT's offer and value-added for place directors must be clear to help prevent disengagement. Other organisations faced with similar challenges designate certain meetings, groups, or roles (e.g. group chairs) as requiring a specific level of seniority, to draw a clear line.
- 5.3 Place directors in particular seem to appreciate having the 'helicopter view' of ADEPT – what it stands for and where it is headed. Our interviews showed that some place directors do not have a full understanding of the ADEPT offer. Therefore, there is a need and opportunity to define what ADEPT does, who the offer is for and what the value added is. We feel this is addressed in the forthcoming Strategic Plan 2023-26, which makes clear to members the offer, including policy work, networking, advocacy, innovation, and leadership development.
- 5.4 In relation to member communications we have described the feedback loop between activities most members engage in, and ADEPT's higher profile policy and advocacy work. Member recognition of ADEPT's national policy influence has increased dramatically in the past four years, and members believe ADEPT "punches above its weight". But beyond the Leadership Team, not everyone can see the relationship or feedback loop between what happens in the groups and boards, and national policy advocacy. This contributes to an unclear overall picture of ADEPT's work and its influence over central government.
- 5.5 Our research also showed that there seems to be a gap between what ADEPT communicates to its members, and what members see and remember. This frustrating conundrum is not unique to ADEPT and all organisations struggle with this. For ADEPT this may be in part due to the type of communications that are sent out. Both the interviews and surveys highlighted a desire for more tailored communications, although members also warn about communications becoming siloed!
- 5.6 These findings from our work suggest some small and subtle changes could be implemented to enhance engagement with, and show the value of, the ADEPT offer to its existing and potential members. These changes are explained in the recommendations section.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 We recommend 10 changes that ADEPT can undertake to better engage the membership. These are small and subtle course corrections, which together could make a big difference. It is recognised that ADEPT has a small secretariat, therefore recommendations have been considered within this context.
- 6.2 **Recommendation 1:** Be explicit and set the boundaries about seniority and engagement, either to join certain meetings, or take certain roles. This includes who can be chairs of boards, who can be the president and who can be on the leadership board. ADEPT already does this to some extent, but there is a need to make this more explicit and visible, such as on the website and through induction.
- 6.3 **Recommendation 2:** Clearly describe what ADEPT does for its members. Ensure key elements of the Strategic Plan 2023-26 are on the website and consistent in communications with members and stakeholders. This could include descriptions of ADEPT's recent policy or advocacy wins.
- 6.4 **Recommendation 3:** Introduce a formal communication plan or grid within the organisation with regular posting times and clearer notices of events going out more than three months in advance.
- 6.5 **Recommendation 4:** Formalise communication paths from the boards to the Leadership Team and back to the boards and wider membership. This could be in the form of written summaries that are circulated to the wider membership.
- 6.6 **Recommendation 5:** Use the contacts database and mailout platform to create more tailored newsletters based on different areas of interest. This could be based on the themes of the subject boards or working groups and would be sent separately to that of a general newsletter.
- 6.7 **Recommendation 6:** Keep a general newsletter but keep the information brief and high-level. This means reducing the length of the current newsletter and having subject specific details for the tailored newsletters.
- 6.8 **Recommendation 7:** Create a formal induction process for new members to understand their needs and how they want to engage with the membership. This could be in the form of a formal induction pack and standard welcome email.
- 6.9 **Recommendation 8:** Create an ongoing task of routine check-ins or courtesy calls with existing members to ensure their needs are being met.
- 6.10 **Recommendation 9:** With any expansion of staffing capacity, consider the option of including a membership engagement role (as mentioned in recommendations 7 and 8).
- 6.11 **Recommendation 10:** Communicate a clear narrative to members about the benefits of convening the joint group of membership organisation presidents.

Appendix – survey results

Survey results

Figure 2

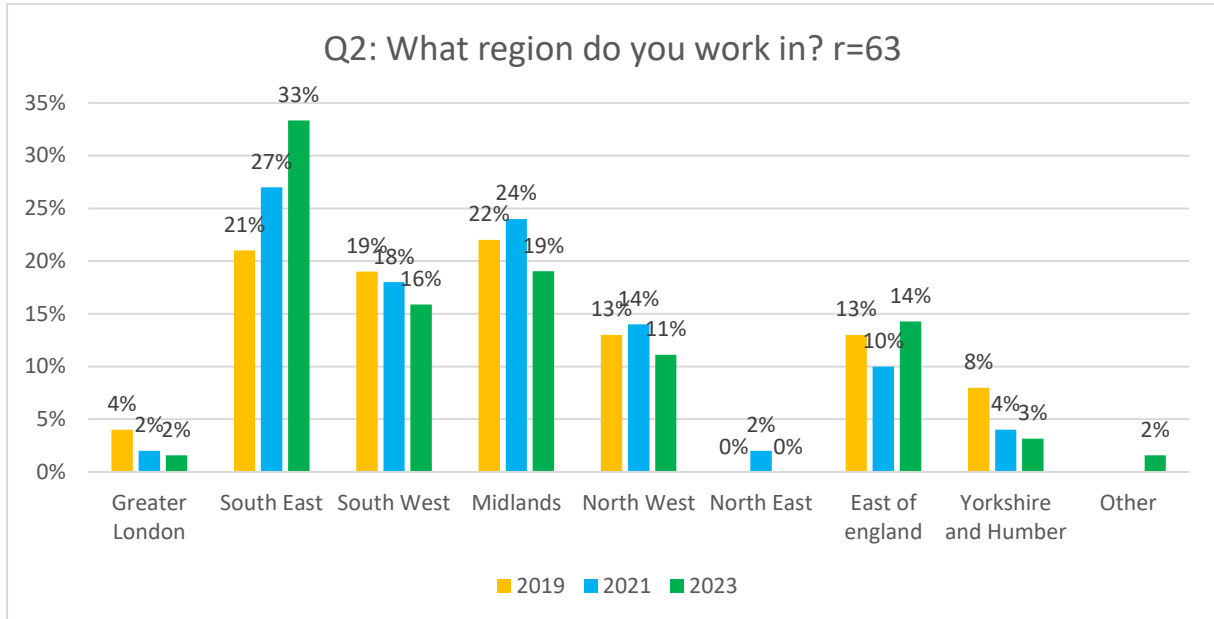


Figure 3

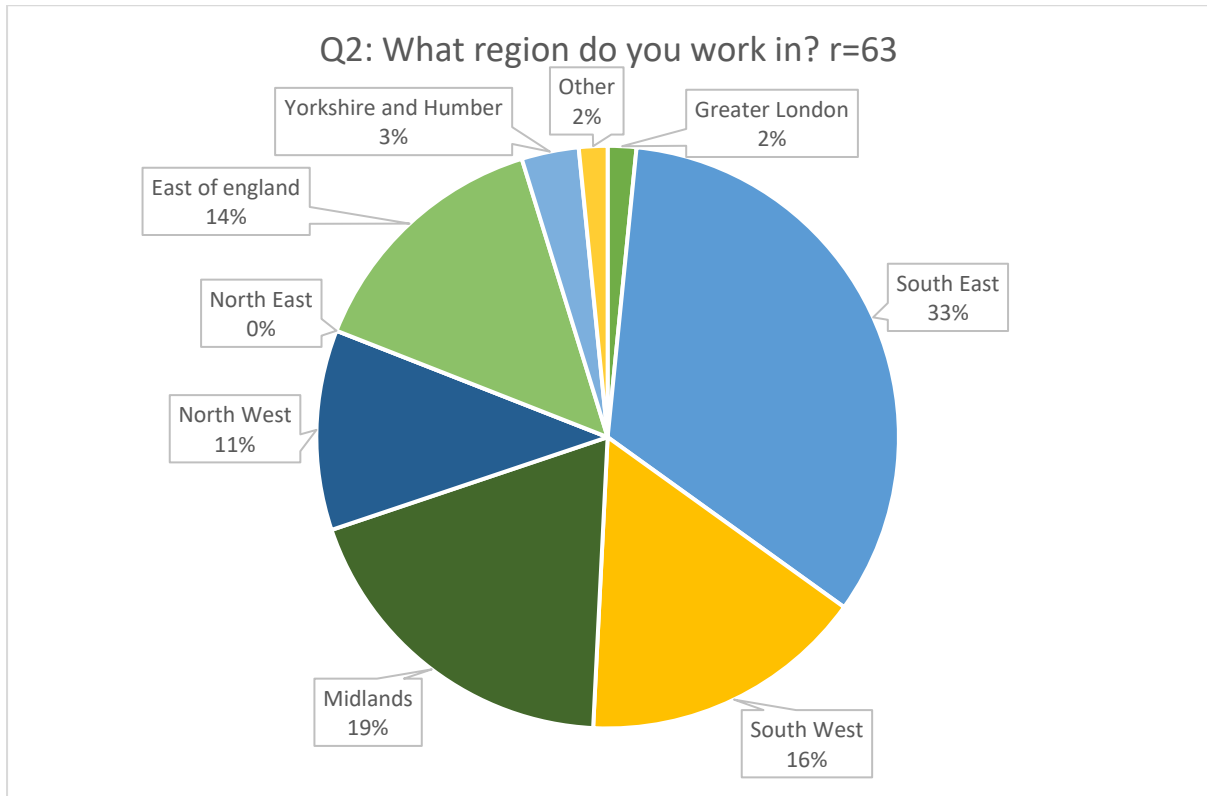


Figure 4

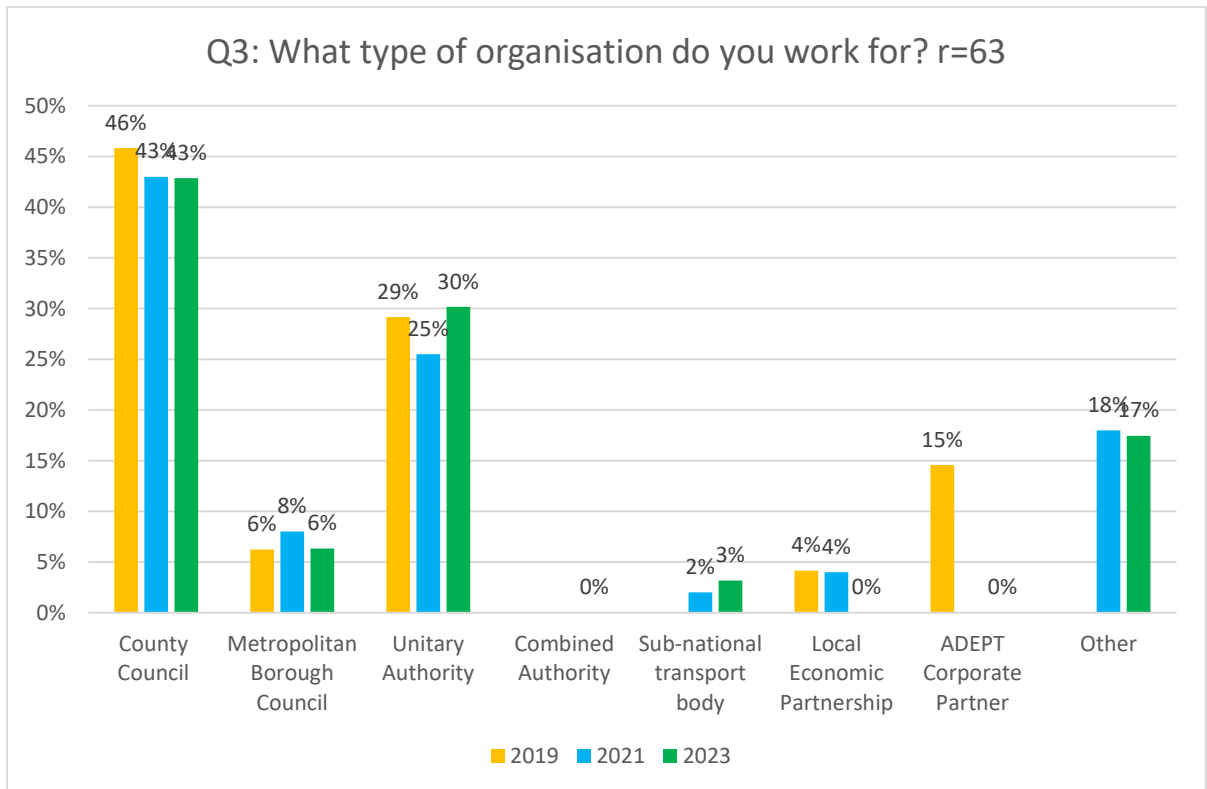


Figure 5

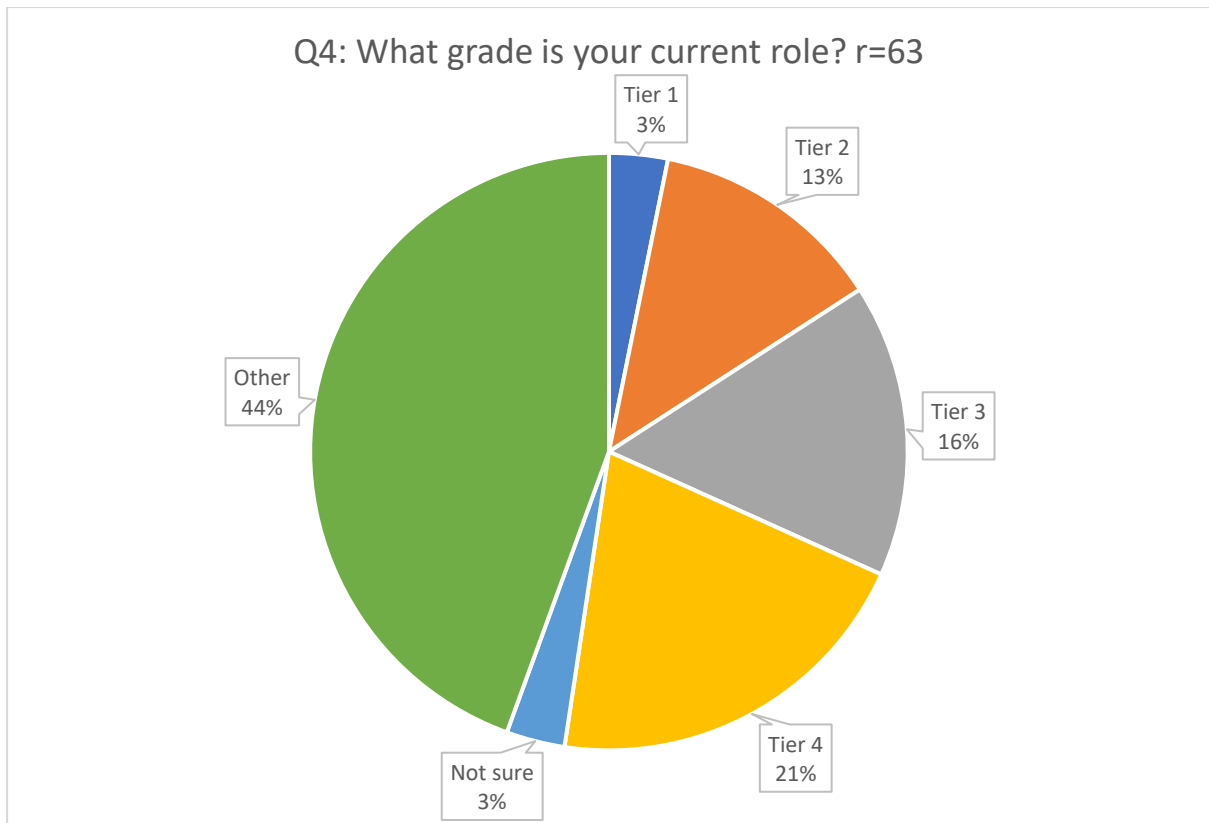


Figure 6

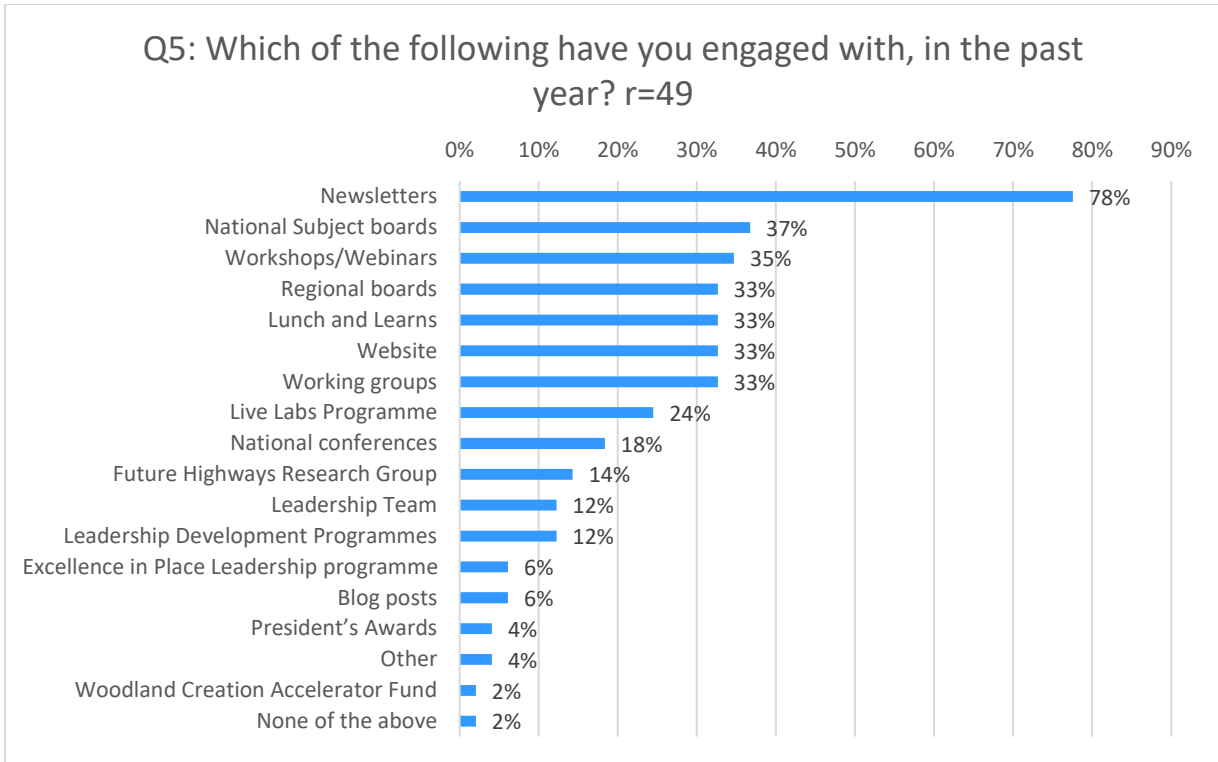


Figure 7

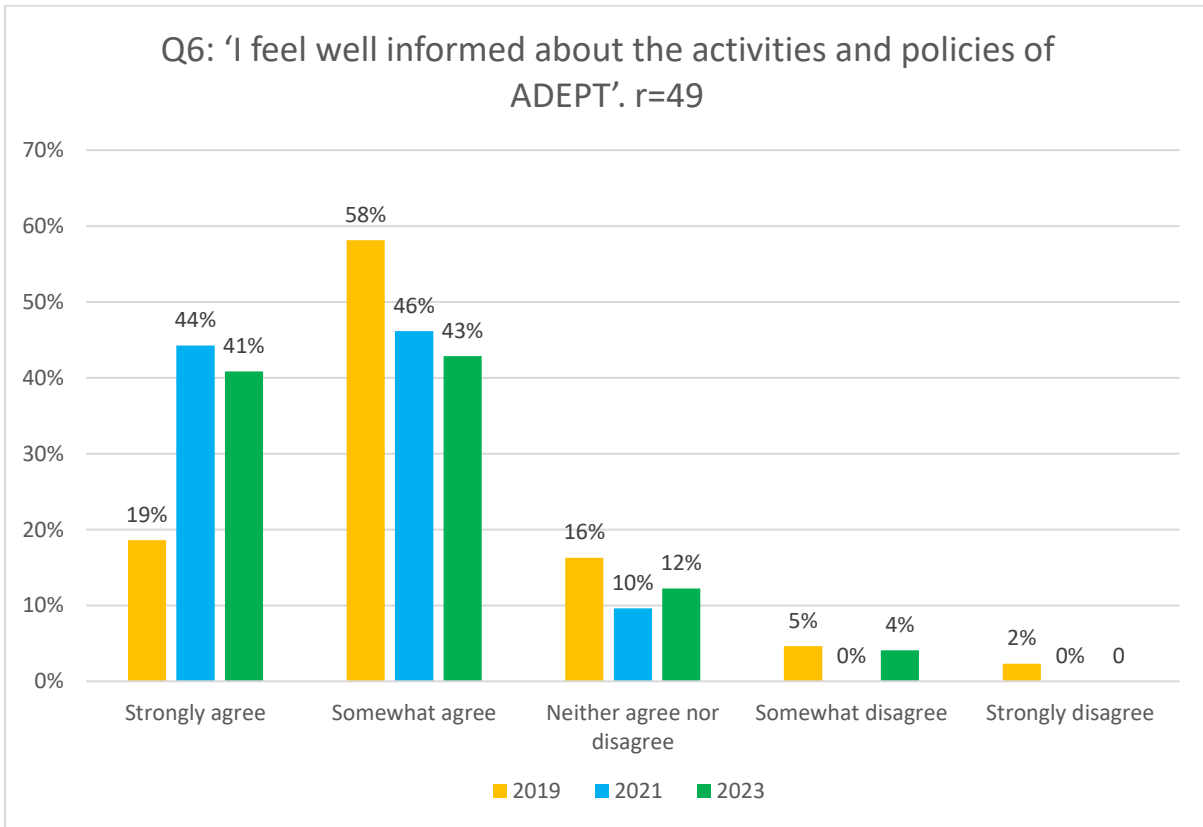


Figure 8

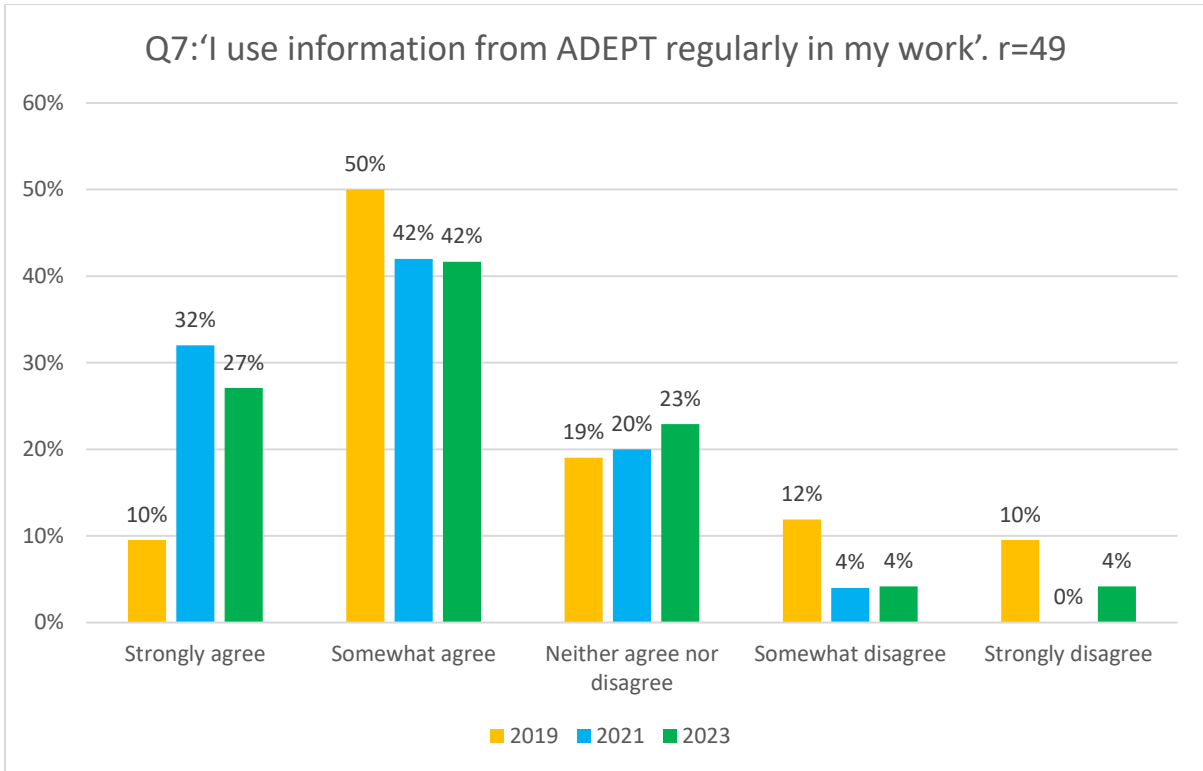


Figure 9

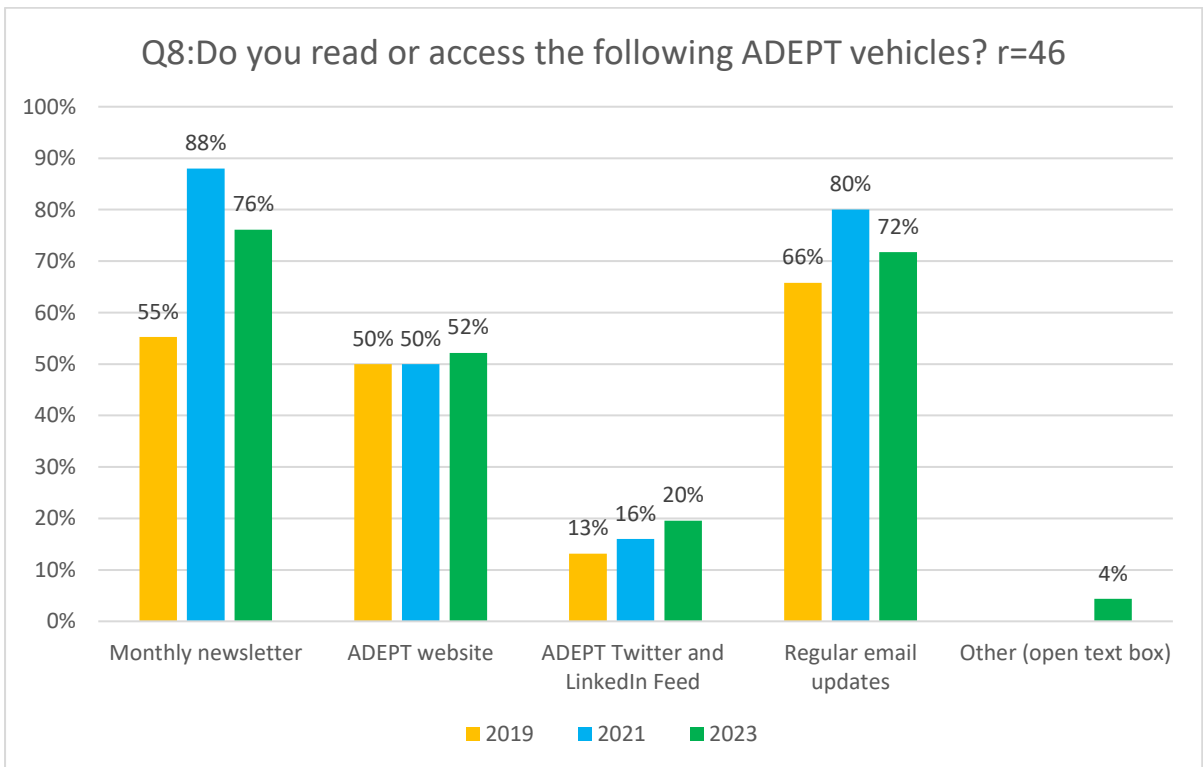


Figure 10

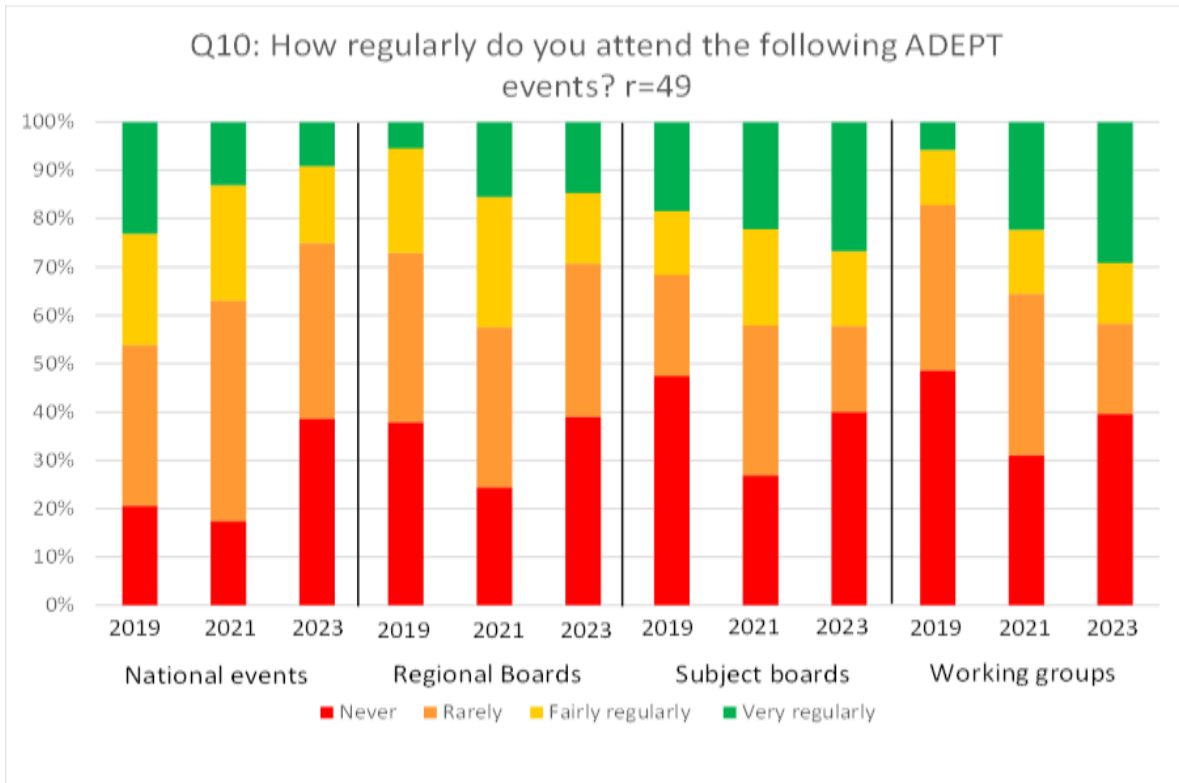


Figure 11

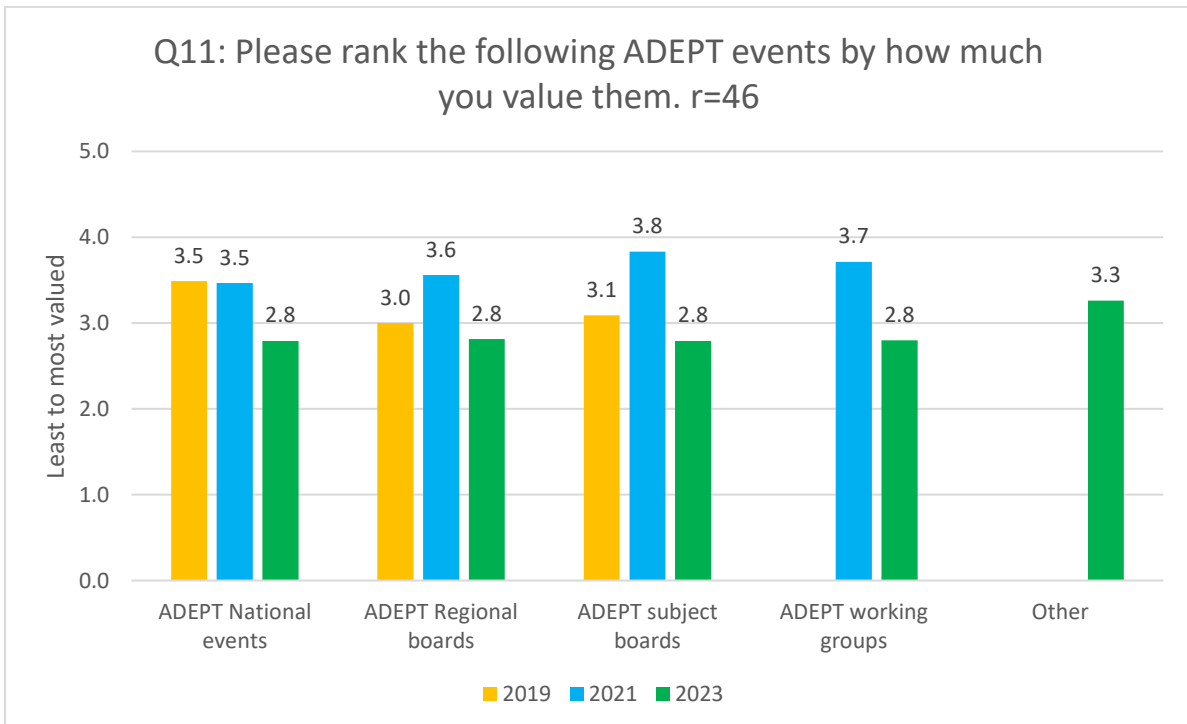


Figure 12

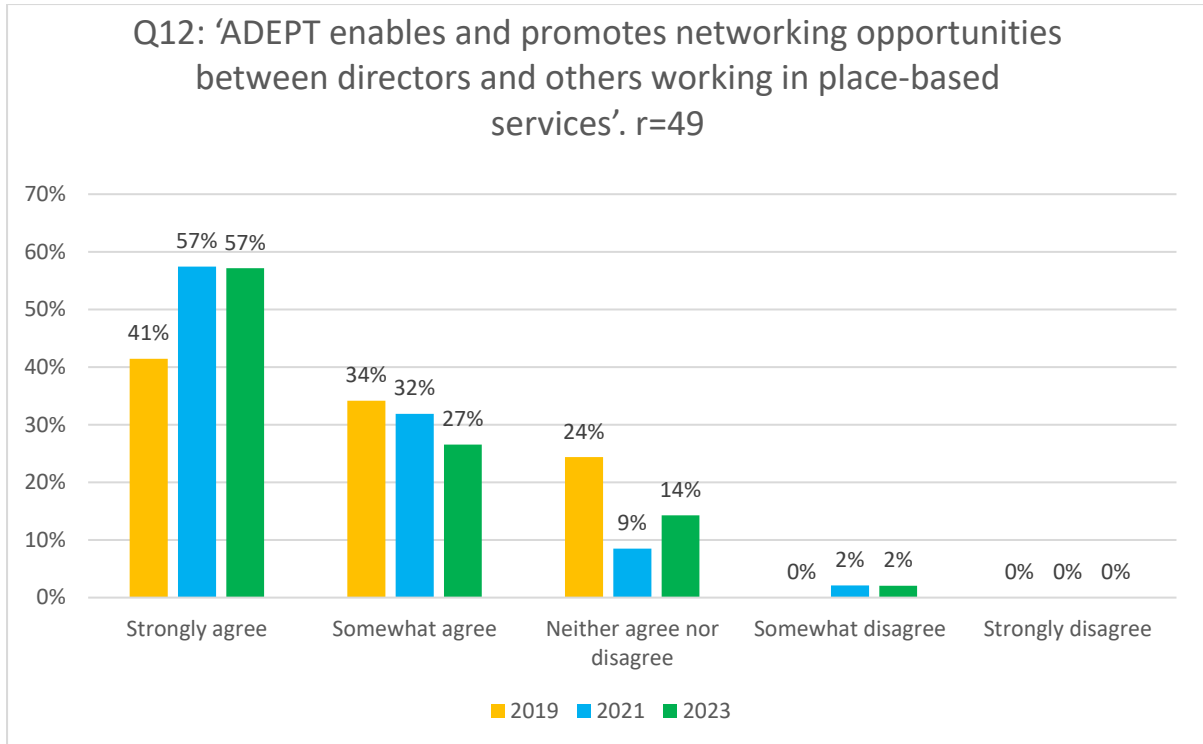


Figure 13

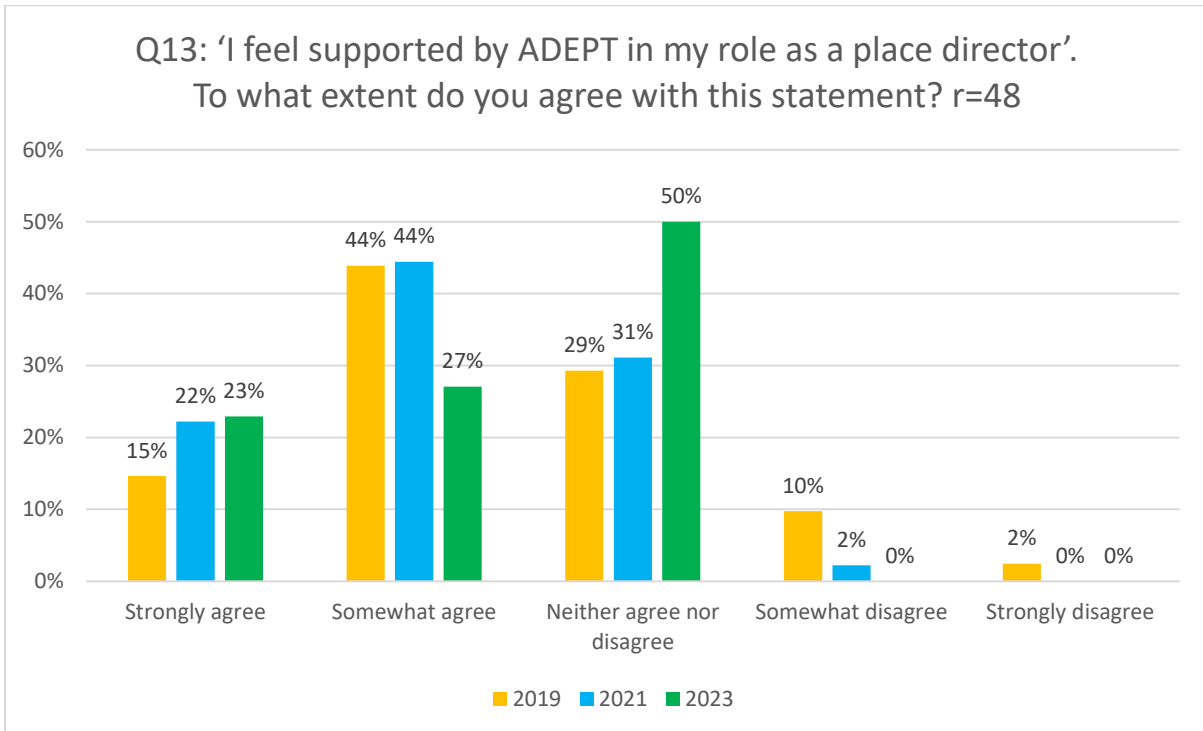


Figure 14

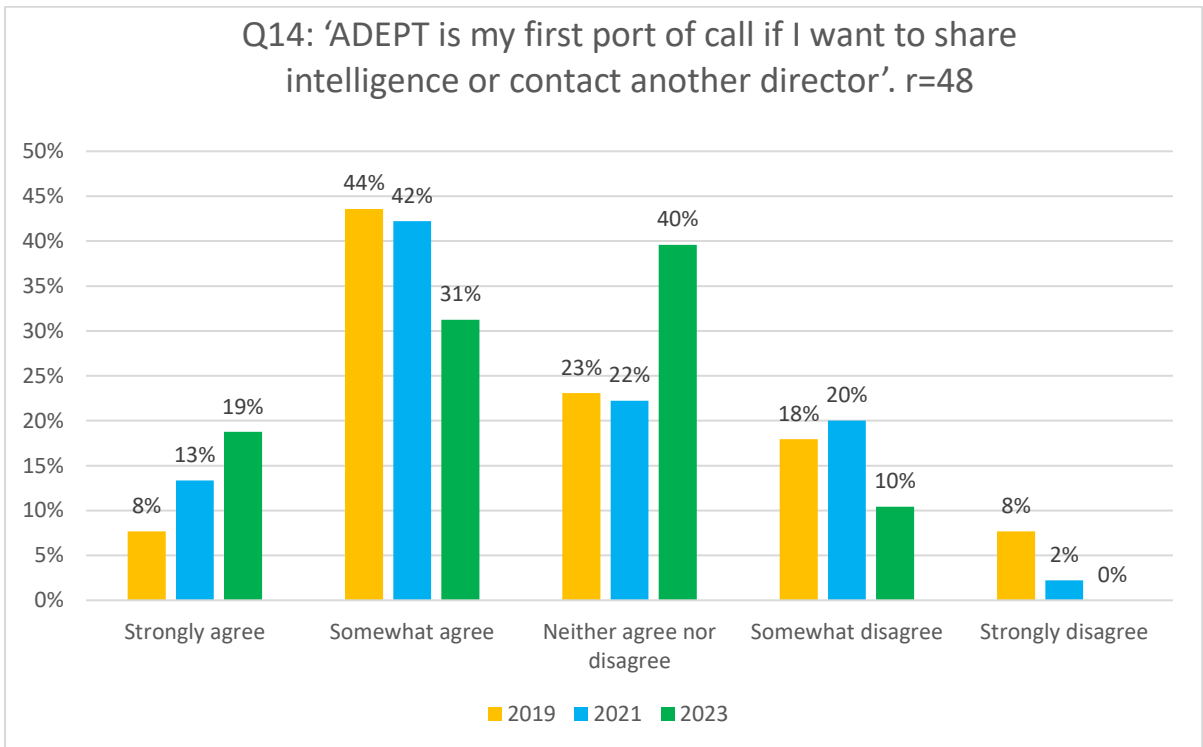


Figure 15

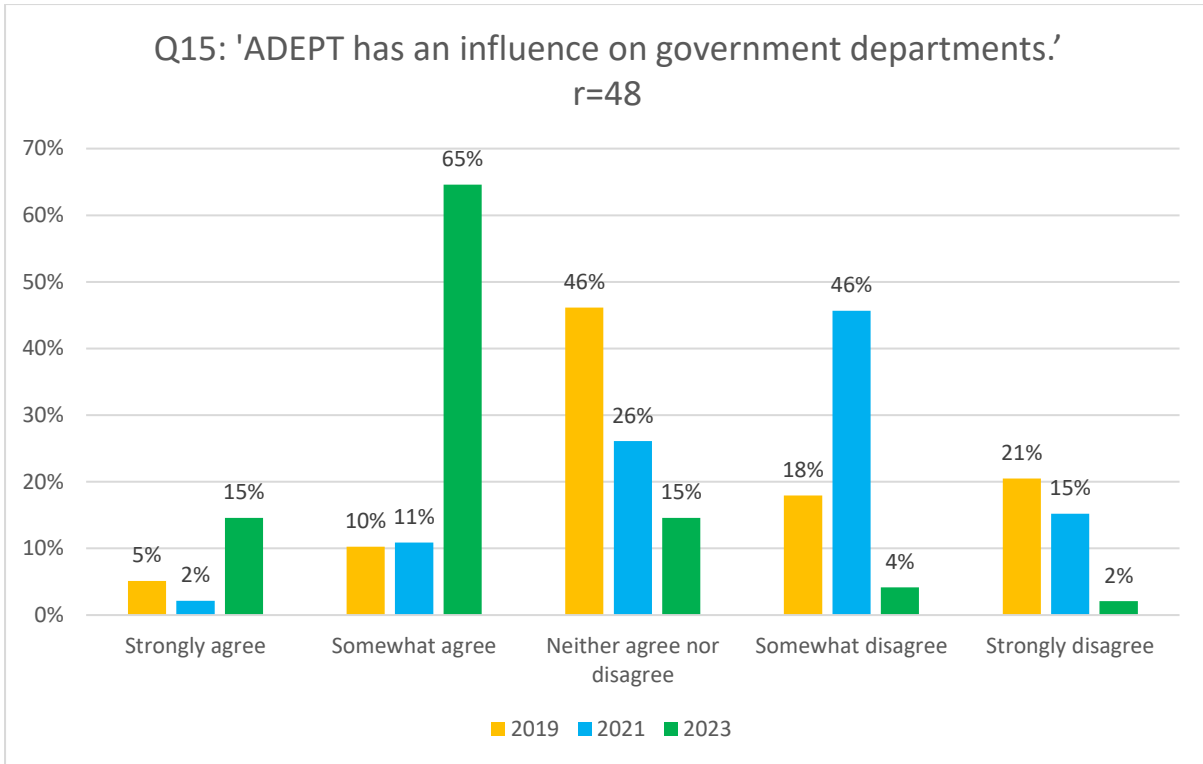


Figure 16

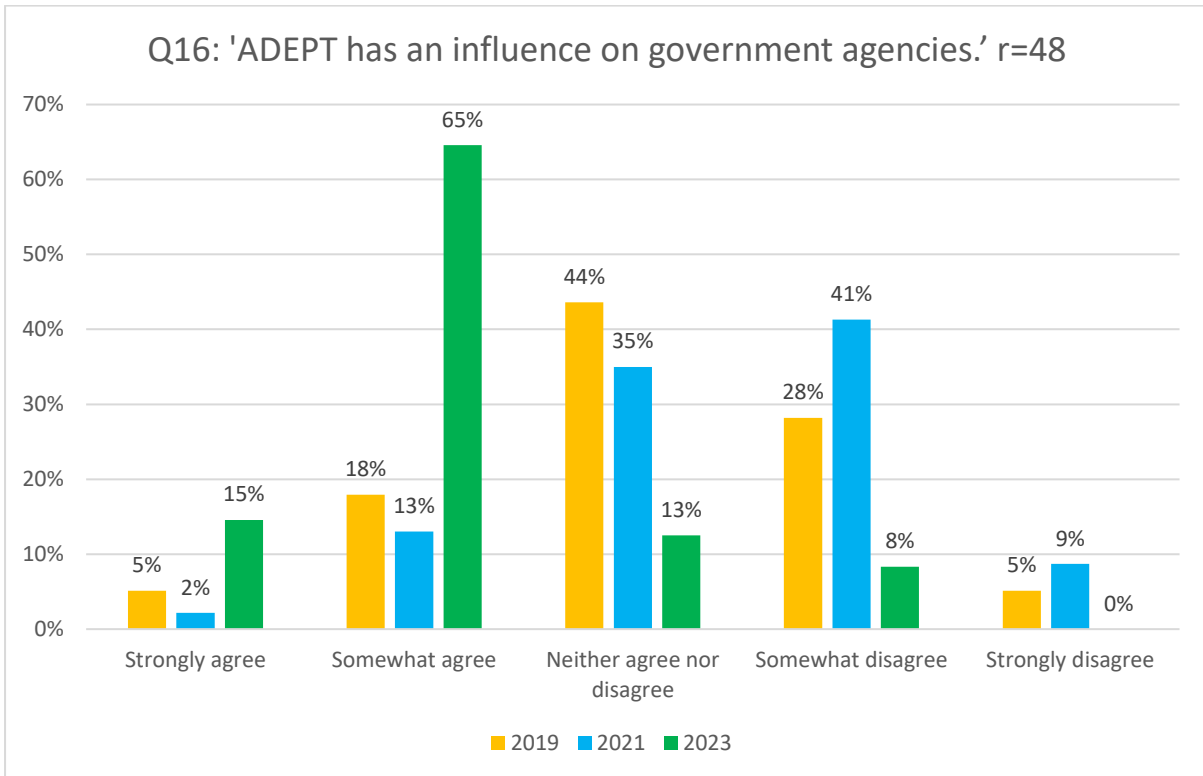


Figure 17

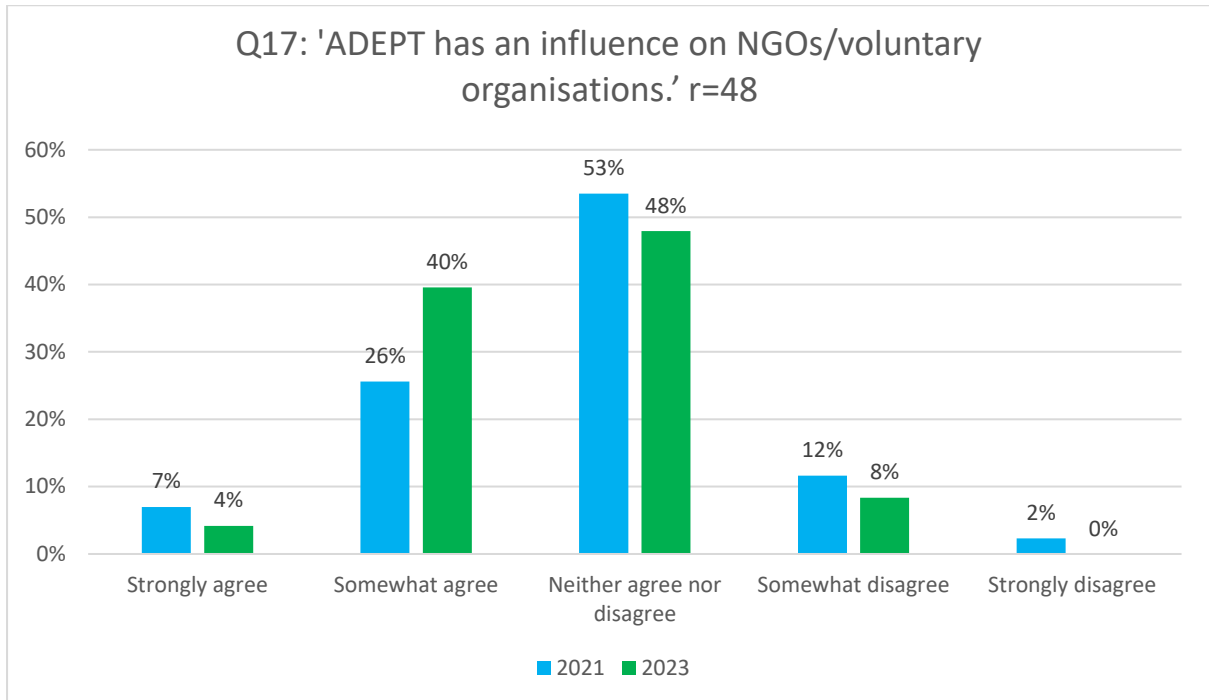


Figure 18

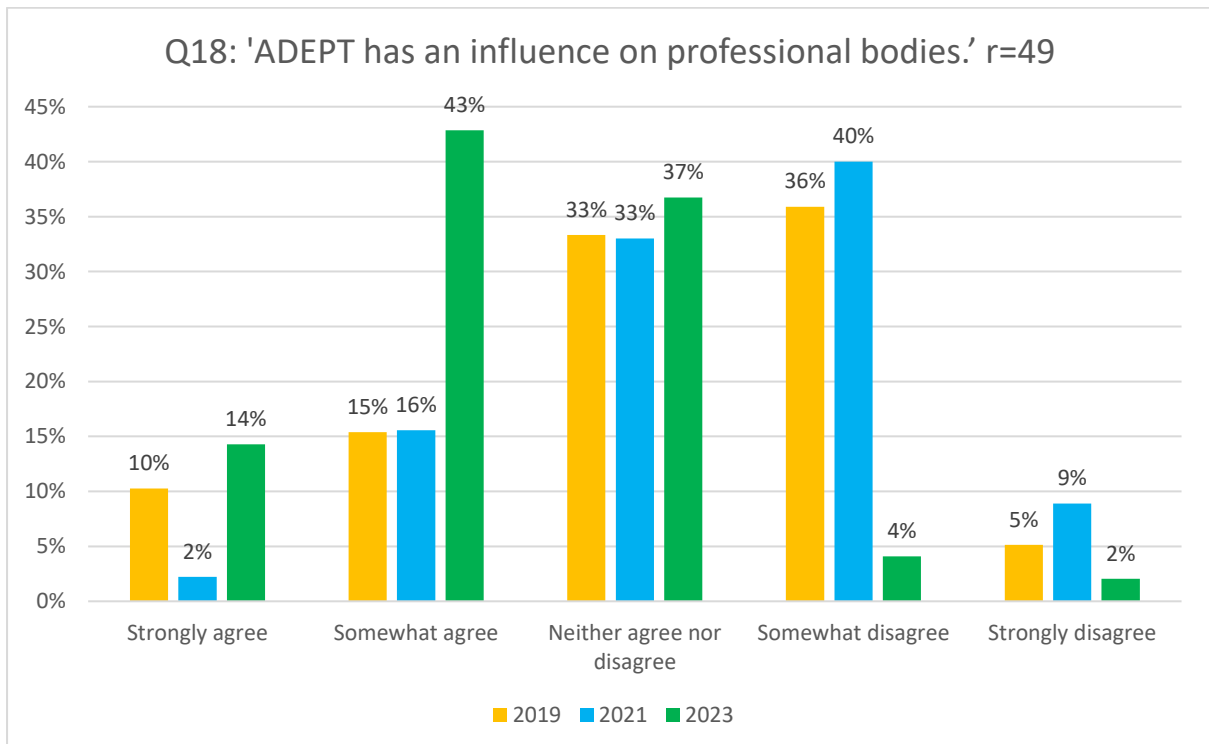


Figure 19

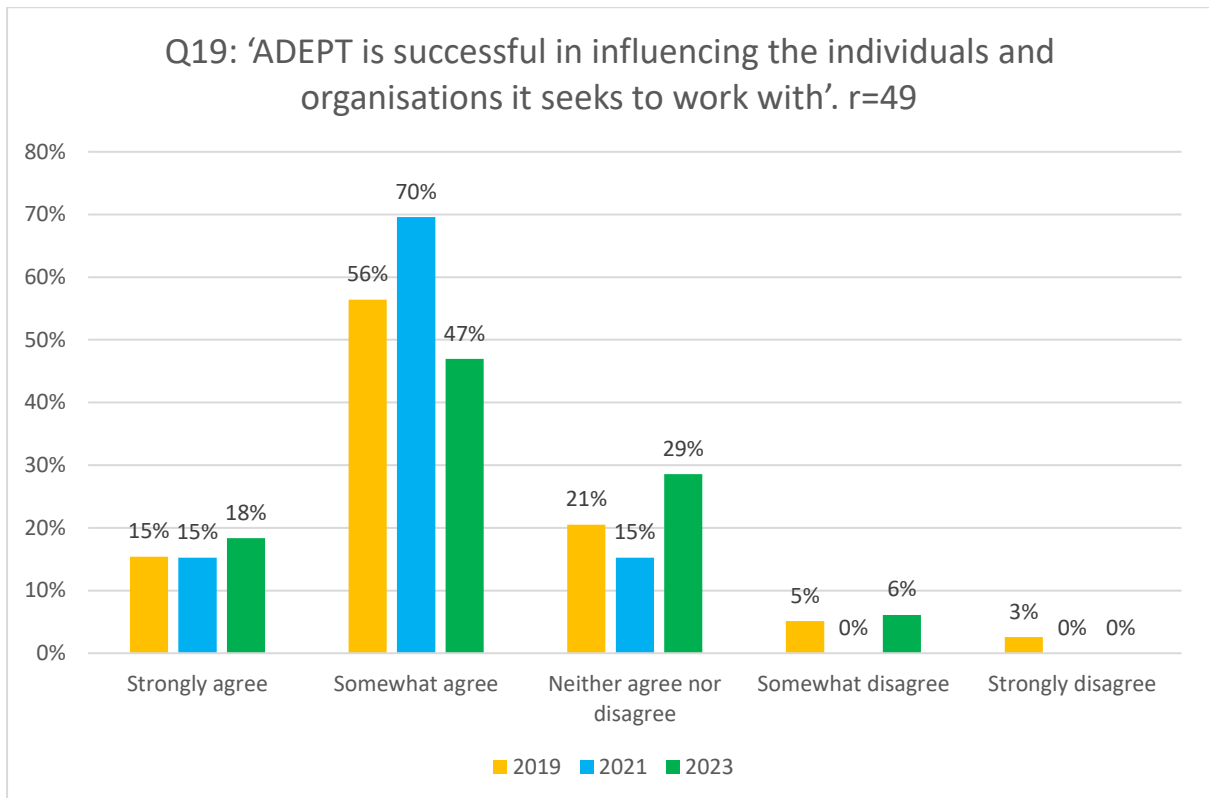


Figure 20

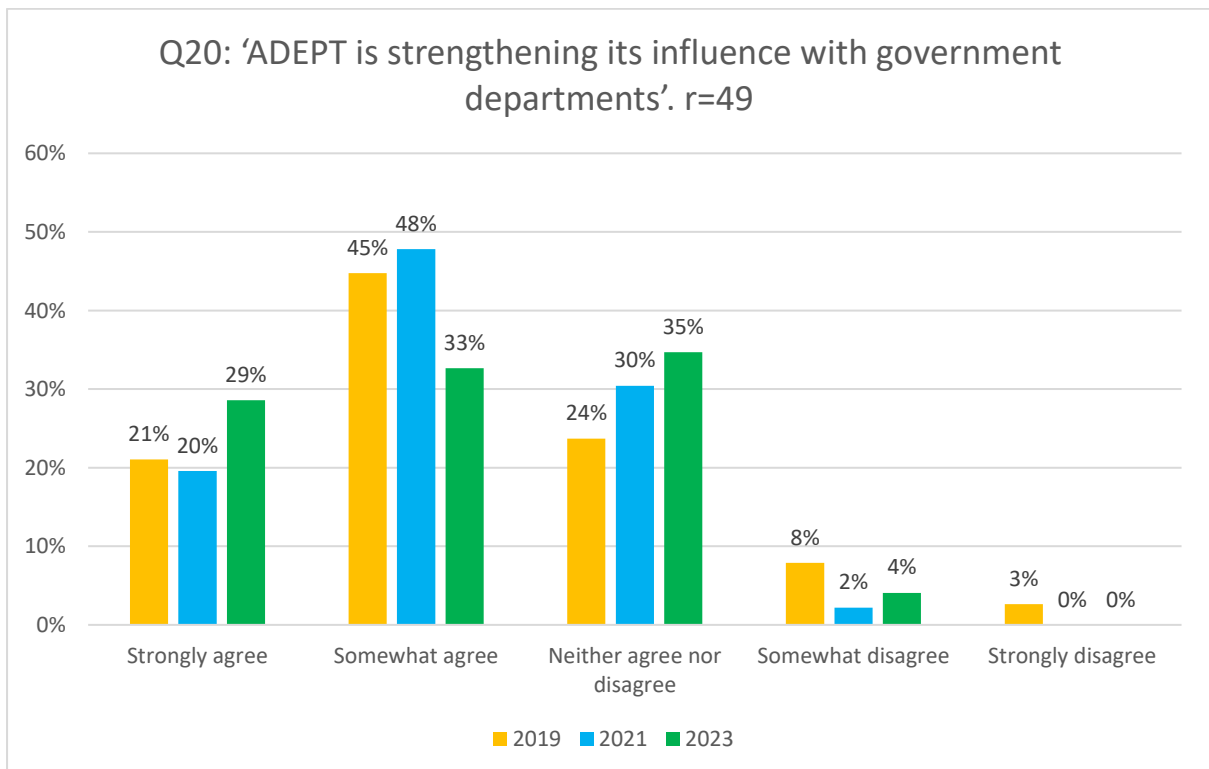


Figure 21

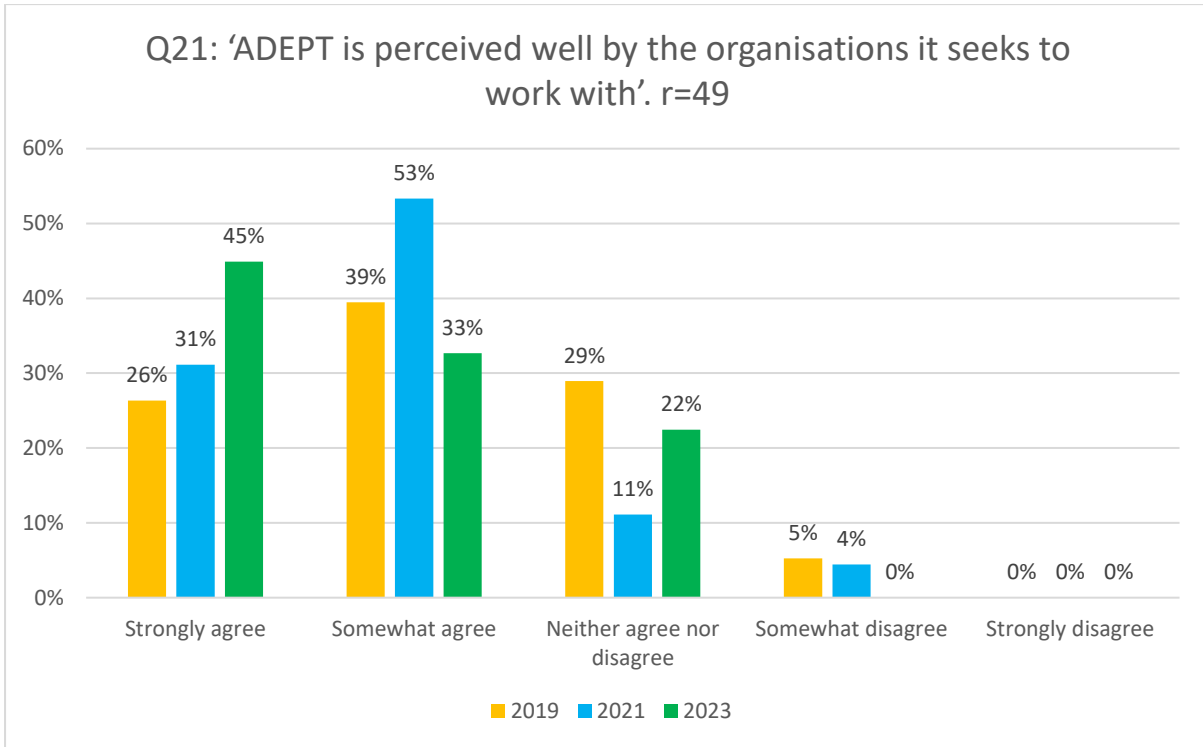
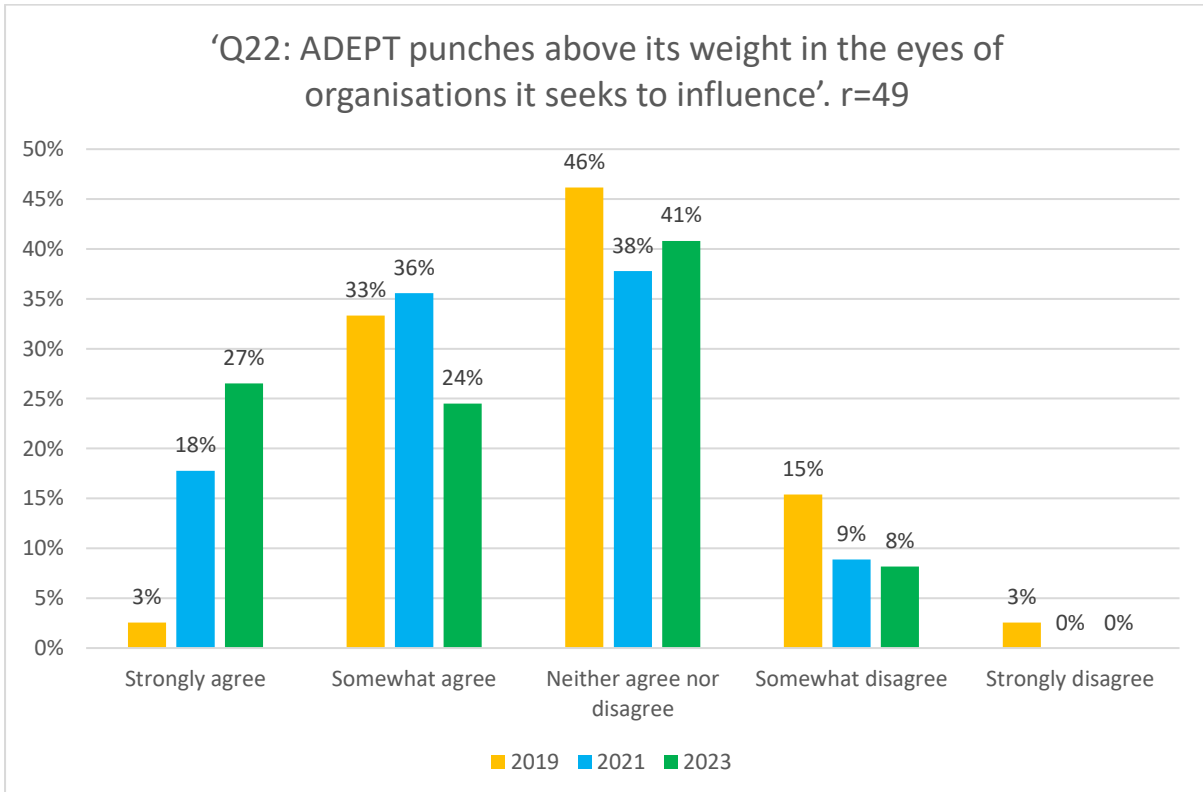


Figure 22



Summary of open text responses

Seniority of engagement

- Can ADEPT more so tailor its offer to different tiers of engagement? r=24
 - Engagement with retirees
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Joining up of 3Ps
 - Succession planning
 - Taking working group suggestions forwards
 - Clearer comms
 - Widening tiers of training
 - Management training and network
 - More f-2-f
 - Green finance training

Communications

- Are there other mailing lists that members are more likely to read? r=24
 - Highways magazine
 - New civil engineer
 - IPROW
 - LGTAG
 - LGA
 - MG
 - Transport today
 - More specific to expertise – may be worth thinking about with tailored comms
- What are members views on a more tailored comms approach? r = 28
 - General comms is useful – core place work and widens understanding
 - Tailored communications
 - Working groups
 - Be careful not to silo
 - Subject boards
 - Retired members

Equalities and diversity

- What are ADEPT members thoughts on equalities and diversity within ADEPT? r=30
 - Do more in this space
 - Consider wider place teams for health of association
 - Mobilise voluntary sector
 - Doing better on gender but need to also focus on other protected characteristics
 - More in terms of diversity of workforce

Feedback loop

- For members on topic boards, how do they understand the boards influence on ADEPTs national agenda and influence? r=13
 - Informing government thinking
 - Priorities on national stage
 - Sharing knowledge and expertise
 - Limited influence
 - Policy development
 - Promote issues

- What value do members gain from sitting on topic boards? r=14
 - Stewardship
 - Collaboration
 - Access to national government
 - Expertise
 - Peer learning
 - Networking
 - Issue sharing/resolving
 - Technical opportunities
 - Guidance
 - Position statement

Additional support

- What is one important issue ADEPT could support you with? R=26
 - Skills
 - Employment
 - Leadership training
 - Funding
 - Networking
 - Policy
 - Best practice
 - Climate change
 - Inflation
 - Raising awareness
 - Devolution
 - Network
 - Streamlining govt decision
- What is the one thing you would ask of ADEPT to influence Central Government on? R=30
 - Funding
 - Value of local government
 - Policy
 - Recruitment, retention, skills
 - Closer work with other orgs
 - Sustainable construction
 - Street lighting, highways maintenance
 - Streamlining gov decisions
 - Sustainability
 - Local roads
 - Longer term vision for infrastructure
 - Removal of bidding process
 - Lobbying
 - Transport policy



SHARED INTELLIGENCE