



Emotionally  
Intelligent  
Communications

**WALES & WEST UTILITIES**

**ENVIRONMENT AND BIODIVERSITY  
ONLINE STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP**

**FEEDBACK REPORT**

**11 DECEMBER 2023**



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## INTRODUCTION

On 11 December 2023, Wales & West Utilities (WWU) held an online stakeholder workshop aimed at seeking feedback from local authority representatives on the following topics: minimising the environmental impact of our streetworks and managing vegetation while delivering environmental net gain.

Each workshop session consisted of a short presentation given by a WWU representative, followed by a facilitated group discussion in a virtual breakout room where feedback was noted down by a scribe.

There were eight participants in attendance, representing eight different local authorities.

WWU instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the event and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. This document summarises the feedback received. Every effort has been made to faithfully record the feedback given. To encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A summary of the major themes of the feedback provided from each session and the results from the event feedback form are provided below.

### MINIMISING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF WWU'S STREETWORKS

- Stakeholders emphasised the importance of adopting new working approaches, such as re-using non-hazardous materials on-site during works and reviewing initial procurement methods to minimise spoil and carbon emissions.
- It was clear that good progress was being made by local authorities to reduce spoil and the need for virgin aggregate for backfill.
- Adherence to the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport's (ADEPT's) guidelines was emphasised, as was shifting the operating principles of council streetworks teams.
- There was praise for WWU's proposals to work with Wessex Water to combine their roadworks projects to minimise disruption for residents.
- Discussions highlighted the trend towards emissions reduction in council operations. Initiatives include the electrification of waste management vehicles, as well as collaborative efforts including combining roadworks projects and establishing information partnerships to both enhance sustainability and adhere to safety regulations.

### MANAGING VEGETATION

- Stakeholders emphasised the need for WWU to conduct comprehensive biodiversity surveys and strategise emergency work responses to protect sensitive habitats and species, while also ensuring transparent and proactive communication with customers. However, WWU was also urged to clarify its tree-planting approach in order to overcome greenwashing concerns held by some attendees.
- Participants advocated for collaboration with WWU in land management and community engagement initiatives, with a focus on integrating local nature recovery strategies, leveraging existing partnerships with environmental networks, and engaging diverse community segments to deliver biodiversity gains, social value and enhanced environmental awareness to the public. It was felt that collaboration could also include initiatives to deliver social value as well as ecological enhancement.

The importance of working in partnership with established networks was a recurring theme. Local nature partnerships were seen as particularly important stakeholders, along with Wales Biodiversity Partnership, wildlife trusts and the National Trust.

### WRITTEN FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below. A full breakdown of the feedback can be found in Appendix 2 of this report.

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- 83% of attendees who filled out a feedback form told us that they found the workshop ‘interesting’ with the other 17% finding it ‘very interesting’.
  - 83% ‘strongly agreed’ that they had had an opportunity to make points and ask questions.
  - 50% ‘strongly agreed’ and 33% ‘agreed’ that the right topics were discussed on the day.
  - 100% thought EQ Communications’ facilitation was ‘very good’.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

A full list of the local authorities represented at the workshop can be found in Appendix 1.

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## SESSION ONE: MINIMISING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF OUR WORKS

Following a welcome and an overview of WWU and the upcoming GD3 Business Plan from David Robinson (Business Services Director), Stacy Griffiths (Corporate Environment Lead) took stakeholders through the first presentation, which focused on minimising the impact of WWU's streetworks. To begin, she outlined examples of streetworks with environmental impacts, such as emergency repairs and new connections, and presented key environmental performance figures, such as the company's waste management statistics. Stacy then talked attendees through WWU's current approach to reducing its environmental impact through its use of aggregate for streetworks and decreasing its excavation and consumption of reinstatement materials. To finish, she introduced a proposed new commitment under WWU's Environmental Action Plan of collaborating with others to understand and grasp opportunities to reduce its fleet and tooling emissions.

Participants were then asked to introduce themselves and provide feedback on WWU's plans to reduce its environmental impact through these measures.

All discussions began with introductions. Attendees representing eight different local authorities expressed an interest in exploring potential partnerships to improve biodiversity, and wanted to hear more information about WWU's work in this area.

A number of participants were of the opinion that good progress was being made within their councils towards reducing spoil or the need for virgin aggregate for backfill. As part of these efforts, some had had interactions with the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport's (ADEPT) and were signing up to its streetworks guidelines, with a view to reducing their own environmental impact. While no specific new working methods had been adopted, stakeholders noted that there had been a shift in the operating principles of council streetworks teams, with even greater emphasis than ever placed on trying to re-use non-hazardous materials on-site rather than taking them away for dumping. This was seen as a valuable step in the right direction, in that it would save significant amounts of money and materials. At the same time, another stakeholder noted that their council was also looking at their initial procurement approaches in order to reduce the amount of carbon emitted.

During discussions into how councils are reducing emissions associated with streetworks, it was clear that fleet electrification is a popular solution among these organisations. A range of different public vehicles were identified as being under consideration for electrification by different councils, including waste management vehicles and refuse collection vehicles. The local authorities represented were exploring the viability of these solutions, but gave the impression that they felt they would be key to reducing emissions going forward. This suggests a tacit approval for WWU's new commitment around reducing its own fleet emission.

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Participants put forward a number of examples of collaboration to reduce disruption for residents during streetworks. One stakeholder endorsed WWU's intentions to work with Wessex Water to combine their roadworks projects or overlap works timetables, feeling that this was an eminently sensible approach. Another suggested looking into setting up information partnerships in which WWU could advise local authorities who were interested in sustainability projects around rolling out these initiatives without contravening WWU safety regulations. It was thought that this would prevent incidents that could disrupt customer supplies.

## FEEDBACK

### 1. What is your role and your reason for attending today? What would you like to get out of it?

- "I'm looking to get more information around the biodiversity duty." Local authority officer
- "I'm looking at opportunities for working with different organisations on environmental things, and to be involved with S106 in Powys." Local authority officer
- "I'm involved with the S106 and the nature partnership. Anything that is biodiversity, I get involved in." Local authority officer

### 2. Has your council introduced any new ways of working that reduces spoil or reduces the need for virgin aggregate for backfill?

- "I know, from our side of streetworks, that each time we take material out of the ground, we request virgin material is put in to prevent contamination. I'll take this back to my managers so that they can understand to be more lenient on recycled material." Local authority officer
- "There is a project funded by ADEPT on road network maintenance and net zero that is focused on by my Highways colleagues. We are also trialling different ways of maintenance on the road network." Local authority officer
- "Powys are leading the way on the procurement side and reducing carbon from that. It was found that procurement was the highest emitter of carbon in Powys." Local authority officer
- "The background of the ADEPT programme is that you'd be looking to the older tarmac in the road layers. You'd be looking more at assessing hazardous and non-hazardous levels and recycling the non-hazardous parts off. You would be saving major cost by doing this instead of sending everything you've planed off as hazardous waste." Local authority officer
- "We always try to re-use material on site, rather than take it away. If it's roads, reuse the hedge bank material. The general principle is rather than import material, reuse whatever you have on site first." Local authority officer
- "The cost-effective way is not transporting or paying for waste material to be dumped and new material being brought in. It does depend on the type of material being discussed, but the general principle of trying to retain and reuse for the biodiversity elements is a high priority for us." Local authority officer
- "Encourage recycling and follow adept guidance. It's something I will mention to the other teams to encourage recycling." Local authority officer

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### 3. Has your council found ways to reduce emissions associated with streetworks, including for example low emission reinstatement materials?

- “There are electric fleet vehicles being put in place. Waste management vehicles are electric, and the centre is being redeveloped to support the charging stations.” Local authority officer
- “On the wave side, in a rural location, we are trialling an electric RCV in different routes to see what is viable. As part of the fleet review, we’re reviewing what can be electrified.” Local authority officer

### 4. Do you have examples of collaboration to reduce disruption for residents?

- “There’s talk of Wessex Water and WWU around combining works or overlapping timetables on infrastructure work. This is definitely something we would be interested in, it makes complete sense.” Local authority officer
- “Our climate change officer does a lot of this. Not sure how the street care and maintenance teams manage the facilities of that. Certainly, as a biodiversity partnership, we have a lot of interest with local groups for tree and pollinating planting. One of the things I’d like to try and ask would be whether there is generic advice from WWU to local authorities who wish to do green infrastructure, biodiversity gain, tree/street planting as to how can we do that to the best possible outcome without contravening their regulations?” Local authority officer

### 5. Are there opportunities to work more closely with other organisations?

- No feedback provided



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## SESSION TWO: MANAGING VEGETATION

The second presentation of the day, on WWU's approach to managing vegetation, was given by Rhodri Thomas (Sustainability and Environment Manager). To begin, he introduced WWU's Sustainability Strategy, which aims to help natural environments thrive across the company's own land and in its projects by working with communities and partners. Rhodri explained that this approach was underpinned by three pillars: planting five trees for every tree cut down; delivering 85 contaminated land projects by 2026; and understanding, monitoring and promoting biodiversity. He noted that this Sustainability Strategy and these pillars influence the company's approach to managing vegetation, which is necessary to ensure the safety of the network. Rhodri then talked stakeholders through a number of case studies illustrating these considerations, such as Castell Alun High School in Wrexham and the Shapters Road former gas site in Plymouth. Stakeholders were then invited to provide their thoughts on WWU's strategy to managing vegetation.

Stakeholders suggested a number of barriers that arise when undertaking works in relation to protecting biodiversity. The key issues raised during discussions were related to identifying and preserving sensitive habitats - such as reptile hibernation sites and species-rich grasslands on road verges - and managing areas with protected species such as great crested newts. In order to overcome this issue, one participant stressed that WWU should be undertaking comprehensive biodiversity surveys in order to inform work timings and approaches.

Another potential barrier identified was the challenge of balancing emergency works and long-term biodiversity enhancement. For emergency works, one stakeholder suggested that WWU should focus on responding to the incident at hand, and then adding biodiversity features subsequently. Another noted that they were using an ecologist to address these kinds of challenges around mitigations and enhancements.

Stakeholders were very much of the view that any communications about this type of intervention should be made to customers as early as possible through a variety of channels. At the same time, concerns were raised about potential choices of partners and schemes for replacement tree planting, as well as potential permanent damage to linear corridors and protected species due to tree felling. A number of stakeholders sought reassurance from WWU regarding their approach in order to stave off accusations of potential greenwashing. At the same time, one stakeholder noted that some local authorities have Forestry Commission grants for tree-planting schemes and urged WWU to explore collaboration opportunities in this area in order to make their separate funding pots go further.

Attendees put forward a range of further potential collaborative opportunities with WWU on a whole ecosystem, environmental net gain approach to vegetation and land management across a number of areas. One participant was enthusiastic about looking into pushing community engagement forward using technology, through a new online tree portal that would enable residents to suggest locations for tree planting, thereby involving communities more prominently in environmental decision-making. Green

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infrastructure was another potential area put forward for collaboration. One attendee noted that their local authority was looking at environmentally friendly projects, such as green bus shelters and solar-powered energy green roofs, and took the view that WWU could potentially assist in pushing forward these types of sustainable urban schemes.

The importance of engaging with established networks was a recurring theme, with local nature partnerships, Wales Biodiversity Partnership, wildlife trusts and the National Trust highlighted as potential appropriate organisations for collaboration. These partnerships were seen as effective channels for growing environmental initiatives, demonstrating a preference for working within existing frameworks among stakeholders. Finally, another attendee highlighted the concept of collaboration with WWU in conducting biodiversity audits on lands and in broader landscape projects. It was hoped that this could identify areas where interventions could have greater environmental impact, suggesting an appetite for a more strategic and data-driven process underpinning environmental management.

Participants also put forward a number of ways in which they believed that they could collaborate with WWU to deliver co-benefits/social value through land management. One stakeholder made the point that their local authority would be interested in exploring this, but noted that their lack of resources would prevent them from doing it at present. They emphasised that in-house ecology teams and local nature partnerships must be involved in any approach to get the most out of any management initiatives already in place as a practical first step to sustainable land management. Another attendee felt that collaborative contributions could be made in this area through aligning local nature recovery strategies with land management processes, identifying highway projects as one area where resources could be combined. At the same time, collaboration on land management was also seen as an avenue for delivering social value, particularly on support for project work undertaken by community and climate action groups, and communications campaigns on fuel poverty and energy awareness.

More broadly, another participant saw many potential collaboration opportunities around community engagement and biodiversity, with efforts to reach out to diverse sections of local populations around ecological projects viewed as a potentially effective approach for achieving multiple benefits. This approach was championed for its potential to simultaneously achieve biodiversity gains, raise awareness, offer volunteer opportunities and enhance community wellbeing. At the same time, others stressed that any collaboration approach where community access to nature was enhanced was worth pursuing, pointing to its potential to bring people together and raise awareness about environmental issues.

## **FEEDBACK**

### **1. What are the barriers you face when undertaking groundworks in relation to protecting biodiversity? How do we overcome these barriers?**

- “The major ones that we advise on are reptile hibernation sites, and how we identify if they are there. That way, we can arrange the work around them. Another one would be the digging up of species-

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rich grassland on road verges. It's about how you put it back and maintain it after that. Another big one is scrub clearances around bird-nesting season." Local authority officer

- "Looking if there is a tree preservation order on a tree, and also great-crested newts. That's the extent of it." Local authority officer
- "Getting proper biodiversity surveys to know what's there, and the timings of works. Trying to impose net gain overall and finding opportunities to add biodiversity features. For emergency works, looking at them post-works rather than leaving it. Be proactive on that." Local authority officer
- "As part of the S106 duty, we have to maintain and advance biodiversity. We will have an ecologist involved to help in what needs doing, and what mitigations and advancements are required." Local authority officer

## **2. How can we communicate this essential work to customers in your area?**

- "The more notice you can give, the better. It's about clear and varied communication through different channels as early as possible. We would also be interested in knowing the number of trees that you are cutting down and how you are replacing them. Us and a lot of other local authorities have funding from the Forestry Commission for tree-planting, so that's an opportunity to overlap and reach out with WWU." Local authority officer
- "The off-setting companies make me nervous. We have high woodland cover so there's not much space for large-scale tree planting. It's how you vet the tree-planting companies because they all greenwash. The other thing to consider is if you cut down a tree in Neath, for example, but plant one miles away, you're losing that habitat in the local area." Local authority officer
- "Addition of linear features when replacing cut-down trees. Taking out trees in certain places can sever these linear corridors and have a major impact on protected species. We have a three-for-one policy and we always try to replace trees where they've been felled. Can we plant a tree back where it was before?" Local authority officer

## **3. What are the opportunities in your area for collaboration on a whole ecosystem, environmental net gain approach to vegetation and land management?**

- "A webpage is about to go live where there's a tree portal and residents can pin where they'd like the trees planted." Local authority officer
- "We are looking at green bus shelters and solar-powered energy green roofs ... if that's something WWU could get involved in." Local authority officer
- "Feeding into local nature partnerships is key because they have so many organisations within them. Feeding into those dependent on capacity may be a nice, easy way of understanding what best to get involved in." Local authority officer
- "Wales Biodiversity Partnership is the best contact for any potential scheme, with so many opportunities." Local authority officer
- "Wildlife trusts are a key player, as is National Trust. But local nature partnerships speak to each other, so that's the best way of going about it." Local authority officer

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- “Whether there are biodiversity audits on your land and on wider landscape projects, whether there is scope to have projects in areas with a bigger overall effect?” Local authority officer

#### 4. How could you work with us to deliver co-benefits/social value through land management?

- “If we had in-house capacity, that is something that we could do. If we had to dig up a stretch of road grassland, we have a road verge scheme. That could be a possibility as well. First port of call would be our in-house ecology team, then a local nature partnership.” Local authority officer
- “The local nature recovery strategies that we must deliver, it overlaps with that. The big limit with us is resource around, if we do work on highways for example, there are collaboration opportunities there. On social values, we’ve got a lot of community and climate action groups that can be supported on various projects. Opportunities around fuel poverty and energy awareness.” Local authority officer
- “There is a lot of awareness-raising and biodiversity gain ... multi-factor enhancements that you can gain from bringing communities onto projects. Engaging local teams, local communities, young offenders, all sorts of people. We’ve had young offenders building otter holes, for example. Look at where you can gain volunteer opportunities and also contribute to wellbeing.” Local authority officer
- “The social value delivery is an interesting discussion. How this is implemented and counted is key.” Local authority officer
- “Access to nature and accessibility is a big opportunity to connect people.” Local authority officer
- “Raising awareness of energy efficiency and awareness. Access to nature is also very important, so this could be enhanced.” Local authority officer
- “The nature partnerships groups are important, as is facilitating projects through these groups.” Local authority officer
- “Understanding the biodiversity resource that you have as well, so that if you have the brownfield site, you want to retain the ecology there. It is important to understand the importance of sites in the wider landscape scheme.” Local authority officer
- “All organisations have to look after the depleting biodiversity resource. It should be an inherent element of the thinking and it should be in the documents you send to customers ... that is why you’re spending money on this. It’s saving the planet.” Local authority officer

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## APPENDIX 1: ATTENDEE LIST

A total of eight stakeholders attended the workshop, representing eight organisations:

Bristol City Council

Denbighshire County Council

Neath Port Talbot Council

Pembrokeshire County Council

Powys County Council

Somerset Council

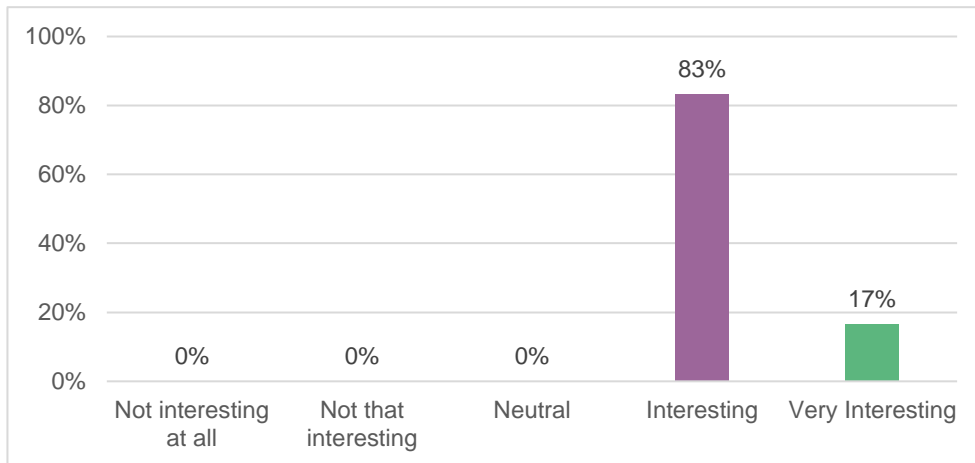
Stroud District Council

Wrexham County Borough Council

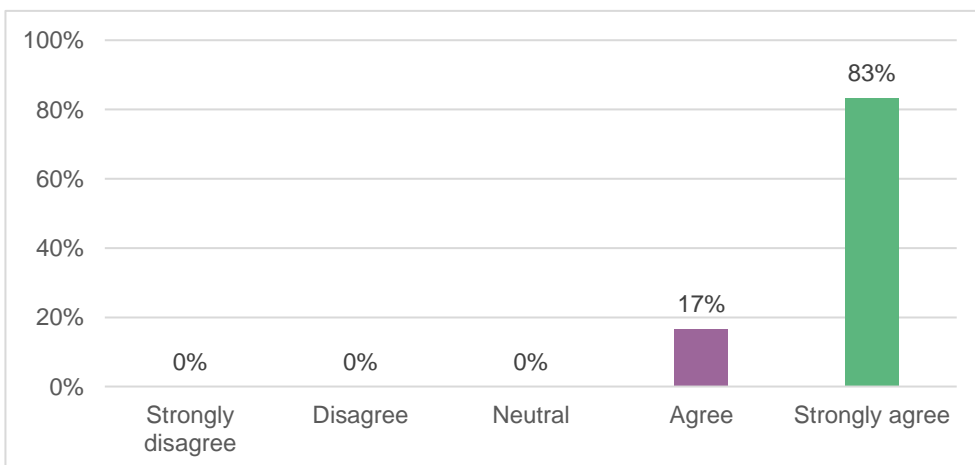
## APPENDIX 2: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below.

### 1. Overall, did you find this workshop to be:



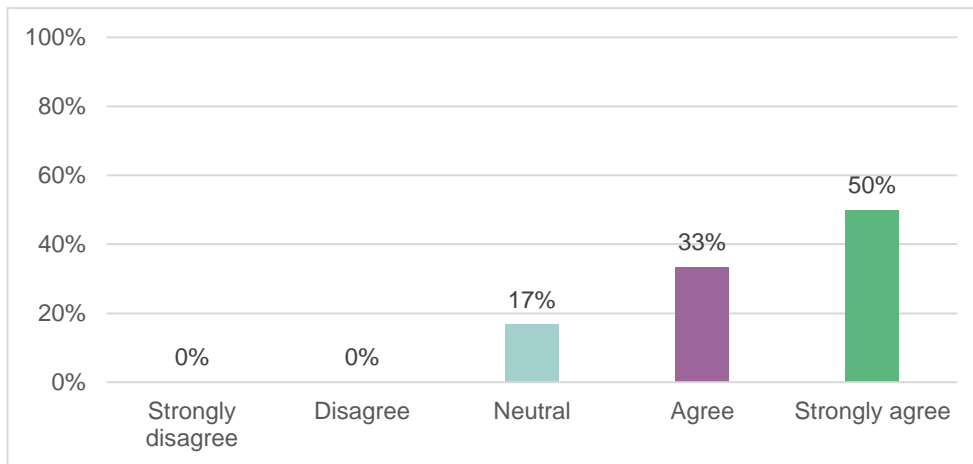
### 2. Did you feel that you had the opportunity to make your points and ask questions?



#### Comments:

- “Lots of opportunities to input and being asked directly was good, too.”
- “Very easy to comment.”

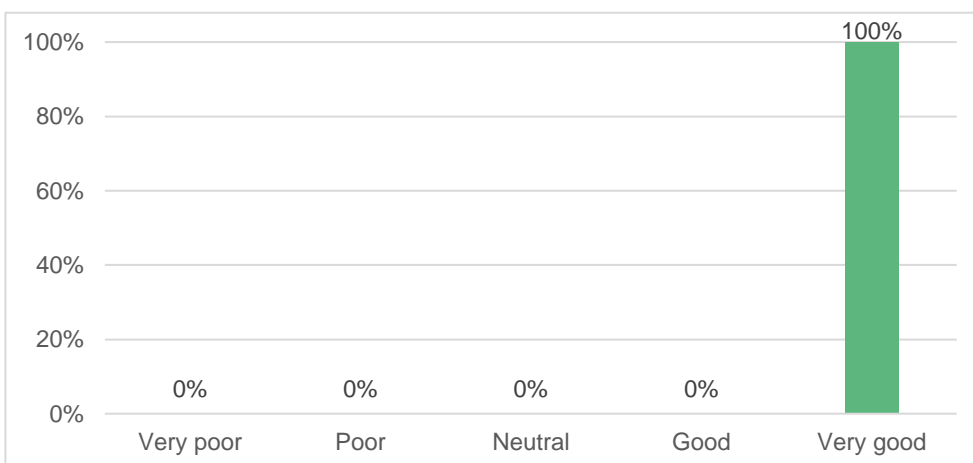
### 3. Did we cover the right topics for you on the day?



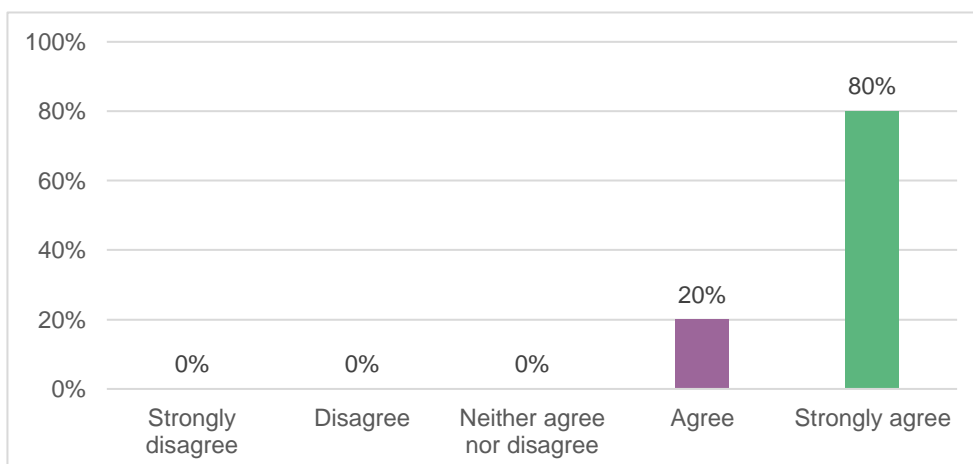
**Comments:**

- “It would have benefitted from the Carbon Reduction Team and Open Spaces Team being present to be able to cover other aspects that the highway roadworks / streetworks team could not answer.”
- “A good amount on biodiversity opportunities as well as climate.”

**4. What did you think of the way the workshop was chaired by your facilitator?**



**5. Did you find the online format accessible and easy to use?**



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**6. Do you have any other comments?**

- “It was a really useful chat, where we could share ideas and opportunities. Hopefully this will lead to more collaborative work with WWU.”





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