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Export Cluster Programme feedback survey results

Mae’r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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Export Cluster Programme feedback survey

Author: Mair Smith

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:
Name: Mair Smith
Division: Knowledge and Analytical Services
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Tel: 03000250958
Email: stats.trade@gov.wales

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Executive summary

i. The Export Cluster Programme (2021-2024) is a key component of the Welsh Government's Export Action Plan for Wales. The Export Cluster Programme (hereafter referenced as 'the Programme') is focused on supporting and developing an increase in the export performance of companies based within five priority export sectors for Wales – Renewables and Clean Energy, Consumer Products, High-value Manufacturing, MedTech and Diagnostics and Technology. The Programme provides cluster members with a combination of one-to-many and one-to-one support designed specifically to enhance their export capacity and capabilities as well as the opportunity to collaborate with other members to create networks, niche groups and peer-to-peer mentoring support.

ii. Delivery of the Programme was contracted out to three suppliers (delivery partners) from October 2021 for three years with the option of a fourth year extension to end of October 2025. The Survey feedback played an important part in the overall decision to take up the extension into a fourth year.

iii. In 2024, the Welsh Government's Export Team tasked colleagues in the Trade Analysis Team with undertaking a small-scale research project to gather feedback from businesses who have participated in the Programme. The aim of the research was to gather evidence to assess and better understand the effectiveness and impacts of the support provided to businesses via the Programme.

iv. An online survey was consequently developed to capture both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The Survey was distributed via email to 215 business beneficiaries of the Programme in May and June 2024. A response rate of 36% was achieved. The Survey and analysis focused on businesses who had been members of the Programme for seven or more months (referred to as 'established members') as it was considered that businesses needed this time to engage meaningfully (these responses represented 31% of total membership).

v. The results indicated broad satisfaction with the Programme, including positive initial perceptions from new members (participating for six months or less). Responses showed widespread satisfaction with Cluster Managers and the service provided by them, as well as with the delivery of events and advice.

vi. Across all survey questions, less than five respondents reported dissatisfaction or issues/difficulties with the Programme, and these were distributed across clusters (rather than concentrated in a single one). However, a substantial proportion of indifferent responses were provided to multiple different statements around satisfaction, impact and effectiveness. Comments from some respondents suggest that possible explanations for this were: limited engagement with the Programme to date and a time lag in the realisation of benefits as members embarked on longer-term strategies of export development.

vii. The only barrier to participation for many respondents was their own resource constraints. This is important to consider when anticipating participation levels and planning future events, specifically their format and advance notice given. The hybrid approach to organising cluster events/activities currently delivered by some clusters is beneficial in seeking to both reduce burden on businesses while also allowing opportunities for face-to-face networking which were valued by some members.

viii. Not all members agreed that other businesses within their cluster were useful to engage with. Related to this, the 'relevance of events and activities' was identified as a barrier to engagement with the Programme by just over two fifths of businesses. Balancing the specificity and differences in businesses' markets, products and export status/experience is therefore a key challenge and one that appeared relevant to all clusters.

ix. The results revealed comparably different levels of engagement and satisfaction with different activities from members across the five individual clusters. The different perceptions shown by respondents of different clusters reinforces the need for the Export Team to consider the results on a cluster-by-cluster basis and use these to inform the needs and direction of each cluster individually. Separate analysis by cluster was out of scope for the purposes of this report. When broken down by Cluster, the response rate was insufficient for further analysis and could have been disclosive.

x. The Programme has most widely benefitted businesses in terms of confidence to export, with half of respondents reporting an increase. Almost two fifths of respondents reported that the Programme had supported them to identify new market opportunities and to improve their export strategies. Meanwhile around a fifth reported increased skills and capability to export as well as developing new commercial partnerships because of the Programme. Subsequent research, further down the line, would be better positioned to identify longer term outcomes and impacts, once businesses have had more time to realise the benefits of support.

xi. Going forward future versions of the Programme would benefit from more systematic implementation of evidence gathering. This should combine surveys and analysis of monitoring data with a schedule of qualitative data collection (including consultation with delivery partners) while minimising the burden on businesses. A strategically designed monitoring and evaluation framework should be implemented alongside any future versions of the Programme and in coordination with supporting Export Support programmes.

1. Introduction

1.1 In early 2024, the Welsh Government's Export Team asked colleagues in the Trade Analysis Team for their support and expertise in undertaking a research project to gather feedback from businesses participating in the Export Cluster Programme (hereafter referenced as 'the Programme'), a key component of the Welsh Government's Export Action Plan (ExAP) for Wales. The aim was to gather evidence to understand the effectiveness and impacts of the support provided to businesses via the Programme. The ultimate purpose was to inform recommendations and decisions around the option to extend the Programme into a fourth year and the design/delivery of such export support to Wales based businesses in the future.

Background to the Programme

1.2 The Programme is one of a series of export support initiatives introduced as part of the ExAP for Wales. The ExAP, published in December 2020, set out the Welsh Government's plans to "assist businesses to recover and rebuild their exports and to adapt to any associated new processes and trade agreements", specifically in response to both the end of EU transition and COVID-19. The ExAP aims to create a strong, vibrant and sustainable exporting sector; to drive the growth of Welsh exports in the longer term, increasing the contribution exports make to the Welsh economy; and to safeguard existing, as well as create new, jobs and opportunities for people in Wales.

1.3 The Programme was modelled on the existing Food and Drink Export Cluster by bringing companies together to systematically develop their capacity and capabilities for exporting on both a one-to-many and one-to-one basis. Its focus was on the five Priority Export Sectors for Wales as set out in the ExAP, these being:

- Renewables and Clean Energy
- Consumer Products
- High-value Manufacturing
- MedTech and Diagnostics
- Technology.

1.4 After an initial pilot of the MedTech and Diagnostics Cluster in 2021/22, the development and management of individual clusters was contracted out to three suppliers (delivery partners) for the period from October 2021 to October 2024[1] (with the option of a one-year extension to October 2025). Each supplier was given responsibility for identifying and recruiting appropriate businesses, delivering a range of support to their respective cluster members across Wales, and acting as a 'feeder' for referrals to other export support programmes provided by Welsh Government and the wider export support ecosystem in Wales.

1.5 The support delivered was to comprise of an annual schedule of 'activities' designed to achieve the aims and objectives of the Programme by providing members with a mix of one-to-many, small focus groups and, sometimes, one-to-one support tailored to meet their needs and aspirations for export growth. Support was anticipated to include:

- Progression towards exporting (e.g. exporting for the first time, entering a new market, or increasing market share).
- Facilitation of new commercial business collaboration amongst targeted smaller groups, who would be comfortable in engaging commercially together (e.g. export consortia, etc.).
- Development of new partnerships, networks, understanding innovation in key markets, enabling members to secure new export business (including the creation of new exporters).
- Identification and addressing of common exporting issues or challenges faced by cluster members (e.g. changes to trade agreements or changes to regulations and processes).
- Development of the capabilities and capacity for members at any stage of the export journey.
- Seeking out and engaging with market opportunities relevant to the cluster.

Structure of this report

1.6 The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Methodology
- Findings: Engagement
- Findings: Satisfaction and effectiveness
- Findings: Impact
- Conclusions

1.7 A separate Annex (A) contains a copy of the online survey.

[1] Kinetic (Consumer Products, Renewables and Clean Energy, MedTech and Diagnostics), IBDG (High-value Manufacturing) and Tramshed Tech and Impact Innovation (Technology).

2. Methodology

2.1 An online survey was designed and developed to gather feedback from businesses which have participated in the Programme. The Survey was designed in collaboration with the Export Team and reviewed with the three cluster delivery partners by the Export Team prior to launch.

Survey distribution

2.2 The Survey was hosted on Smart Survey and distributed via email to the 215 businesses that were cluster members on Wednesday 8th May 2024. The first email was sent on Wednesday 8th May 2024 and followed by a reminder email to businesses which had not completed the Survey on Monday 16th May 2024. A final reminder was sent on 23rd May 2024. A final response rate of 80 businesses, equivalent to 37% (including one survey returned via email), was achieved when the Survey was closed on 11th June 2024. Subsequent data validation reduced this response rate to 78 (36%).

Questionnaire design

2.3 The Survey was designed to gather a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to assess the overall effectiveness of the support provided alongside an explanation of responses and opportunities to provide examples. A copy of the Survey is included separately in Annex A.

2.4 The Survey asked several multiple-choice questions to gather information on the background of the business responding (e.g. size of business and length of time exporting) as well as their engagement with the Programme (e.g. which cluster, length of membership). This has supported some level of analysis by different business and engagement characteristics (limited by the response rate of different subgroups).

2.5 After being asked questions on the background to their business, new members (those businesses which responded that they had been a member of the Programme for six months or less) were routed out of the Survey early. This was decided in discussion with the Export Team because it was not expected that members who had joined so recently would have had enough experience of the cluster to meaningfully comment on the Programme. Before reaching the Survey closure page, they were asked two short questions on engagement/impact (one open ended comment question and one Likert-scale question with three statements covering their experience of the Programme to date).

2.6 The remainder of the Survey was directed to those who had participated for seven or more months (referred to hereafter as 'established members') and asked a combination of Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions allowing for 'Other' responses or further explanation. Themes covered comprised:

- Barriers to participation
- Satisfaction with the support services and activities
- Issues encountered and satisfaction with their management by the Programme
- Outcomes and impacts of the support for businesses.

2.7 One sliding scale (0-10) question was asked on a respondent's likelihood of recommending the Programme.

Limitations

2.8 The Survey aimed to gather some timely insights to inform decisions around the extension option and any subsequent iterations, should the Programme be continued beyond the extension. Surveys have an inherent response bias, and the results are therefore limited in providing the perspective of just some (but not all) members. In addition, the Survey relied on respondents recalling benefits from across several years of participation and asked them to isolate these outcomes from other factors and their participation in wider programmes. As many cluster members have also benefitted from wider Welsh Government export support beyond this Programme, this would have been particularly complex.

2.9 Further research, including qualitative consultation with the delivery partners and cluster members would offer supporting explanatory findings. Capturing outcomes achieved in a timelier manner (supporting participant recall) would be best achieved through more regular data collection. Overall, a comprehensive evaluation framework designed alongside the delivery plan would optimise evidence collection.

Analysis and presentation of results

2.10 Quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics was undertaken using Excel. Results should be viewed within the context of the small base figures for each cluster. To support this, base sizes are provided for all figures and individual response numbers included for each category in Likert scale graphs.

Sample profile

2.11 During data validation, two responses were removed from the total of 80 responses as their comments suggested that they were not engaged in the Programme. Once responses for new members were removed (n=11), the remaining 67 responses (established members) used for the majority of analysis represented 31% of all members.

2.12 As shown by Table 1, each cluster received a total response of between 30% and 40%. However, this total includes new members who indicated that they had participated for six months or less. Once new members are removed from the sample, the greatest response from any single cluster represents 44% of the cluster's total membership (Renewables and Clean Energy), and the smallest represents 23% of the cluster's total membership (Technology).

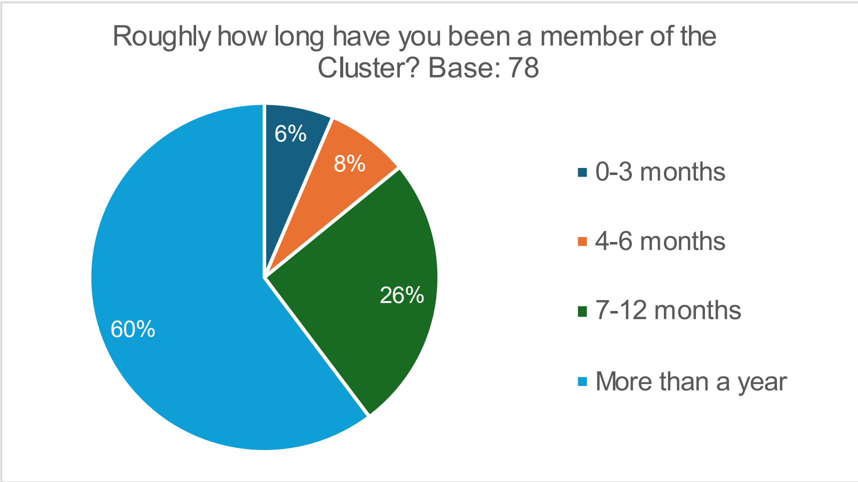
Table 1. Survey response by cluster

Cluster	Number of members	Members responding (% of members)	Established members responding (% of members)
Renewables & Clean Energy	32	14 (44%)	14 (44%)
Consumer Products	45	18 (40%)	12 (27%)
High-value Manufacturing	51	17 (33%)	15 (29%)
MedTech & Diagnostics	43	16 (37%)	16 (37%)
Technology	44	13 (30%)	10 (23%)
Total	**215**	**78 (36%)**	**67 (31%)**

Source: Export Cluster Programme monitoring data and Export Cluster Feedback Survey (2024)

2.13 As shown by Figure 1, the majority (86%) of respondents reported participating in the Programme for seven months or more. New members (those participating for 6 months or less, n=11) were routed out of the Survey early as it was thought that they would not have the experience to be able to comment fully on the impact of the Programme. They were not asked to answer the same questions on engagement and impact.

Figure 1: Length of cluster membership

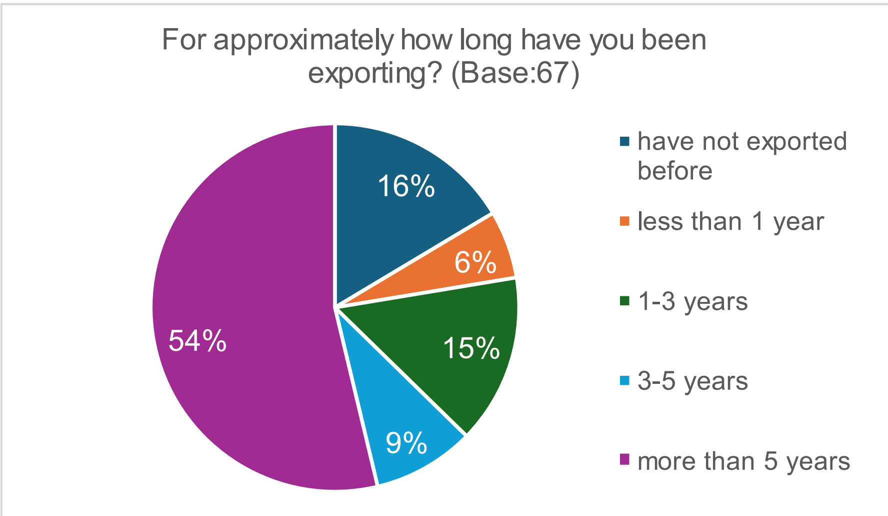


Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

2.14 Of established members, almost half of the respondents were microbusinesses (46%), just under a third were small businesses (31%) and 22% were medium businesses (Base:67).

2.15 As shown by Figure 2, just over half (54%) of established members reported that their business had exported for more than five years while 16% reported that they had not exported previously (Base:67).

Figure 2: Respondent businesses' experience of exporting



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

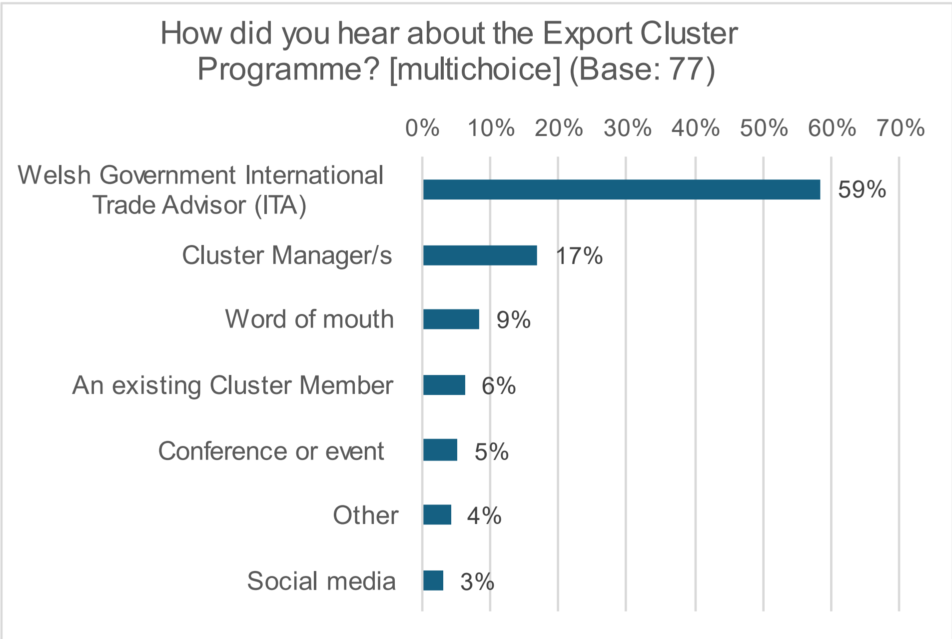
3. Findings: Engagement

3.1 This section outlines the findings from the Survey in relation to awareness of the Programme, barriers to participation and the responses of new members (those engaged for six months or less). Base numbers are included, and reference made to whether the figures include new or established members.

Awareness of the Export Cluster Programme

3.2 When all respondents (including new members) were asked how they had heard about the Programme, over half (59%) indicated that it was through a Welsh Government International Trade Advisor (ITA), while almost one fifth (17%) said Cluster Managers. This suggests that direct outreach from the Export Team and delivery partners are the primary means of engaging new members in the Programme. 'Other' sources named were Business Wales, Chamber of Commerce and Tramshed (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Awareness of Export Cluster Programme

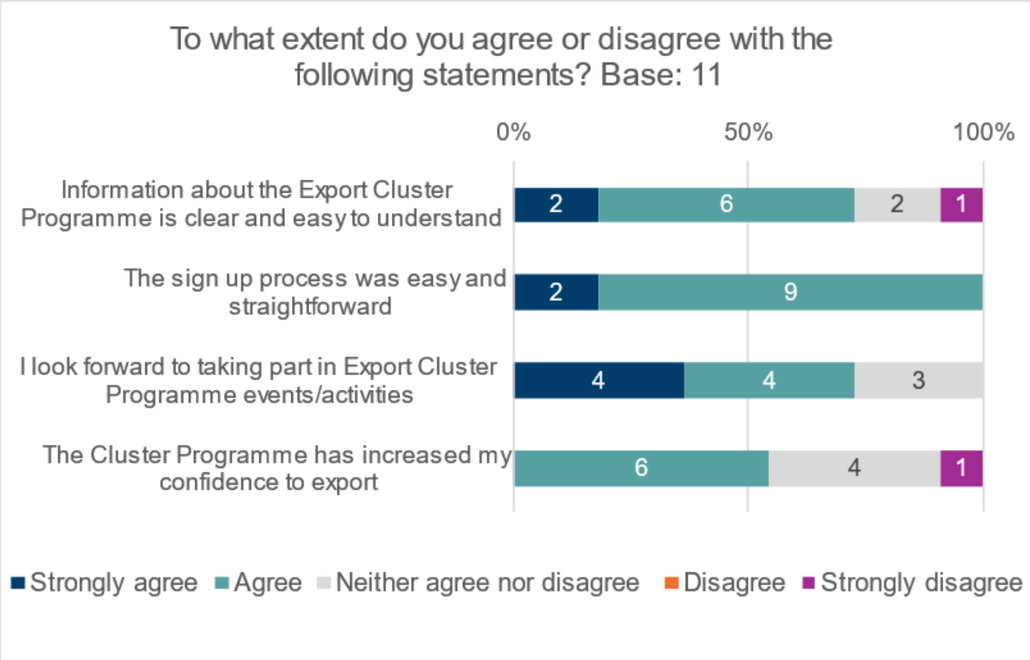


Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

Early experiences of the Programme by new members

3.3 Responses from the eleven new member respondents are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: New member perceptions of the Export Cluster Programme



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

3.4 Figure 4 shows that the majority of new cluster members reflected positively on the information available about the Programme. However, one Consumer Products Cluster member commented that it was not entirely straightforward as they "sit across two groups". Nevertheless, all reported finding the sign-up process easy and straightforward. Figure 4 shows the majority (eight) of the eleven new members looked forward to future events and activities and this sentiment was echoed in a comment from one cluster member.

"Look forward to more engagement" Technology Cluster member

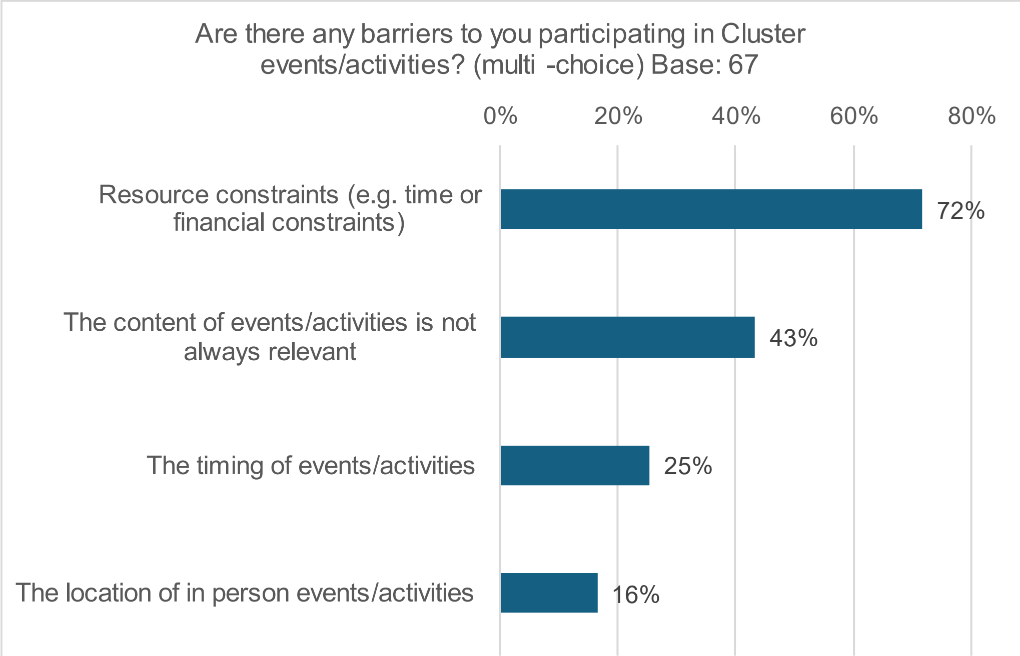
3.5 Despite being relatively new to the Programme, just over half of new members agreed that the support provided had increased their confidence to export.

Established members' barriers to participation

3.6 Figure 5 indicates that resource constraints were the largest barrier to participation for 72% of established members. Individual respondents elaborated with one business noting that they had experienced a difficult financial period. Other comments mentioned missing events due to "other commitments", being a "small team" and being busy with work.

“Due to having had so much work on I have had little time or opportunity to engage more fully with the Programme.” Renewables & Clean Energy Cluster member

Figure 5: Barriers to participation in the Export Cluster Programme



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

3.7 The relevance of cluster event/activities content was the second most widely reported barrier to participation for just over two fifths of established cluster members (Figure 5). Responses to an open comment question provided further explanation for why the content of cluster support was not always perceived as relevant, with several respondents articulating that they didn’t feel “the right fit” for their cluster. Two businesses explained that this was because their business focus did not align with the content.

“A lot of the opportunities to engage relate to public healthcare / hospitals, whereas we sell to private clinics and business owners” MedTech Cluster member

“We are a software company - most of the focus is on physical items, wind technology or nuclear - these are areas that we are not involved within… our challenges are different too [sic] much of the other providers. Therefore, not all discussion points are relevant to us.” Renewables & Clean Energy Cluster member

3.8 Meanwhile, another respondent felt that their Consumer Products Cluster’s activity was “not specific to individual business needs” and “too generic”. Another, a member of the High-value Manufacturing Cluster, speculated that content being less relevant to some members may have been the reason for a decrease in attendance that they felt they had noticed over the last year.

3.9 A comment from one respondent (who had been exporting for more than a year) also highlighted the need for content to reflect members' level of expertise in exporting.

> "we export to about 140 countries, and the majority of the cluster programme is aimed at those who are starting to export, or who wish to gain a foothold in a particular country." High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

3.10 These comments highlight the challenge of designing support in a 'one to many' format. It is notable though that more than half of respondents did not report the content of events/activities as a barrier to participation.

3.11 A quarter of established members indicated that the timing of events/activities was a barrier for them while the location of in-person events was only reported as barriers by a minority (16%) of respondents. Two respondents felt that more events were needed in North Wales. Two others also commented that they felt that both the Programme and relationships between cluster members could be strengthened and impacts increased with greater in-person networking.

> "its [sic] difficult to engage with other businesses in my cluster online meetings, when we had a in person group meeting, more discussions and engagements were had in the day than in the year." Renewables & Clean Energy Cluster member

Engagement conclusions

The most common way of finding out about the Programme by respondents was Welsh Government ITAs. New members reported positive initial perceptions of the Programme, including information and the sign-up process. Amongst established cluster members, the widest barrier to participation was reported to be resource constraints: something beyond the control of programme design. The next most widely reported barrier was the relevance of events and activities, though only a minority reported events and export markets were not relevant/of interest to their business. The findings indicate that a key challenge of engaging businesses in the Programme is balancing the specificity and differences in businesses' markets, products and export status/experience.

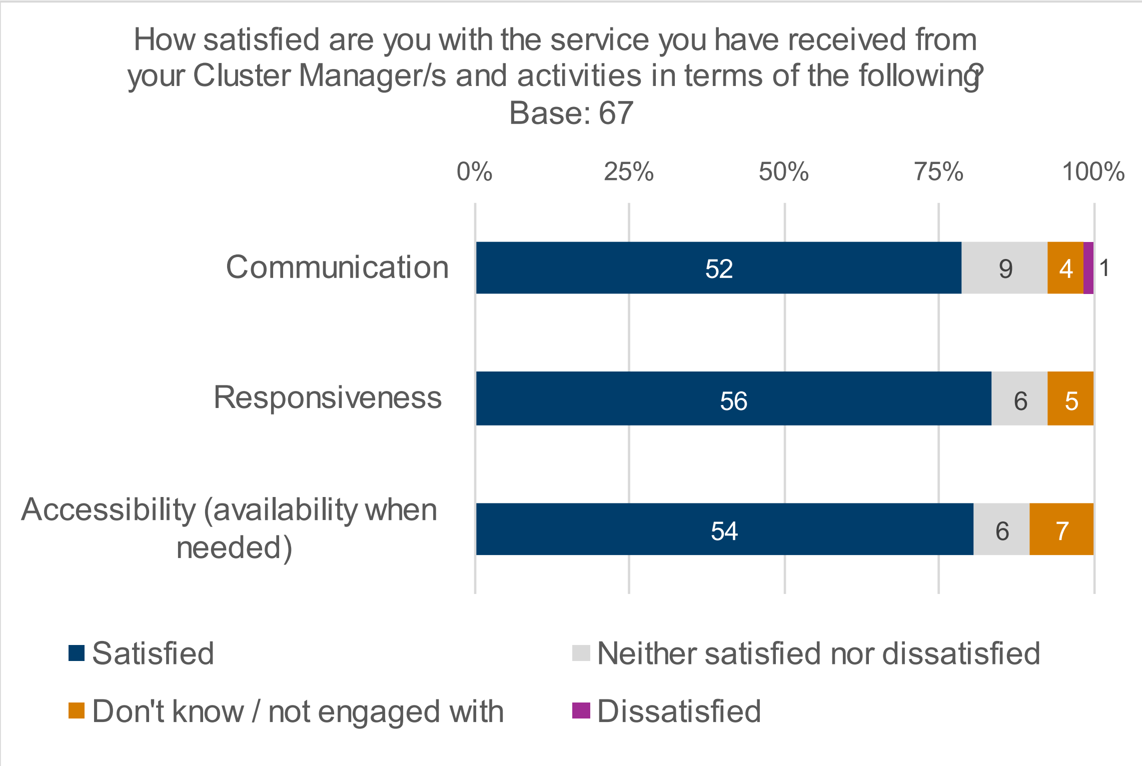
4. Findings: Satisfaction

4.1 This Section outlines the findings from the Survey in relation to satisfaction with Cluster Managers, cluster activities and whether respondents would recommend the Programme to others. It does not include new members and draws only upon the responses of those established members.

Satisfaction with Cluster Managers

4.2 Overall, more than 75% of respondents reported being ‘satisfied’ with the communication, responsiveness and accessibility (availability when needed) of their Cluster Manager. Figure 6 shows that only one respondent reported dissatisfaction, although a notable proportion reported indifference or that they ‘don’t know / not engaged with’ respective activities. There were no large differences in responses between clusters.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with Cluster Managers



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

4.3 When asked for open comment, Cluster Managers were described by different respondents as “helpful and proactive”, “solutions driven”, “responsive” and “personal and relevant”.

> “They are always very obliging and I know if we need help/advice it is readily available” High-value Manufacturing Cluster business

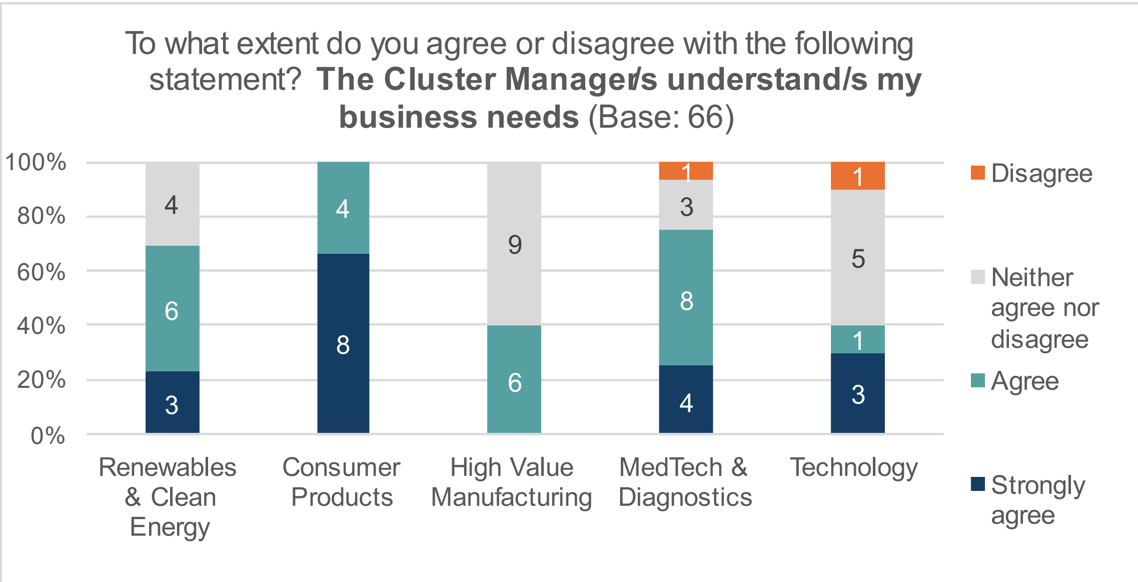
"They have been extremely supportive in our journey when exporting internationally. Any help needed they will go above and beyond to find out." Technology Cluster business

4.4 All but one response to the open question on Cluster Managers was positive. The only challenge noted was from a member of the Renewables and Clean Energy Cluster who indicated they felt that they were given little notice for events and that this made it difficult for them to participate.

4.5 The majority of respondents overall felt understood by their Cluster Manager and only a very small minority of some clusters had a different perception. When asked, overall, 65% of respondents agreed (27% 'strongly') with the statement 'The Cluster Manager/s understand/s my business needs'. Just 3% (2 respondents) disagreed with the same statement, the remainder (32%) reported 'neither agree nor disagree'.

4.6 Figure 7 provides a comparison of cluster responses (caution should be used due to low base sizes). It is included as an indication of the difference in agreement between different clusters with regards to their different managers.

Figure 7: Cluster Manager understanding of business needs by cluster



Base: Renewables & Clean Energy (13), Consumer Products (12), High-value Manufacturing (15), MedTech & Diagnostics (16), Technology (10)

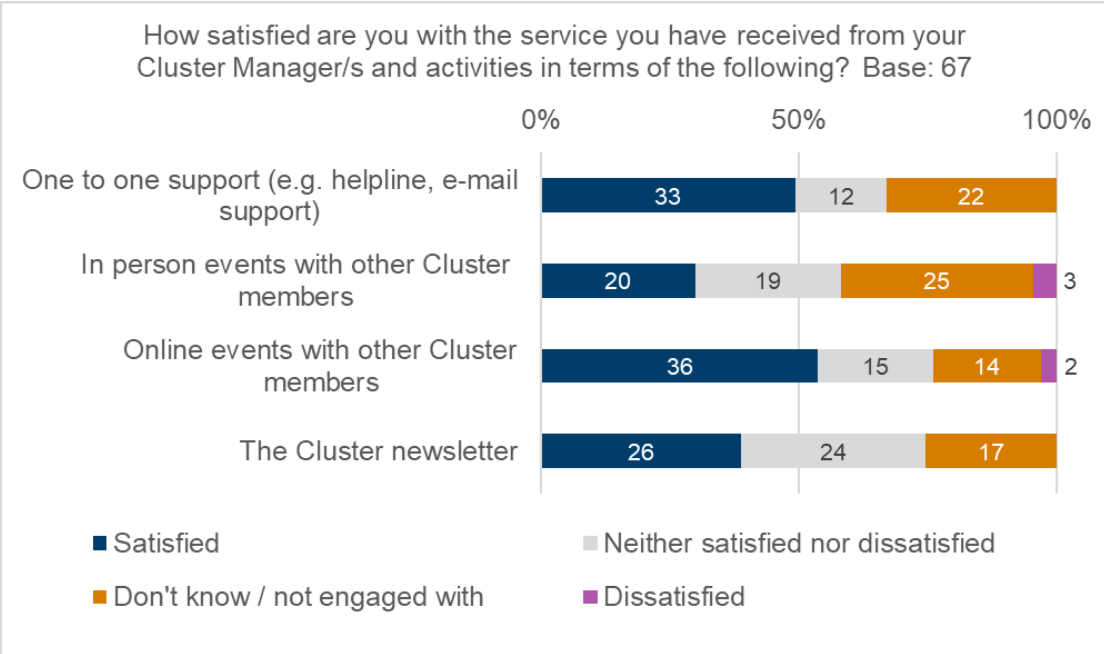
Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

4.7 In line with wider positivity towards the Programme, when asked a closed question on whether they had any difficulties, issues or problems when dealing with their Cluster Manager/s or wider Programme, just two out of 67 established members indicated that they had. One respondent simply stated that "everything is always targeted at South Wales, particularly Cardiff", a view shared by one other participant in wider responses. The other respondent who reported an issue felt that their needs were not properly understood, nor expectations met and that they had not had an adequate or appropriate response to emails. This view was not however reflected in responses from any other respondent.

Satisfaction with cluster activities

4.8 As shown by Figure 8, of the four types of cluster service listed (online and in-person events, one-to-one support and the Cluster Newsletter), respondents most widely reported satisfaction with online events. This is, at least in part, because online events have been the main deliverable of the programme. Almost half also reported satisfaction with one-to-one support, an interesting finding given this was not the original focus of the programme. A very small minority of respondents (three or less) reported dissatisfaction with each of the four cluster activities/services.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with cluster activities



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

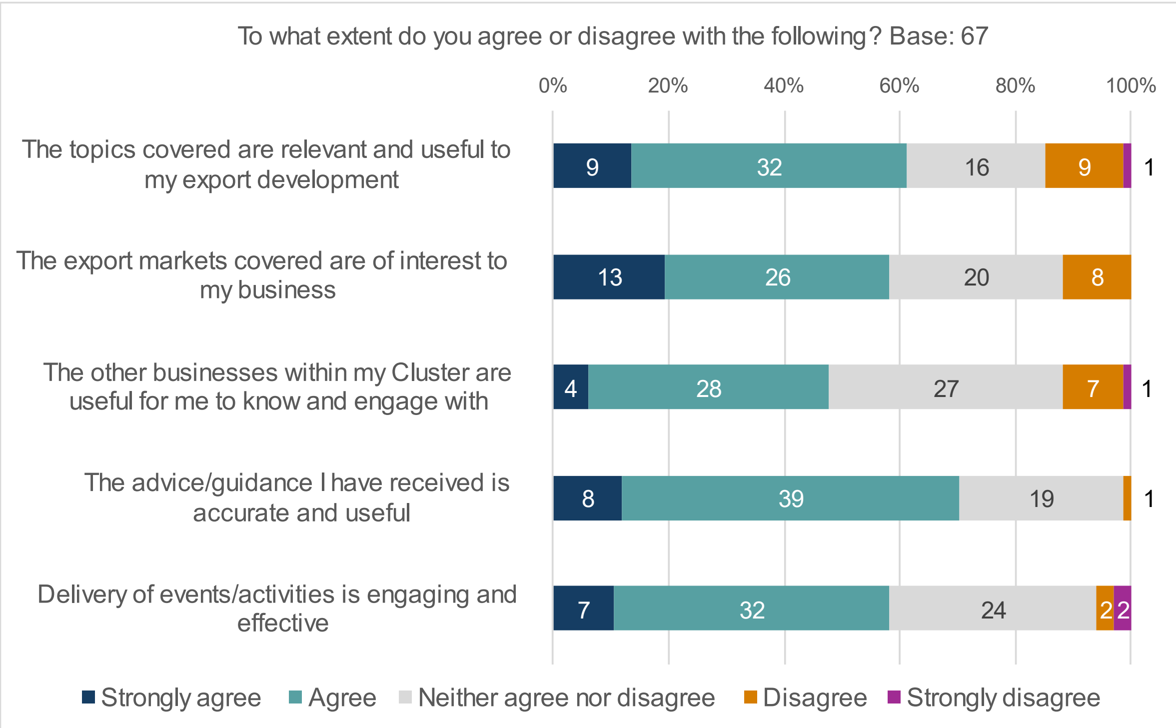
4.9 No respondents reported being dissatisfied with the Cluster Newsletter though just over a quarter (25%) reported not engaging with it (base: 67). One respondent commented that this was their "fault". The remaining respondents were split almost evenly with 36% reporting indifference ('neither satisfied nor dissatisfied') and 39% reporting they were 'satisfied'.

4.10 The results for each activity, grouped by cluster show levels of reported satisfaction, engagement and indifference noticeably varied between each cluster but that no single cluster showed particular dissatisfaction or low levels of engagement across all three activities. It was beyond the scope of this report and low levels of response per cluster to present an analysis of individual cluster results however, an anonymised set of findings have been shared separately with each Cluster Manager to inform the design of revised Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the extension year.

Effectiveness of cluster events, focus, advice and networks

4.11 Respondents were asked to state their agreement with several statements relating to cluster events, advice, the network of cluster members and content of support. The results are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Effectiveness of cluster events, focus, advice and networks



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

4.12 The majority (70%) of respondents felt that the advice they received through their cluster was accurate while around two thirds agreed that events were engaging and effective, that the export markets were of interest and, that the topics covered were of interest/relevant.

4.13 However, 15% of respondents indicated that they did not feel the topics covered were relevant and useful to their export development and a further 24% reported being indifferent. When asked if they had any recommendations to improve the Programme, one respondent suggested that relevance of events could be improved through greater involvement of members:

"A brief survey after each session to measure satisfaction and relevance would be useful feedback. Asking members to request topics would perhaps improve engagement and relevance." High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

4.14 Just 6% disagreed to some extent that delivery of events and activities were engaging and effective with a subset of 3% (two respondents) disagreeing 'strongly'. The disagreement was spread across four clusters and cannot therefore be explained by a single event or delivery approach. One respondent who reported indifference explained that this was related to one event which did not fulfil their expectations.

"One online session was not especially informative. The presenter had to fill in for someone else. Preparation and content fell short of my expectations" High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

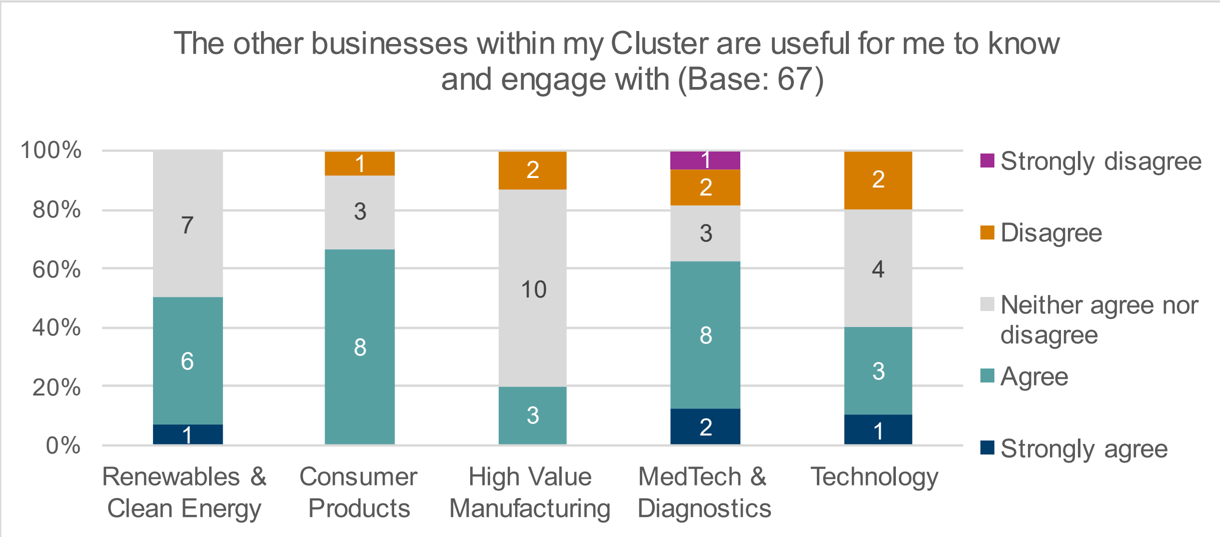
4.15 Overall substantial proportions of respondents reported 'neither agree nor disagree' for multiple statements. Over a third of respondents stated that they 'neither agree nor disagree' with the statements regarding events being engaging and effective and other businesses being useful to know. One respondent, who had been participating for over a year, and given multiple answers of 'neither agree nor disagree', stated that they had limited opportunities to engage. Perhaps this contributed towards their indifference.

"There has been very little engagement and very few events, so it is difficult to make measured responses." Renewables & Clean Energy Cluster member

4.16 It is possible that substantial indifference corresponds with the lack of engagement reported in response to other questions.

4.17 As shown by Figure 9, overall, 48% of respondents agreed to some extent that other businesses within their cluster were 'useful to know and engage with'. While 40% stated they 'neither agree nor disagree', a small minority (12%) 'disagreed' to some extent, indicating that they did not feel the other members were useful to know. Responses to this statement are broken down by cluster in Figure 10. Despite low response rates when broken down, this provides a further indication of the differences in responses, reinforcing the need for the Export Team to consider the future of each cluster on an individual basis.

Figure 10: Usefulness of other businesses within clusters as perceived by members



Base: Renewables & Clean Energy (14), Consumer Products (12), High-value Manufacturing (15), MedTech & Diagnostics (16), Technology (10)

Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

4.18 Figure 10 shows the lowest agreement with this statement came from the High-value Manufacturing Cluster where only three out of 15 members (20%) agreed that the other businesses in their cluster were useful to engage with. One member of the High-value Manufacturing Cluster emphasised that they had benefitted from the learning and sharing within the network.

> "I have benefitted from sharing and learning about others' experiences as it mitigates the potential for isolation in a very niche market" High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

4.19 Within the same cluster, a different member felt that attendance at events had decreased over the last year and that better value could be achieved through an expanded pool of members.

4.20 Meanwhile the highest agreement with the statement about other businesses was shown by Consumer Products Cluster members (67%). Certain clusters appear to be perceived as more useful networks than others by their members but this also appears very specific to individual businesses.

4.21 Only a small minority of *each* cluster stated that they disagreed that other members were useful to know and engage with and only one did so 'strongly'. However, when combined with the proportion which remained neutral, it appears that ensuring that *all* members feel part of a beneficial network is a challenge for all clusters.

Suggestions for improvement

4.22 Respondents offered a variety of suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the Programme, some at the end of the Survey when specifically prompted to do so and some in response to earlier questions. Suggestions are listed below (offered by individual respondents unless otherwise stated).

Respondent suggestions for improvement

- More in-person events (four references from members of four different clusters) including a suggestion for tours of facilities "e.g. university or Life Science Hub or member company or similar". (MedTech & Diagnostics Cluster member)
- Actively sharing and promoting session materials available online (after events) for access by those who cannot attend.
- Additional clusters "may mean that we fit better than we currently do". Renewables & Clean Energy Cluster member
- Increase cluster membership and/or increased participation of existing members (more than one member).
  "It feels like there would be much better value for Welsh Government if the cluster pool was expanded or more of the existing members participated. It would also make the sesison [sic] more engaging by having more companies contribute during the sessions." High-value Manufacturing Cluster member
- Phone calls with Cluster Managers to improve understanding of business needs and promote related opportunities available to members.
- "Consider England as an export market" and coordinate missions there in order to capitalise on "easy export opportunities first".

Satisfaction conclusions

The results indicate widespread satisfaction with Cluster Managers and the service provided by them with multiple respondents complimenting the responsiveness and supportiveness of their Cluster Manager. The majority of respondents also indicated that their cluster had been effective in delivering engaging events, providing accurate and useful advice and covering topics and markets of interest and relevance.

Responses indicate varying levels of engagement and satisfaction with different activities from members of different clusters. This is perhaps unsurprising given they have been delivered by different delivery partners. This included particularly varying proportions of different clusters agreeing that other businesses in their cluster were useful to know and engage (in one cluster this was quite low).

A substantial proportion of responses indicated a lack of commitment to either agreeing or disagreeing with multiple different statements around satisfaction, impact and effectiveness. In some cases, a lack of, or limited engagement with certain activities may explain the neutral responses (indicating '*neither agree nor disagree*').

Negative responses, indicating dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness or issues/difficulties with the Programme, were only given by less than a handful of respondents in each case and these were distributed across clusters (rather than concentrated in a single one). This further reinforces that broadly respondents were satisfied with the Programme and its effectiveness.

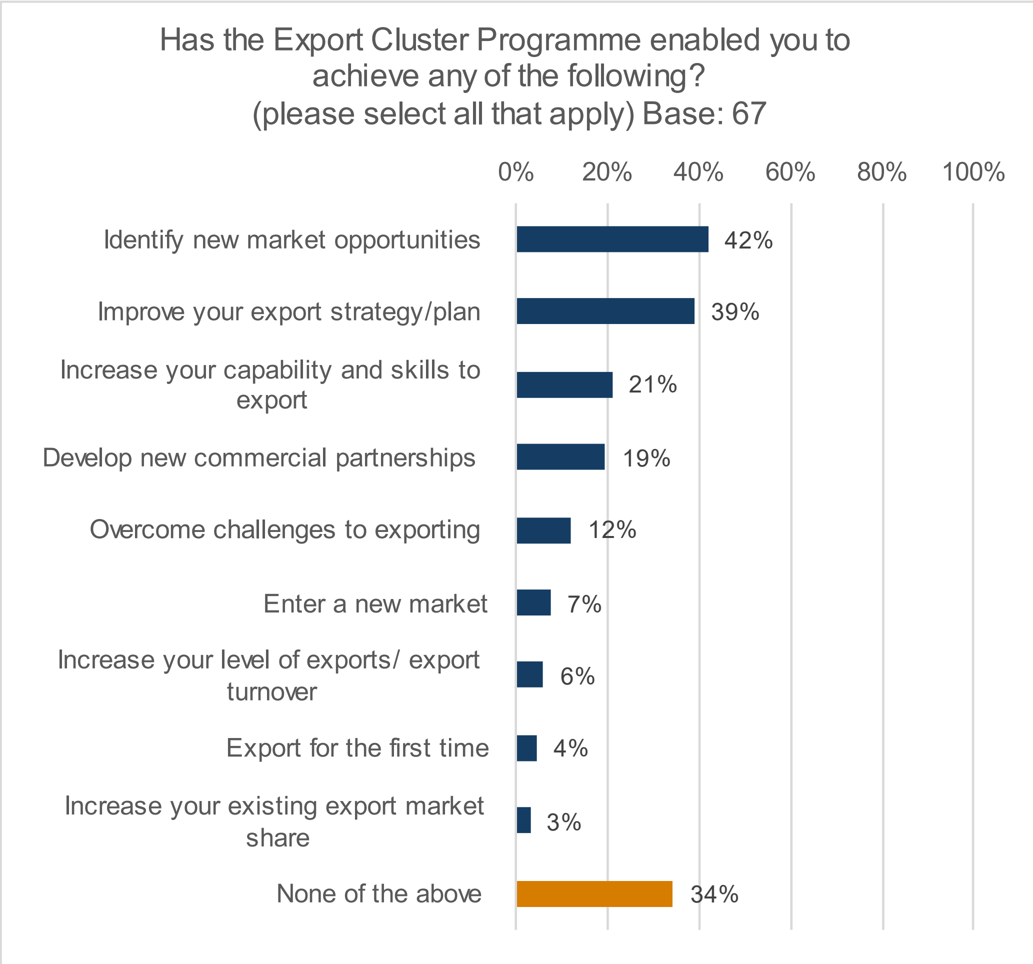
5. Findings: Impact

5.1 This section outlines the findings from the Survey in relation to impacts identified and indicated by established members responding to the Survey. It does not include any reference to new members.

Overall outcomes and impacts

5.2 As shown by Figure 11, when asked which of a list of outcomes respondents had achieved because of participating in the Programme, the most widely reported benefits were the identification of new market opportunities (42%) and improvements to their export strategy/plan (39%).

Figure 11: Outcomes and impacts of the Export Cluster Programme for businesses



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.3 When asked (an open question) to explain how participation in the Programme led to outcomes for their business, six of the fifteen who responded referred in some way to gaining knowledge or learning from cluster events.

“The in-person sessions allowed me as a business owner to ask the right questions at the right time”. Technology Cluster member

"We have participated in a number of events covering mainland Europe, the US and the Far East. These have been crucial in making key introductions, learning about the opportunities and practical challenges… these are very effective ways of building knowledge, networks and reducing risks of initial entry consideration and development”. MedTech & Diagnostics Cluster member

“Export cluster events were helpful in gaining knowledge on different subjects related to exports and this solves many problems when it comes to scaling your product offer” Technology Cluster member

5.4 In answer to the same question, six respondents also referred to outcomes arising from links and signposting provided through the cluster, including “in country visits…and market access assessment”, and “Access to opportunities like Medical Alley”.

“Finding the right Distributor was really a combined effort between our discussions with our Export Cluster Manager and subsequently attending a Trade Show in Europe helped with an OBDV [Overseas Business Development] grant.” Consumer Products Cluster member

5.5 Outcomes were also attributed to the benefits of networking with other businesses (referenced specifically by four respondents when asked to provide an explanation for the outcomes they experienced).

“When we have been in contact with other companies it's been really useful to hear their stories and importantly feel we aren't alone in the challenges businesses are currently experiencing since Brexit as well as other issues such as increased shipping costs.” Consumer Products Cluster member

“Simply the awareness of others' challenges and a sense of potential for help even if I have not yet availed myself of it” High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

5.6 Respondents also referred to their Cluster Manager as a key factor in them benefitting from the Programme. This was reported by three in reference to the question discussed above, as well as by several more respondents throughout their survey responses.

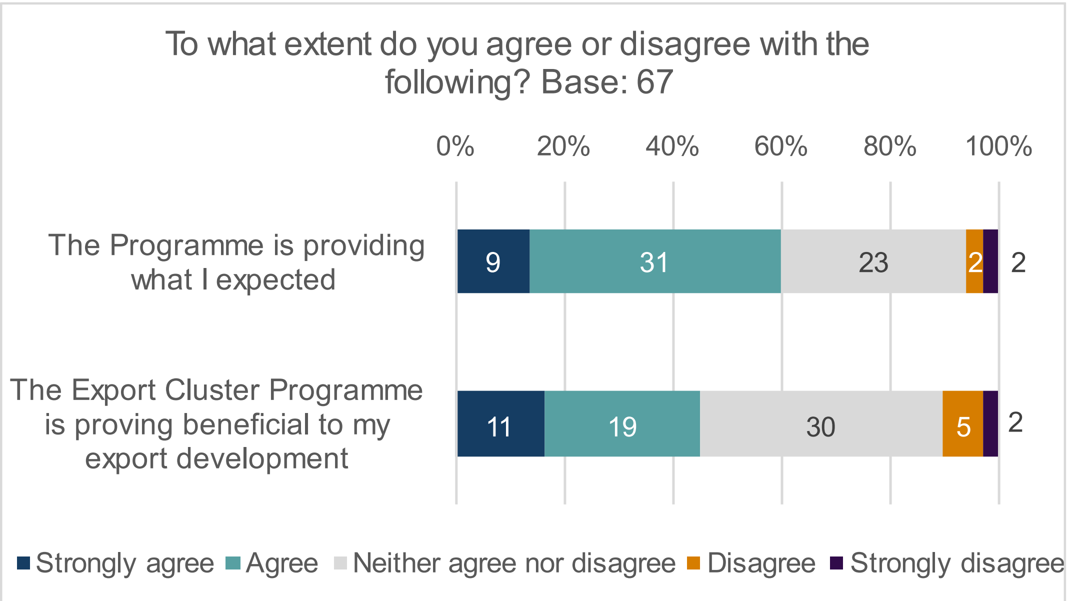
“We have felt very supported by [name of Cluster Manager] and his colleagues to try to support us to overcome the challenges and provide some amazing opportunities and funding to help us grow our export market again”. Consumer Products Cluster member

“I found it useful working with the Export Cluster Manager to develop our Export Strategy and streamline our goals to make them easier to achieve. We now have a European Distributor based in [European country] which is essential to be able to trade in Europe with fragranced products post Brexit.” Consumer Products Cluster member

Expectations and benefits of the Programme

5.7 Figure 12 shows that while a majority (60%) of cluster members felt the Programme was delivering to their expectations, a lower proportion (45%) reported that the Programme was proving beneficial in terms of their export development.

Figure 12: Export Cluster Programme expectations and benefits



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.8 Almost half (45%) reported that they ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that the Programme had proved beneficial and 11% felt it had not proved beneficial. Some respondents gave explanations for why they felt they had yet to benefit from the Programme. This included a lack of engagement with the Programme on their business’ part to date.

“The lack of achievement to date is not the fault of the Cluster, it is due to a lack of time and focus invested in the Cluster by [respondent business name]…

however this could change if [business reference removed] invests time and effort into the cluster" MedTech & Diagnostics Cluster member

"It's fair to say i have not yet attended sufficient sessions to realise the obvious benefits of this programme." High-value Manufacturing Cluster member

5.9 Another reason given for not benefitting from the Programme was the current position of respondents' companies and the stage they had reached in their export development plan.

"A little early for us given our strategy" MedTech & Diagnostics Cluster member

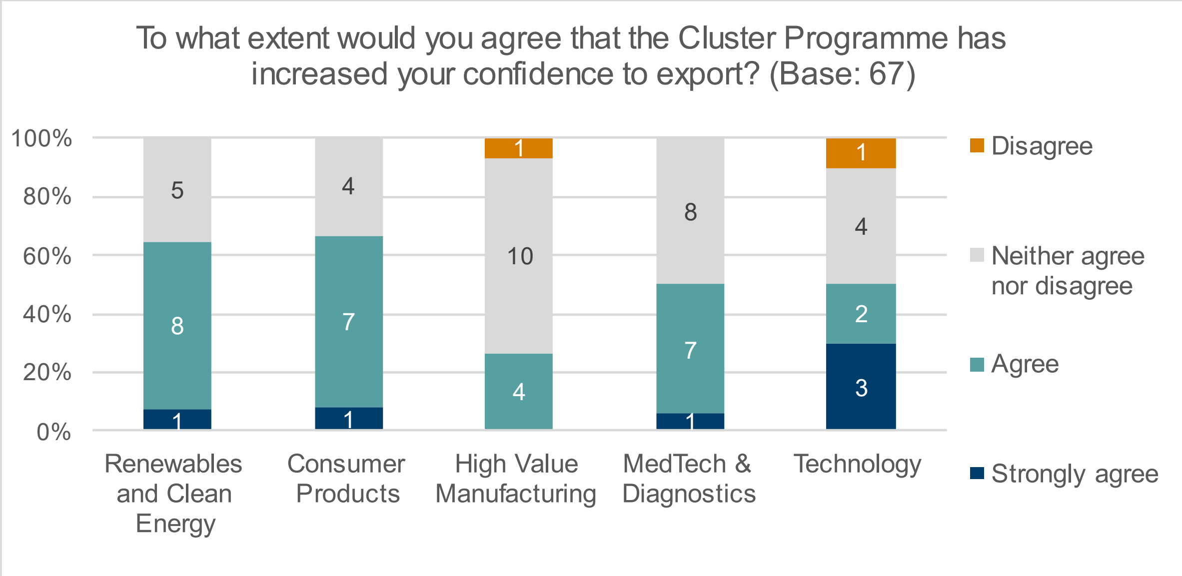
"We are yet to full [sic] benefit, however the support received gives us confidence that we will be successful with our export plan." MedTech & Diagnostics Cluster member

"We are still trying to increase our export share post Brexit which severly [sic] hampered us. As yet this has not transformed into a noted improvement but we are very much aware of the steps we need to take and specifically how the export cluster and Wales Gov can help us to achieve this and are very much planning on implementing those things over the next 6 months to a year." Consumer Products Cluster member

Increased confidence to export

5.10 Overall, 51% of cluster members reported that they 'agreed' (42%) or 'strongly agreed' (9%) that the Programme had increased their confidence to export (base: 67). Just two respondents (3%) did not believe the Programme had increased their confidence to export and a substantial proportion (46%) 'neither agreed nor disagreed'. Responses varied somewhat by cluster membership, length of time exporting and size of business, as shown in Figures 13 to 15. These Figures are included as an indication of differences, but caution should be exercised when considering the results due to the low response rates of subset groups.

Figure 13: Increased confidence to export outcome by cluster membership



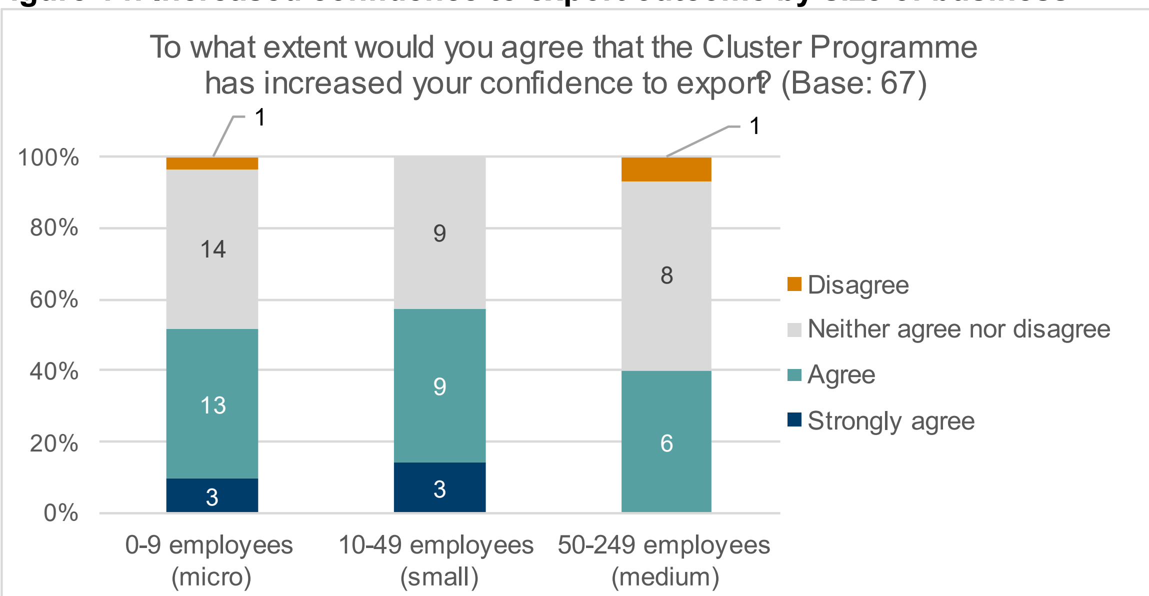
Base: Renewables & Clean Energy (14), Consumer Products (12), High-value Manufacturing (15), MedTech & Diagnostics (16), Technology (10)

Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.11 Members of the Renewables and Clean Energy and Consumer Products Clusters most widely reported the Programme to have increased their confidence to export. Members of the High-value Manufacturing Cluster most widely reported to 'neither agree nor disagree' and also had the lowest reported agreement that the Programme had increased their confidence to export.

5.12 Figure 14 indicates that respondents of micro and small businesses showed marginally wider and stronger agreement that the Programme had increased their confidence to export compared to medium businesses.

Figure 14: Increased confidence to export outcome by size of business



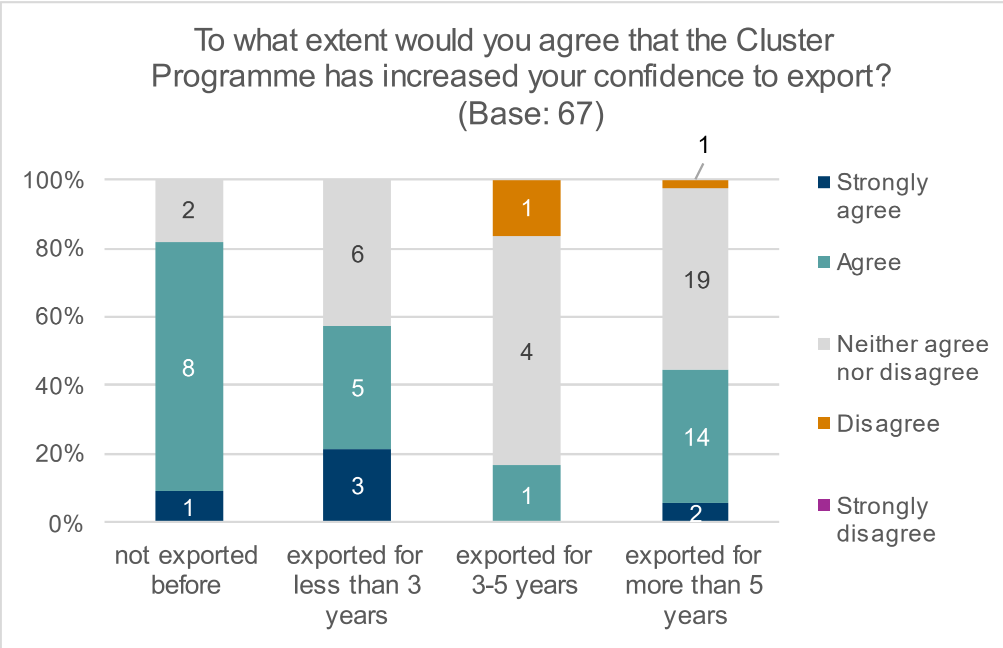
Base: micro (31), small (21), medium (15)

Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.13 Meanwhile Figure 15 shows that those businesses who had not exported before more widely reported increased confidence to export (because of the Programme) compared to those who had already exported. This was also the perception of one respondent who had been exporting for more than five years. While broadly satisfied with the Programme, they indicated 'neither agree nor disagree' that the Programme had increased their confidence and felt that:

> "It [the Programme] is useful to businesses new to exporting" Consumer Products Cluster member

Figure 15: Increased confidence to export, by export experience of business respondent



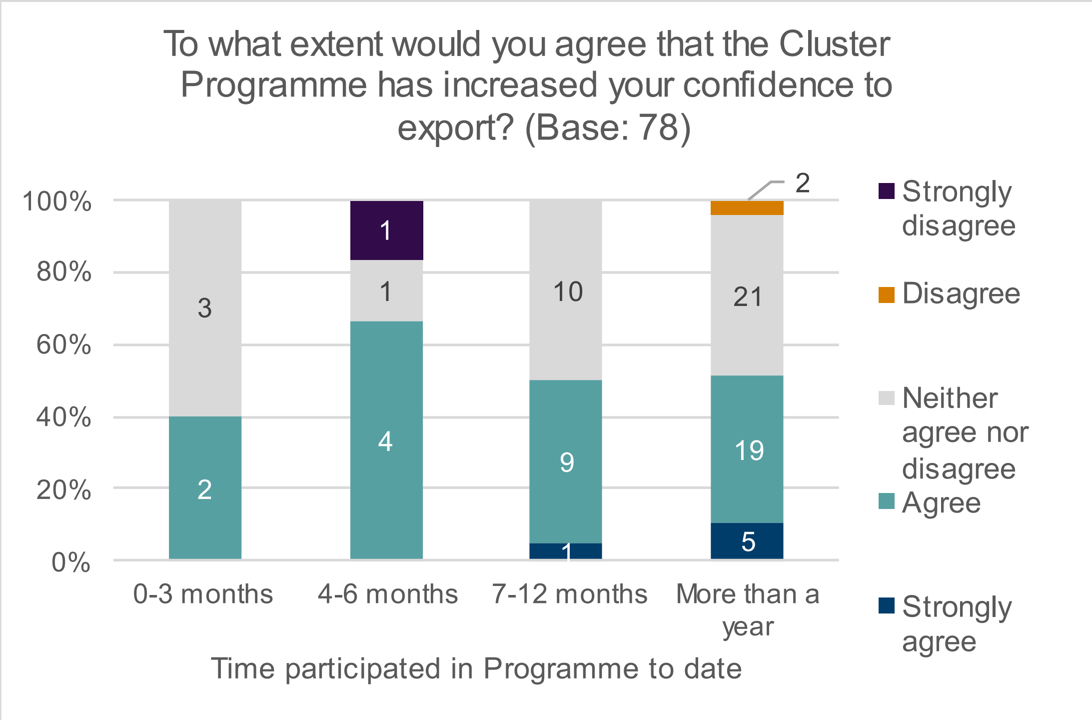
Base: have not exported before (11), exported for less than 3 years (14), have exported for 3-5 years (6), have exported for more than 5 years (36)

Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.14 However, the results shown in Figure 15 do not show lower reporting of increased confidence (as an outcome of the Programme) amongst those with the longest experience exporting. Notably, despite their experience exporting, 44% of those exporting for more than five years reported that the Programme had increased their confidence to export.

5.15 Figure 16 shows that, even new members participating for six months or less reported increased confidence to export because of participating in the Programme.

Figure 16: Increased confidence to export by time spent participating in the Export Cluster Programme



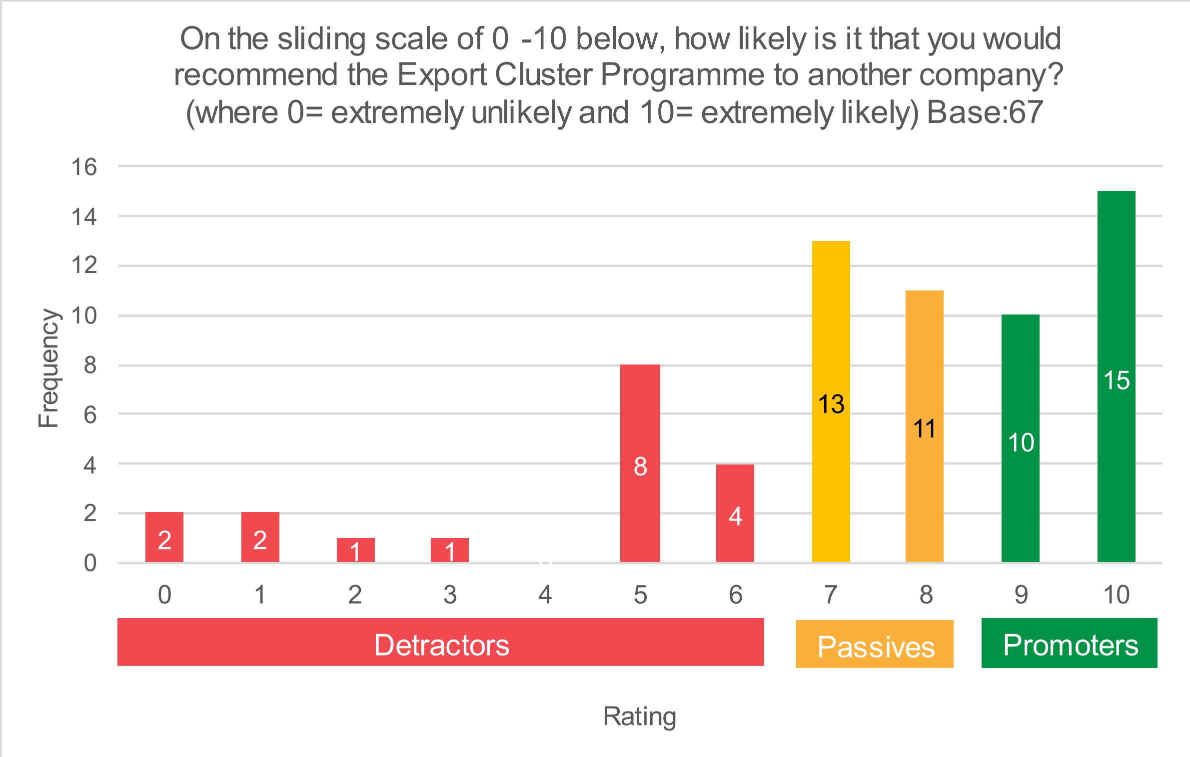
Base: 0-3 months (5), 4-6 months (6), 7-12 months (20), more than a year (47)
Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

Overall, 50% of new members reported they had gained confidence to export. This indicates that early outcomes of receiving support should not be underestimated.

Likelihood of recommending the Export Cluster Programme

5.16 Figure 17 shows that, at face value, most respondents were more likely than not to recommend the Programme to another company.

Figure 17: Member likelihood of recommending the Programme



Source: Export Clusters Feedback Survey 2024

5.17 A very small number (less than two members within each cluster) provided a response less than five, reflecting a similar minority who reported dissatisfaction and low levels of impact in response to previously discussed questions.

5.18 This question is based on the Net Promoter Score (NPS)[2], the primary objective of which is to infer customer loyalty (as evidenced by repurchase and referral) to a product, service, brand, or company on the basis of a single survey question. The responses define respondents as either ‘Detractors’ (0-6), ‘Passives’ (7 and 8) or ‘Promoters’ (9 and 10). Based on this interpretation:

- 37% of Export Cluster Programme survey respondents would be considered ‘promoters’, and loyal enthusiasts with high potential for supporting growth in the Programme by praising it and recommending it to others.
- 36% of Export Cluster Programme survey respondents would be considered ‘passives’ and, while satisfied customers, they are considered less uncommitted to the Programme and referrals are likely to be qualified and less enthusiastic.

[2] Further information can be found online: [Net Promoter Score (NPS) & System | Bain & Company]

- 27% of Export Cluster Programme survey respondents would be considered ‘detractors’ which could include both dissatisfied customers with potential to discourage new customers as well as those unwilling to speak up for the Programme and unlikely to refer at all.

5.19 The NPS score itself is calculated by subtracting the ‘detractors’ from the ‘promoters’, dividing by the total number of respondents. Multiplying the result by 100 leads to a score between -100 and +100.

$$\text{NPS} = \frac{\text{Promoters} - \text{Detractors}}{\text{Total respondents}} \times 100$$

5.20 The results of the Survey give a score of 10[3]. This provides a benchmark against which future survey results for the Programme can be compared. Some sources have claimed that creators of NPS, Bain & Company, suggest a score of between 0 and 20 is “good”, with above 20 being “favourable”, above 50 “excellent”, and above 80 “world class”[4].

Impact conclusions

The most widely reported outcomes of the Programme were the identification of new market opportunities and improvements to businesses' export strategy/plans. Only a very small minority of respondents reported increasing their existing export market share and increasing their level of exports/export turnover as a result of their participation. Further research would be beneficial for establishing the longer-term impacts of support for businesses.

Key factors of delivery considered to have supported outcomes appear to be the knowledge provided by events, signposting to wider opportunities, discussions with other cluster members and the Cluster Manager. Qualitative evidence identified that the Programme had been useful in allowing opportunities to gain knowledge to answer key questions and solve problems in a timely manner, gain introductions and a sense of a wider business community and identify wider development opportunities.

While a majority of respondents felt the Programme was delivering to expectations, the gap between this and the lower reporting of benefits is an area for further investigation. Possible explanations include limited engagement with the Programme to date and a time lag in the realisation of benefits as members embark on a longer-term strategy of export development. Comparing results for individual

[3] ((25-19)/68) *100

[4] What is a Good Net Promoter Score (NPS)? - Qualtrics

clusters with the frequency of events coordinated, levels of engagement and length of membership could offer some interesting insights.

Reported increases in confidence suggest that those who have benefitted most widely from the Programme include micro and medium businesses, members of the Renewables & Clean Energy and Consumer Products Clusters as well as businesses which have not exported previously.

The majority of respondents indicating they would recommend the Programme to other businesses reinforces wider positive perceptions of the Programme and levels of satisfaction.

6. Conclusions

6.1 The Survey has provided evidence to demonstrate that the Programme has broadly satisfied the majority of businesses responding to the Survey. Its events, advice and Cluster Managers are widely perceived as effective by participants. The different perceptions shown by respondents across clusters indicates the need for the Export Team to consider the results on a cluster-by-cluster basis when considering the needs and direction of each cluster individually.

6.2 Limited barriers to participation of businesses have been identified which are within the control or influence of the Export Team. Nevertheless, the barrier of resource constraints is important to consider when anticipating participation levels and planning future events, specifically their format and advance notice given. This needs to be balanced with requests for, and reports of greater impacts from, in person events. The hybrid approach currently delivered by some clusters is beneficial in seeking to both reduce burden on businesses while also allowing opportunities for face-to-face networking. Inevitably however, this approach is unable to meet the preference of every business.

6.3 The perceived relevance of activities is also considered a barrier to engagement. Likewise, it is also a challenge to meet the needs of every business in terms of content when those across each cluster vary not only in terms of products and markets but also business size, export status and experience.

6.4 The differences in the perceived effectiveness of each cluster’s network reinforce that results should be considered on a cluster-by-cluster basis by the Export Team and Cluster Managers. This should inform decisions around their future membership development to ensure that the composition of the networks is optimised for beneficial sharing and discussions. This is critical as perceptions around the relevance of other members are likely to have implications for future engagement.

6.5 The Survey results suggest the Programme has been effective in supporting the identification of new market opportunities and improvements to business export strategies for close to two fifths of respondents. It has also been successful in improving confidence to export for half of businesses surveyed. It is possible these are just the early outcomes of participation and that further impacts may follow for more businesses once they have had more time to realise the benefits of support. This should be examined in any future research of the Programme.

6.6 At present, the prevalence of outcomes reported, or lack of them in some cases, may assist in determining how the Programme should be marketed and described to prospective members. These outcomes, and the time it might take to achieve them, should also be considered in the development of any future KPIs.

6.7 These conclusions are drawn only from the results of a survey of beneficiaries, with no input from those managing and delivering the Programme. To better understand the Programme and evidence gathered, and to make informed decisions on its future, delivery partners should also be consulted. Overall, going forward any future iterations of the Programme would benefit from a more systematic implementation of monitoring and evidence gathering.

6.8 A strategically designed monitoring and evaluation framework would be useful for ensuring timely and informative data availability while also continuing to seek to minimise the burden on businesses. Co-designed feedback forms, combined with a schedule of qualitative data collection (including consultation with both beneficiaries and delivery partners and analysis of monitoring data) would help to capture both short to longer term outcomes and impacts and support participant recall of benefits. Such a framework should be designed alongside the development of any future versions of the Programme and in collaboration with delivery partners, participants and wider Welsh Government Export Support programmes.