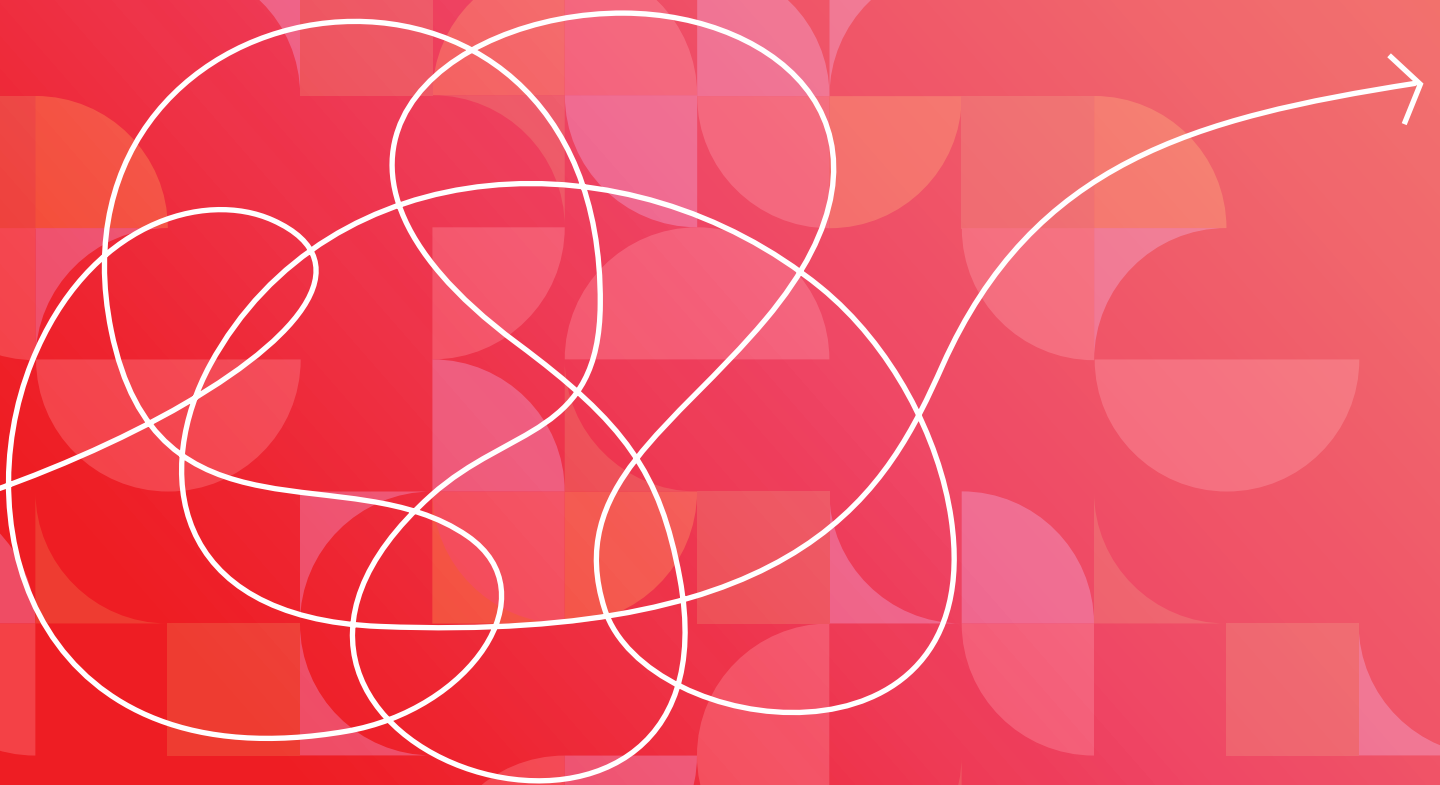


iiMEX 2023

POLICY FORUM

City Workshop



iiMEX

Cities Workshop – Note from Professor Greg Clark CBE

At the City Leaders Workshop, we were a group of 20-30 City/Region/Province Leaders and Destination Management Organisations attending IMEX from Amsterdam, Australia, Cape Town, Dublin, Durban, Kwa Zulu Natal, London, Mpumalanga, New Zealand, Rimini, Riyadh, Seoul, Sydney, Utrecht, and Washington DC.

In a wide ranging discussion, many speakers expressed their optimism that they are seeing a new appetite and enthusiasm for conferences, events, expos, and business travel, with increasing willingness to innovate with strategies, focus, formats, venues, engagement, and experiences. We asked three key questions, and had an open discussion about each of them.

- i. What are business events already contributing to how our cities are emerging post pandemic?
- ii. What are the new formats, venues, and strategies emerging in this cycle?
- iii. How are city leaders supporting business events to help their cities? Are National Governments helping?

Five main issues were highlighted:

1. A surge in new activity.

Firstly, many of the cities, regions, and provinces are seeing a surge of activity with new events being created, and established events being reformatted and re-oriented towards emerging and growing drivers and themes, such as innovation economy, sustainable development, R&D alignment, public and civic participation, and the 'experience' of delegates, speakers, exhibitors, hosts, place. The 'experience' driver has deepened dramatically and rapidly to make clearer how 'in person' events can optimise the impact of 'being there'.

2. A new logic for business events.

Many representatives spoke of a new logic to business events in cities, regions, and provinces. This was particularly recognised as coming from the recognition that the absence of business events during the pandemic lock downs, led to a clearer realisation of what is lost if business events are not happening in the city. The absence made the value more discernible and visible.

Firstly then, the logic is about positioning a city or region in relation to high value sectors, science, medicine, and innovation, and creative activity, and a superb and differentiating experience. Second, there is the logic to use business events to drive fresh momentum post-pandemic in an environment when cities and regions can start again 'from scratch'. Business events are a great way to differentiate a city, and endow it with a serious purpose.

Third, Business events are no longer just a 'hosting' activity, they are now much more an alignment and participation opportunity for the location itself. Forth, business events are a compelling mandate and means to convene local partners to better drive strategy contributing to enhanced governance and coordination within a city or region. Lastly, the post-pandemic agenda brings new commitment to tackle wider social and environmental issues from inequality to climate change, resilience to afford-ability, place leadership and agility. This provides a revised framework in which business events can demonstrate their impact. Rather than such events simply having 'legacies', we now think about them having important 'co-benefits' that are part of the mix from the start and throughout.



3. Integrity and Distinctiveness.

In the post pandemic cycle that is now unfolding there is a growing desire for activities and ventures that people can really trust. The pandemic both fostered trust between neighbours and communities and with some Governments and Institutions, but it also raised doubts about the quality of leadership in many quarters. So there is a deep appetite for activities that are sincere, trustworthy, and demonstrate integrity, and through that foster both a unique relationship and identity, and build an enlarged canvass of trust, and social capital, to work with.

One way this plays out is in the environmental sphere. Several delegates commented that our paths towards 'carbon positive business events' need to embrace the unique ecological and natural character and inheritance of each place. In this context, action to be more sustainable and resilient is a means to reveal and celebrate the distinctiveness of each location, so that we have a deeper experience of place.

Another example was the commitment to direct local benefit from the engagement of local schools and young people with visitors who come to a place to participate in a business event. We discussed ways to enrich such interactions to make them permanently drive value and beneficial impacts for young people.

4. Technology and Place Dynamics.

There was much discussion about the links and mutually reinforcing roles of place and technology. Rather than seeing 'virtual' as somehow the opposite of 'physical', the focus here was one how they can augment each other.

For example:

- Events and activities that are largely virtual can benefit from creating opportunities for physical meet ups that provide an additional domain for, and deepen, human interactions. Virtual events can and do involve multiple forms of physical interaction before, during, and after.
- Hybrid events need to make the most of both domains, creating omni-channel experiences for all kinds of visitors. The emergence of new platforms and apps that bring together virtual and physical attendees, and intelligently curate their interaction, has been rapid.
- Physical events can be augmented in multiple ways by digital platforms. From the delegate booking and experience, to pre, during, and post event interaction, to navigations systems for venues and locations, to connectivity, matching, and linking, between participants, and much more.

There is a new arena of creativity in the way that events are integrating physical and digital, and this is spawning new business concepts, platforms, applications, and systems.

5. Destination Choice

One final major trend is how cities, regions, and provinces are working to exercise of much greater autonomy and choice about which events they seek to attract, create, or evolve. Due to the drive to optimise the 'co-benefits' that business events can bring to a city or region, decision making and strategy is shifting towards the events that brings the largest package of co-benefits, and the greatest alignment, rather than a more narrow focus on the number of delegates, or the size of the spend.

The direct economic value of events remains very important, but it is not more important than the wider co-benefits that give the events it's local mandate and legitimacy. So, we expect to see more cities and regions choosing events that appeal to local citizens, media, and leaders because of those co-benefits. One consequence of this is that everyone will work harder to find the co-benefits and be responsible for them. This will give business events their renewed licence to operate.

