iMEX 2023
POLICY FORUM
Highlights

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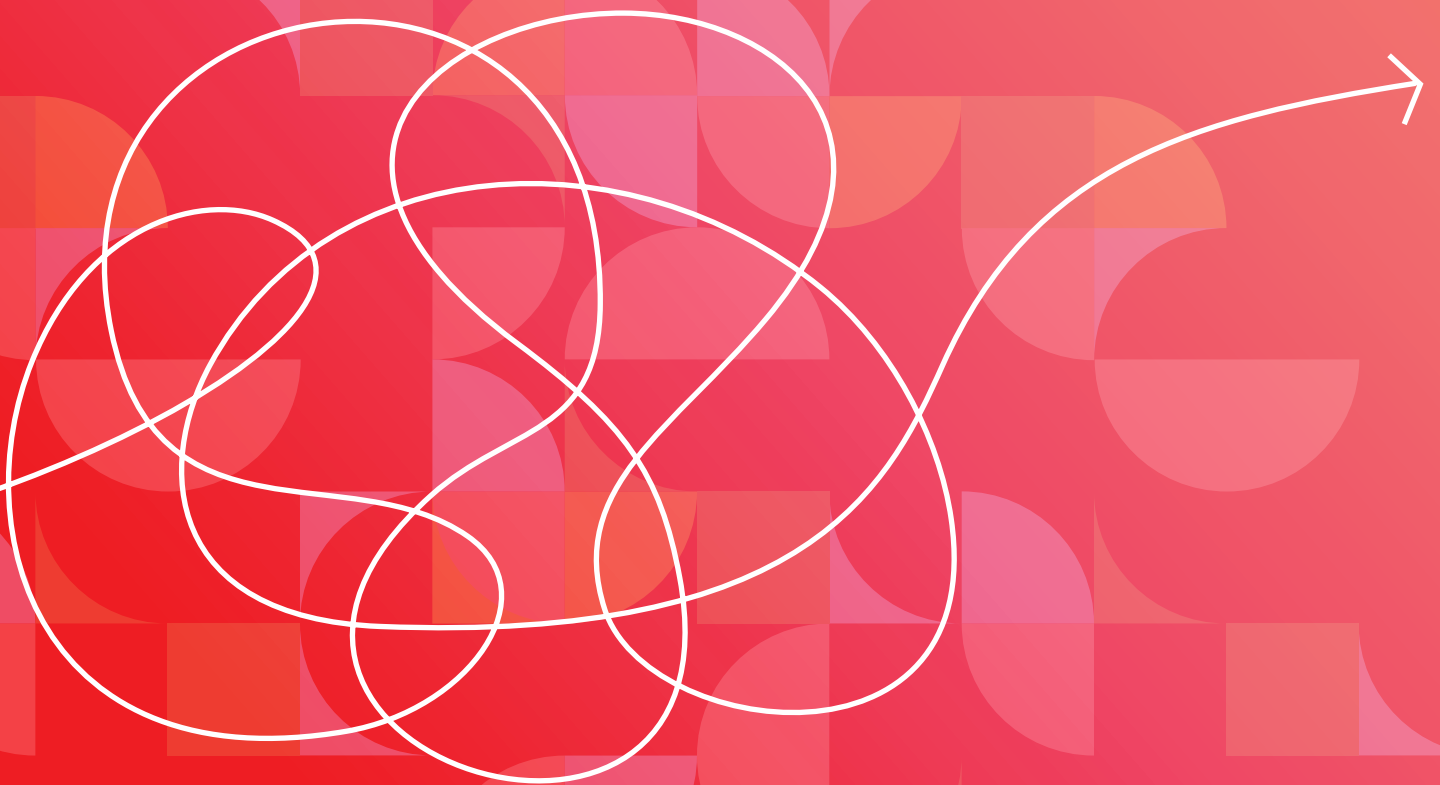
Uncomfortable Conversations & Unexpected Solutions

Objectives

The aim of this year's Policy Forum was to identify new ways of thinking about the major threats and opportunities that we face, and to influence and align future high-level conversations around the world about the value, relevance, and impact of business events.

The gathering was attended by 19 policy makers from 11 countries, including Ministers, Vice-Ministers, Mayors, Deputy Mayors, Heads of Regional Government, City and Municipal officials, and Ambassadors.

These were joined by the heads of all major business events industry associations, strategic partners, and senior destination representatives. More than 30-plus countries were represented at the Forum.

Natasha Richards, Director of Impact & Industry Relations, IMEX Group

"The global business events industry holds significant value and it has an important part to play in the global economy, making a positive impact in knowledge exchange and innovation, professional development, place branding and fostering sustainable growth, research and development, and leaving societal and cultural legacies.

Yet, there is no guarantee of success for the business events sector.

We are not natural high fliers when it comes to policy priorities. We are increasingly seen as part of the sustainability problem, rather than part of the solution. Our sector has suffered from frequent bouts of identity crisis, in terms of where exactly we fit in the macroeconomic landscape. Our voice has, at times, been disparate and out of sync.

The global pandemic, and the inability of our sector to operate, galvanised our advocacy efforts and our voices are now stronger and more unified. Yet, truly to thrive, we must stop talking to ourselves and widen our circle of influence.

We must maximise our contributions to the advancement and prosperity of global industries and societies whilst supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to which we are all bound.

These are indeed lofty aims and the purpose of this forum is to help set the agenda for future high-level conversations and to help build better partnerships and understanding between our policy makers and our wider industry".

Provocation Panel #1 – External discomforts & creative responses

Moderator: Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International

Panellists:

Rajesh Agrawal, Deputy Mayor of London for Business
Paul Mockler, Head of Commercial Development, Fáilte Ireland
Bjoern Spreitzer, General Manager New Zealand & Business Events at Tourism New Zealand

Key challenges: silver linings, and innovation

Rajesh Agrawal, Deputy Mayor of London for Business, opened the discussion by talking about the challenges of Brexit and the pandemic.

The key challenge has been people and talent. "We need more people than ever before," said Agrawal, but "the fundamental strengths of London and the UK remain intact and unchanged. We have a huge talent pool and rapidly growing sectors including tech, financial services, and fintech. London is tracking more events than ever before, such as London Tech Week, which is the biggest tech festival in Europe."

Agrawal cited two silver linings of the pandemic. Firstly, digital adoption accelerated. "Six million people downloaded a mobile banking app for the first time and millions ordered food online for the first time."

Secondly, there is now "more awareness around sustainability and the environment than ever before," added Agrawal.

In Ireland, the major issue during the pandemic was everything shutting down. Paul Mockler, Head of Commercial Development of Fáilte Ireland, said: "We had to move everything outdoors. A significant capital investment scheme helped our industry to reopen outdoors. We invested in greenways, walkways, and hiking centres, and made the countryside better for residents and visitors, and communities."

Mockler added that one of the major positives of the pandemic was that it highlighted the resilience and strength of the business events industry. Also, it gave Ireland's SME's the opportunity to upskill and as the sector had previously been lagging in terms of access to data sources.

Sustainability

New Zealand shares a similar problem to Ireland in the way that the majority of its businesses are small and do not have much resource to tackle important issues, such as sustainability.

Bjoern Spreitzer, General Manager New Zealand & Business Events at Tourism New Zealand, explained that the country has set up an organisation to help businesses in the sector to become sustainable up to gold standards. He said: "Sustainability is in our DNA, but because you have to fly to come to New Zealand, we have learned that it is ok to have uncomfortable conversations. It is only by having uncomfortable conversations that you can get the change you want."

In London, an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) has been introduced, which means older, polluting cars and vehicles have to pay a strong charge to enter London. "This can only be done if there is a strong transport infrastructure in place, and last year we opened the Elizabeth Line to improve connectivity across the city," added Agrawal.

Like New Zealand, Agrawal is aware that the UK is an island and people need to take flights to get here, but he knows the key lies in encouraging visitors to combine leisure with work when they come to London for business trips and events.

Mockler called for clearer definitions. "We're at a point in time where we need clear definitions because when we talk about impact, legacy, and sustainability, all three are merging into one, which can create some challenges. For example, associations can get edgy when we start talking about destination legacy because they want a legacy for their association. Whereas for us, legacy needs to look at sustainability and all the impacts an association makes and we measure those impacts."

Summary of round table discussions & feedback

Participants were presented with three talking points to discuss at their tables. There was then an opportunity to give feedback on the key points to the room.

The three questions were:

1. Post-pandemic realities require agile responses – how are you innovating?
2. How can we affect/influence behavioural change?
3. Where does digital fit in your destination strategy?

Many destinations shared stories of how competitors came together during the pandemic, becoming allies to foster collaboration and drive innovation.

Another spokesperson focused on how the digital revolution is forcing behavioural change and how the realities of the pandemic forced agile responses that resulted in innovative business models, both in terms of how businesses and their workforces are managed, and how events are now designed. These changes are now driving different conversations.

How can we affect/influence behavioural change?

Storytelling and science are key to affecting change. One spokesperson said: "It is about head and heart. It is about having the right data and science, and the right stories."

Another table picked up on Agrawal's earlier point about influencing business visitors to stay longer in a destination and highlighting the benefits of this for sustainability. One spokesperson said: "There is a question of how can we help people to travel less but still go to business events and incentivise them to stay longer?"

Where does digital fit in your destination strategy?

Using data analytics and strong storytelling were key themes again.

One table's spokesperson said: "A destination that embraces digital, and uses it in whichever way they can to disseminate information, was likely to give both their local residents and visitors an overall better experience. If people feel comfortable and able to access information easily, this will drive increased spend and return visits."

Helsinki was cited as an example of how destinations can influence behaviour around sustainability. For example, in Helsinki, the website has a page that lists responsible shops and restaurants. "Sustainability is in the DNA of cities that are well-advanced in this area."

An interesting talking point emerged around Chat GBT, or "the elephant in the room" as it was referred to by one delegate, who said: "It is going to have an impact on our event owners in terms of how they are going to look at their itineraries and how they are going to book. We're using it across our organisation and the efficiencies are amazing. It is going to change the way we do business. After talking with Google's head of strategy recently, they said the time from booking direct to product is not far away. Chat GBT is going to disrupt our whole planet."

Provocation Panel #2 – Internal pain points & fresh thinking

<u>Moderator:</u> **Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International**

<u>Panellists:</u>

Alex van Westerlaak, Sr. Project Manager Economic Affairs Department, City of Amsterdam
Monika Iuel, Chief Destination Marketing Officer, WESGRO, Cape Town

Key challenges: regulation

Alex van Westerlaak, Sr. Project Manager Economic Affairs Department, City of Amsterdam, discussed the need for regulation when it comes to destination management. He explained: "In Amsterdam, we were surprised that post-pandemic recovery was so fast. Last year, our visitor levels were higher than 2019, and this has an impact on our citizens. Amsterdam is a small city and visitors want to visit one small area, so we are now promoting areas outside of the city. We have also launched an experimental marketing campaign – a retargeting campaign, so if someone is looking online to book a stag weekend in Amsterdam, an advert will pop up encouraging them to go elsewhere."

To attract more business events, the city is investing more in this sector because "it is an example of one of those groups of visitors that add something visible to the city," added Westerlaak.

Also, as part of the city's 50th anniversary, Amsterdam will be talking to residents, schools, and businesses about what the image of Amsterdam should be and this campaign will incorporate the benefits of conventions.

Building attraction value

Monika Iuel, Chief Destination Marketing Officer, WESGRO, Cape Town, gave an overview of WESGRO, the official tourism, trade, and investment promotion agency for Cape Town in the Western Cape in South Africa. Iuel then moved on to discuss the organisation's key hurdles. She said: "We have three streams of effort that come together within WESGRO. Some of the challenges are the way that the different teams operate. Our challenge always is to demonstrate the success of our work and the power of business events. It's a story that needs to be told at both a provincial and city level."

WESTGRO has sought partnerships more broadly outside of Cape Town and the Western Cape to drive the agenda together and build attraction value. Partnerships have been formed with other coastal provinces in South Africa, and partnerships with Namibia and Mozambique are being explored. "The aim is to build the attraction value across the entire value chain," said Iuel. "We need everybody to drive the same agenda – and that is across Africa, too. It will raise the profile of the entire continent, which makes it more likely for one of us to succeed from time to time."

A pilot project is also underway for WESTGRO, in partnership with South Africa's National Convention Bureau. The project will identify smaller towns and villages where there are interesting meeting spaces. National meetings will then be incentivised to use these smaller towns so they can "start building some muscle memory through hosting business events".

Summary of round table discussions & feedback

Delegates were presented with three questions to explore at their tables. There was then an opportunity to give feedback on the pertinent points to the room.

The three questions were:

1. Does your brand reflect your values?
2. New KPIs – what does success look like?
3. How can we ensure that business events are essential to sustainable destination development?

Does your brand reflect your values?

The discussion highlighted the importance for destination brands to have clarity when it comes to values and communication. One spokesperson advised: "Values must be interrogated – are your values pre-pandemic still the same? The big question is: whose values should a brand reflect? Do the values apply to both the destination and venues? All strands have to be aligned to attract investment. When it comes to the communication of brand values, the questions should be: what do you want people to perceive about your brand?"

Another table discussed the importance of aligning the brand with locals, communities, and visitors, so they feel represented and "everybody feels part of the brand".

Better KPIs are needed to explain the economic impact of business events and make better decisions. There needs to be measurement, but also contextualised stories. For example, a city would celebrate the arrival of a new Google office, bringing with it thousands of jobs.

However, one major association event can also bring thousands to a destination. This type of story can help to explain the benefits and contextualise KPIs to make people understand the power of business events.

How can we ensure that business events are essential to sustainable destination development?

There isn't a direct link between business events and community alignment – the link has to be created, said one spokesperson. There is a big question around how do you establish these links, and how do you develop partnerships to create those links? The focus should be on bridging the gaps.

A spokesperson from another round table discussion cited "the old age problem that the business events industry is relevant, but nobody sees it. We need to mandate ourselves and separate ourselves from business and tourism because it is a different conversation.

"Living beyond our mandate" was another important point made during the round table discussion. "The greatest role we can play, as an industry, is to go beyond the call of duty – what else can we contribute?"

Reflections from Prof. Greg Clark CBE

What the pandemic has done is induce the need for a new social contract in our societies and that creates the possibility of a new license to operate for business events.

What we've been hearing around the room are snippets of that new license to operate new ways of working, new ways of thinking, and new ways of behaving that amount to a consensus that business events are part of the good future that we want to have.

For the last three years, we've all been living through something that is quite confusing because it's had different aspects of change going on with it – very different things are happening in different parts of the world. Anybody who thinks they've suddenly got the picture of change, I'm afraid you're probably wrong.

The reason you're wrong is that I've been tracking what happens in 500 cities since the pandemic, and, in half the world, people are more than 100% back to the office, back to public transport, back to public space, back to public events. Yet in small parts of the world, the 4% that live in North America, for example, it is nowhere near back. Don't extrapolate from what's happening in one continent, with what's happening around the world.

There are "three sixes" to remember

Six big changes from the pandemic:

1. **The pandemic stopped human mobility:** Tourism was shut down. International students couldn't travel and normal patterns of migration were halted. In several countries around the world, there's a big debate now because suddenly, migration is back, and it looks like it's too many. But people have forgotten that for three years, there was no migration. Why have we got a war for talent? Why have we got problems with sourcing skills? It is because we shut down human mobility for three years.

2. **The pandemic revealed that global supply chains are not very resilient:** As soon as you've got a pandemic, you can't source the pharmaceuticals, the vital goods, the strategic components. Suddenly there's a big agenda about reshoring, onshoring, nearshoring, and everything else.

3. **Digitization:** There was a massive acceleration of digitization in order to cope with the pandemic, leading to a whole series of new choices about how we work, where we live, when we travel, what we consume, and how we do it.

4. **We became aware, not just of people's vulnerability to respiratory diseases, but of massive health inequalities:** The quality of people's homes, the nature of the jobs they did, the ways they were required to travel, which makes some people more vulnerable than others to the pandemic. It created a sense of crisis in our idea of social solidarity.

5. **We became aware of the connection between human health and planetary health in a new way:** Whether it's a conversation about how the pandemic began, or whether it was the focus on what it meant to be able to leave a slightly lower carbon life, people became aware that planetary health and human health are intimately connected. This has led to a surge in concern about climate and planet.

6. **We completely revised the relationships between citizens and governments:** Suddenly, governments were trying to get people not to leave their homes. Governments were telling people they were in lockdown, that they can't cross the border or go to the shops. This is a massive change – something that hadn't really happened since the whole of the world was at war.

These six changes are now playing out in the conversation around business events and there is a series of secondary effects from all of this.

The secondary effects of the big drivers are...

❖ Business models are changing as a result.

❖ There's a global war for talent going on.

❖ There's a big change in our built environment and how we need to reconfigure it for the new demand patterns.

❖ There's a big concern about the viability of certain kinds of transport and the legitimacy of other kinds of transport going on at the same time. It's illegitimate to drive a car, yet it's hardly viable to ride on public transport unless you're in a place that's got lots of resources to do that.

❖ We're re-sequencing our days, weeks, and months. The way our daily lives work is completely changing. We go to a place of work on different days of the week at different times of day than we used to. We go out to have fun on different days of the week at different times of the day, and we do things differently at the weekends than we used to.

❖ Trust was lost in certain kinds of institutions. Trust between employees and employers is at an all-time low. Trust between citizens and governments is at a low. Trust between people who live with their neighbours is at an all-time high. Social capital really improved in many places.

This has led to six uncomfortable debates...

1. **Employees vs. employers:** Who's in charge of when you have to attend the workplace, and for what purpose? Does individual efficiency, by not having to commute, contribute to firm-level productivity or not? That big debate is very uncomfortable because people assume, and in some continents, there's more of a preference for one answer than the others. In some continents, the preference is to say, whatever makes the human being more free, makes them more productive. In other continents, whatever makes the human being more free, makes them less productive.

2. **Physical vs. digital:** Are we really in a situation where we see physical and digital as somehow opposing each other? But if you like, are we giving up the physical world of the city to enter the digital world of something else? Or do we see how they can really relate to each other? We're seeing this debate played out all around the world with people asking, how can we reconfigure the office? What's the new omnichannel retail opportunity? What's the combination of things that we need to do to win people back? This is a very big issue.

3. **Transition vs. transformation:** Put simply, some people would like us to boycott fossil fuels. Other people say that we've got to incentivize a transition away from fossil fuels. This is a very uncomfortable debate that leads to some people accusing other people of being devil worshippers or less, because this debate about transformation versus transition, is not very clear.

4. **Costs vs. benefits:** Who's benefiting from these changes? Who's experiencing the cost of these changes? Where are they falling? Where are they not? And some people are reaching a settlement, which is actually costly for people who are not them. Let me take the obvious example. It's great to discover that everybody who's in a graduate industry has the choice to work from home. It's not so good for your job if you're a low-paid worker working in hospitality or retail. So suddenly, the freedom of the knowledge worker is directly in conflict with the livelihood of the low-paid, low-skilled worker. So how do we resolve that?

5. **The depth of inequality that we've experienced in our society and what's the feasible pace of change?** This is being played out all over the world at the moment. What the pandemic revealed is that some people have been systematically disadvantaged and have never been treated properly and then governments are asking, how can we solve this in a relatively quick way? It's very difficult, but you see a number of national governments around the world reaching for a new solution.

6. **Competition vs. cooperation:** There's a bit of a thought that's come out of the pandemic that somehow we're all in it together. But on the other hand, there's this strong dynamic of a flight to quality. People are going to the one or two places that they really trust, the office buildings that are really attractive, the destinations that they feel are really safe. There is a problem of competition entering into a situation where we're trying to make change together at the same time.

Those are the six really uncomfortable conversations that come about as a result of the secondary effects of the six big changes that came from the pandemic.

The big question for the next 20 years is: Can we rebuild that social contract?

The idea is that every industry earns a licence to operate, and you earn your licence to operate by demonstrating that you're aligned with the social contract. The social contract is all of those agreements that are reached about what a society wants to happen.

What we heard today was a lot of examples of how business events are becoming much more aligned with a post-pandemic story about the world we want to be in. The question is, does that amount to a new licence to operate, and how can you crystallise it?

What tension are you experiencing? (in a few words)

Wordcloud Poll   68 responses   38 participants

Travel inconveniences   Social inequalities
Volume versus value debates in destination
Social license
Technology   **War**
Competition
Propaganda
Unions
Inequality   Trust   **Industry egos**   Refugees
Flying is necessary for people to meet
Sustainable travel   limited resources
United we stand as an industry divided we fall
Talent acquisition and retention

slido

Competition

We're experiencing competition at almost every level. There's competition going on between sectors of primacy. There's also competition going on between continents, between nations, between cities and between locations within cities. This is playing out everywhere. This flight to quality dynamic has a kind of winners and losers dimension to it. In a sense, it is a Darwinian process, a natural process, but the problem is there are big social and environmental costs and consequences of that competition.

Industry egos

One of the groups of egos that I follow are the chief executives of the world's biggest financial institutions because they've been very bullish on getting people back in the office. They're saying Financial Services is not a routine analyst activity. They are saying, "We want you back in the office five days a week, otherwise, you can't do your job." And they're exercising a certain kind of authority over their largely very well-paid workers.

That's very interesting because that's completely different from the message we originally got from, say, Google and Facebook, which is, do your job anywhere.

Now, of course, people make decisions based on "do your job anywhere" to buy a house that is 1,000 miles away from where their job was located. Only for 18 months later, suddenly the productivity penny dropped. Then employers wanted employees back 10 days a month or something like that. This creates a fairness issue about people having jobs that are in expensive labour markets, but trying to live in expensive housing markets and using digitization as the bridge. Yet it's not yet fully working out. Anyone who lives in North America knows that there's a big issue of stranded assets in the big cities.

Flying is necessary for people to meet

Boeing is no longer expecting sustainable aviation fuel to come online anytime in the next decade. It's going to be a long time before we get sustainable aviation. So then you get into a conversation about offsets. How can you legitimately offset flying to events? I'm noticing much more that business leadership groups in cities that host business events are starting to do local offset schemes rather than global ones, pooling money at the local level and putting it into parks, forests, farming, agriculture and everything else locally. Could the business events sector invent our own offsets programme that is much more meaningful than anything that the airlines have done? And if the industry already has one, talk about it more.

Create partnerships

Because of those slightly irresolvable dilemmas, those six very contentious debates, the only way you can resolve them is practically, theoretically and philosophically. Practically you can do things and so destinations are doing more placed-based partnerships or place leadership. We talked about place leadership, which is where convention centres, local governments, local businesses, universities and others, formed permanent alliances to shape place, because only by doing that actively, can you somehow resolve some of the major dilemmas.

Closing Comments

What change can you make? (in a few words)
Wordcloud Poll   72 responses   37 participants

Train instead of plane
Storytelling
actively take down barriers
Trust
Strategy
Live beyond mandate!
Cooperation
Welcome failure and learn
Educate
Create partnerships
encourage
Tell a better story
lower barriers
Walk more
exchange of experience
all the small things
Walk the talk
change is positive, errors allowed
make people fall in love with nature again
Learn
Value based brand

slido

I'd like to see a word cloud on "what can you really change?" We're trying to create a new licence to operate the business events industry in the context of a new social contract. That involves resolving somehow some of these tensions and uncomfortable conversations. What can you change because the new licence to operate is often built bottom up.

We have heard today about the role of events in aligning with social and environmental challenges in a city or region or nation; the role of events in focusing on nature and the DNA and unique characteristics of a place; the role of events in bringing young people within a place; for the role of events in creating a more sustained engagement between the industries that you have, and the experts or the people who come in; the role of events in helping you be agile, and helping you innovate and helping you reinvent, rather than this idea of passive hosting.

 I know nobody in this room ever thought they were passively hosting anything, but there was this idea that we were just hosting a visit from a convention. Now hosting events has become much more proactive, much more aligned, much more intentional, and, as a result, a better story is beginning to be told.

Living beyond the mandate was a good point made earlier. I talk a lot about benefits and desired intentions but there are often co-benefits that are employment, or placemaking. There are lots of co-benefits out there to be shaped and achieved and celebrated.

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Resources

- **Events Industry Council Global Economic Significance of Business Events Study**

  https://www.eventscouncil.org/Leadership/Economic-Significance-Study

- **Joint Meetings Industry Council Global Manifesto**

  chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://themeetingsind.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/JMIC_Industry-Manifesto-1.pdf

- **Net Carbon Zero Events Initiative**

  https://www.netzerocarbonevents.org/

- **The Iceberg (legacies of business events)**

  https://www.the-iceberg.org/

- **IMEX Frankfurt 2023 - Show Stats**

  https://imex-frankfurt.com/about-imex-frankfurt#showstats

- **IMEX Policy Forum 2023 Photo Gallery**

  https://photos.imexexhibitions.com/IMEX-in-Frankfurt/2023/Policy-Forum-/

The IMEX Policy Forum is organised in collaboration with City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA), the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC), Meetings Mean Business Coalition, Destinations International, under the auspices of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) and Events Industry Council (EIC).

Collaborators

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Legacies of business events

Thank you for being part of the IMEX Policy Forum and please save the date for the 2024 edition,
Tuesday 14 May, 2024