

Insights from

iMEX Policy Forum 2025

Business Events as Catalysts
for Place Leadership

iMEX

Overview

Business Events Redefined: IMEX Policy Forum 2025 Sets Bold New Agenda on Place Leadership

The IMEX Policy Forum 2025, held during IMEX Frankfurt, signalled a major shift in the global narrative around business events. No longer viewed merely as a subset of tourism, business events are emerging as core components of place leadership, innovation, and economic development.

Speaking to a high-level audience of 120 destination representatives and 20 policymakers from more than 30 countries, keynote speaker Professor Greg Clark CBE – who has advised over 400 cities globally – captured the need for urgency and transformation:

“Business events and place leadership have become more important in the past 18 months. This is a moment of great geopolitical change. Our system of global economic organization is being reset in a way which is more fragmented, less dominated by individual sources of power – and that means more opportunity for more places.”



Business Events as Venture Capital?

The forum highlighted a growing consensus: the most successful destinations are those that create platforms where business events function as accelerators of innovation and societal benefits. Prof Clark powerfully summarized the shift in thinking:

"Business events are catalysts, concentrators, and accelerators. They're a form of venture capital, actually, if you want to think about it."

This repositioning is expected to unlock new levels of investment and inter-sector collaboration, particularly for destinations willing to integrate business events into their long-term development plans. The destinations that thrive will be those that go beyond attracting visitors, using business events to fuel progress – economic, environmental, and societal – for the communities they serve.

Key Strategic Insights from the Forum:

- ② **Place leadership in a fragmented world** requires permanent, multi-sector stakeholder coalitions that transcend temporary political cycles, ensuring long-term vision and stability.
- ② Destinations must **align business events with broader socio-economic goals**, reframing their value in terms of innovation, talent, and trade – not just tourism metrics like delegate spend.
- ② The **geopolitical reset** offers a rare window of opportunity for destinations that are organized and forward-thinking to strengthen their global relevance and investment appeal.
- ② **Co-creation of strategy with diverse stakeholders**, including those outside the traditional tourism ecosystem, is replacing top-down planning as a characteristic of successful place leadership.
- ② **Climate action represents both a major challenge and an opportunity** for the business events sector to demonstrate leadership and innovation.



The IMEX Policy Forum 2025 was opened by **Natasha Richards**, Director of Impact & Industry Relations, IMEX Group, followed by **Ray Bloom**, Chairman, IMEX Group. The session was hosted by **Jane Cunningham**, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International, with contributions from global leaders including **Lyn Lewis-Smith**, CEO of BESydney, and **Paul Mockler**, Head of Commercial Development at Fáilte Ireland.

The Forum is organized in collaboration with the **International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC)**, **City Destinations Alliance (City DNA)**, **Destinations International**, **German Convention Bureau (GCB)**, the **International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA)**, **The Iceberg**, and the **U.S. travel Association**, under the auspices of the **Events Industry Council (EIC)** and the **Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC)**.

Collaborators



From Influence to Impact: How Destination Leaders in Sydney and Ireland Secured a Seat at the Top Table

In a global landscape marked by rapid ministerial turnover, rising stakeholder complexity, and mounting climate pressures, business event leaders are evolving from marketers to policy influencers. At the IMEX Policy Forum, two standout case studies – Sydney and Ireland – offered compelling blueprints for how destinations can embed themselves within government priorities, secure sustained funding, and drive strategic change.

Sydney: Playing the Long Game with Policy and Proof

Lyn Lewis-Smith, CEO of BESydney, has witnessed 17 ministers come and go, but the destination's influence has only grown. The secret? A long-term, data-led strategy to become indispensable to government machinery.

"Ministers change, but bureaucracies endure," she said. "We embedded ourselves in that machinery, built trust, and aligned our business events agenda with the city's broader economic and industrial strategies."

BESydney operates outside government as a not-for-profit but is publicly funded and focused exclusively on bidding for international events. The bureau aligns its bids with priority sectors such as renewable energy and technology, builds business cases backed by over 15 years of data from its University of Technology Sydney partnership, and actively contributes to city-wide policy discussions.

Outcomes include:

- ➞ The demolition and rebuild of the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, enabled by strong advocacy and evidence of broader economic benefits.
- ➞ A \$10M post-COVID subvention boost.
- ➞ A strategic MOU with the Department of Education.
- ➞ An ambassador program that extends beyond bid leaders to include influential strategic advisors who organically advocate across sectors.

Lewis-Smith emphasized cross-sector collaboration and strategic visibility:

"Sit on boards beyond tourism – urban planning, education, the nighttime economy. You educate people who had no idea we exist, and they become our advocates."

Ireland: Seizing Crisis to Drive Relevance

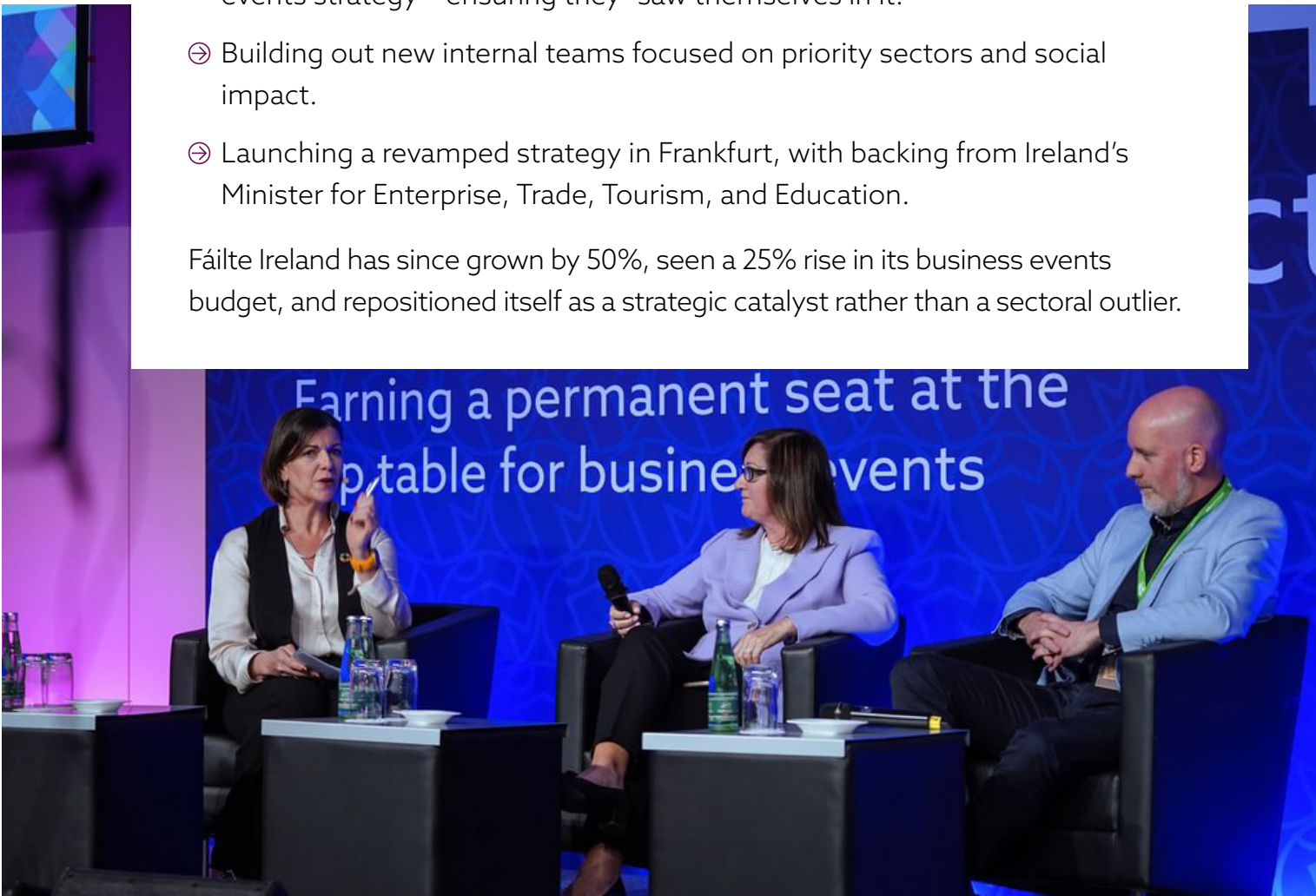
While BESydney's influence was years in the making, Fáilte Ireland's journey was accelerated by crisis. As Paul Mockler, Head of Commercial Development, explained, the pandemic became a proving ground for agility and relevance. When the tourism sector shut down in 2020, the agency repurposed its 300-strong team to support public messaging and develop reopening guidelines across industries. That action earned the attention – and trust – of key government decision-makers.

"We showed we could execute government priorities. Once we had that seat at the table, we pivoted again – to communicate the wider value of business events using the language of government," Mockler said.

Key steps included:

- ➞ Studying departmental policies to mirror government language.
- ➞ Involving cross-departmental stakeholders in writing Ireland's new business events strategy – ensuring they "saw themselves in it."
- ➞ Building out new internal teams focused on priority sectors and social impact.
- ➞ Launching a revamped strategy in Frankfurt, with backing from Ireland's Minister for Enterprise, Trade, Tourism, and Education.

Fáilte Ireland has since grown by 50%, seen a 25% rise in its business events budget, and repositioned itself as a strategic catalyst rather than a sectoral outlier.



Key takeaways

Both destinations shared common principles:

- ② **Align with Government Priorities:** Tailor strategies to national economic and social goals.
- ② **Use Data to Build Business Cases:** Evidence, not anecdotes, drives investment.
- ② **Expand Stakeholder Ownership:** From strategic ambassadors to cross-sector co-authors.
- ② **Speak Their Language:** Replace sector jargon with policy-relevant narratives.
- ② **Be Seen as an Accelerator:** Support, don't supplant, existing government goals.

Mockler issued a powerful warning about the next shift on the horizon:

"If we're not seen as part of the climate solution, governments may shut us down again – just as they did during the pandemic."

As ESG mandates tighten, destinations will need to demonstrate not only impact, but responsibility. For Lewis-Smith, that means gearing up for Scope 3 carbon reporting and ensuring the industry is future-fit.

The discussion made clear: in a world of shifting power, the destinations that thrive will be those who become *strategic partners* with a clear voice at the top table.



Destinations risk becoming “orphans of policy”

The forum highlighted a persistent gap in traditional governance where, as Prof Clark observed: “The concept of “place” is absent. Most governments think in terms of sector – housing, health, education – they think in silos. While place, as a unifying concept, is often left out of policy-making altogether. The risk,” he said, “is that places become the orphans of policy.”

As a result, these geographic locations lack coordinated leadership. In an increasingly fragmented global environment, the need for strong, localized leadership has become essential.

Leading destinations are addressing this challenge by forming permanent stakeholder coalitions. Prof Clark emphasized that effective place leadership requires a unified team comprising “hospitals, universities, big cultural organizations, sporting organizations, etc.” Business events are emerging as catalysts and connectors within these coalitions.

A great example of this is London, where integration and collaboration have been key to the city’s success. Howard Dawber, Deputy Mayor of London for Business and Growth, and Chair of London & Partners, explained: “It’s been a difficult few years with COVID and geopolitical changes. Now people are looking for new alliances and new relationships – technologies are having a major impact in the sector – and it’s growing strongly. Using ‘place’ as part of how you sell a destination to potential partners, conventions, and exhibitions, and also how you create place and enthusiasm about a sectorial conference can spill out into a long-term impact on the city economy.”

Senthil Gopinath, CEO of the International Congress and Convention Association, quipped, "There are plenty of alliances, but little with purpose". He explained: "Destinations need to consider the purposefulness of their alliances. Look outside our industry, look into the future, approach the healthcare sector, approach universities, etc. to find mutual benefits."

Sven Bossu, CEO, AIPC, also advised: "Have a seat at the table and – be on the menu. We need solutions that are not political but could work for any government independently of who is in charge."

Prof Clark took this thought one step further, explaining that the leaders who shape places over the long term are not always those in elected office. "Government leadership is temporary. But institutions like universities, hospitals, cultural organisations, even landowners – they're on 100-year cycles," the speaker explained. "They're the ones who need to be around your leadership table."

The Innovation and Experience Economy Framework

Prof Clark offered a fundamental reframing that challenged conventional definitions: "Strictly speaking, business events are not an industry. What it is, from an economics point of view, is a critical infrastructure, a business enabler." This shift positions business events within two contemporary economic frameworks:

- ➞ **The Innovation Economy:** Events serve as "marketplace convenings," enabling diverse players within sectors to have "an intense experience of each other," thereby accelerating knowledge transfer, invention, and commercialization.
- ➞ **The Experience Economy:** Events meet modern demand, particularly from younger professionals, for experiences that combine serious content with human connection in distinctive locations.





Case Studies in Strategic Repositioning

Prof Clark shared global examples of two cities using events to build economic and reputational capital.

Stockholm: The city successfully transitioned from traditional manufacturing to become Europe's leading tech hub through coordinated place leadership. This involved 56 municipalities in the Greater Stockholm region, together with 12 universities and a large number of businesses. The result is a city now claiming "the highest level of unicorn companies per capita of any city in the world," demonstrating the role of business events as catalysts within innovation strategies.

Tel Aviv: The city strategically leveraged Eurovision hosting to project itself as "a friendly, fun loving party city, which is incredibly sort of diverse and liberal and progressive." This resulted in "a huge flood of talent into the high tech industries," showing how non-business events can serve economic development goals by enhancing lifestyle appeal to target demographics.

Prof Clark also highlighted how sectors like **sport and higher education** have reinvented themselves through visionary leadership – shifting from passive roles to powerful engines of economic and social development.

The industry must challenge itself to tell a more compelling story, concluded Prof Clark:

"It's not about selling the idea of business events – it's about selling the outcomes. More investment, more innovation, better infrastructure, and stronger communities. Leaders want a basket of benefits. Show them why they need you at the table."

Time to 'Set the Table' for Place Leadership

At a time when global economic systems are undergoing seismic change, Prof Clark called on business event professionals to take a proactive role in shaping their destinations – by not just fighting for a seat at the table, but by setting the table themselves.

Prof Clark emphasised that in today's decentralised world order, new leadership opportunities are emerging – not by default, but by design.

"There's not always one table you have to be invited to," he said. "Tables are formed all the time around the issues that matter. The person who creates the table, who convenes, who hosts – that person leads."

The Duvet Generation: How Cities Are Rethinking Events for the Next Wave of Delegates

The spotlight soon turned to a fast-emerging challenge – and opportunity – for the global events industry: engaging the so-called "duvet generation." Characterised by their working from home culture, today's younger audiences are forcing destinations to innovate or risk irrelevance.

Barbara Jamison, President of City Destinations Alliance, captured the mood succinctly: "Delegates of the future are the current duvet generation. They are comfortable at home, and it's hard to get them to go to an event." Jamison highlighted successful strategies being deployed in cities like London and Toronto, where creative industries and eSports events – deeply embedded in Gen Z's digital-first lifestyles – are seeing notable traction.

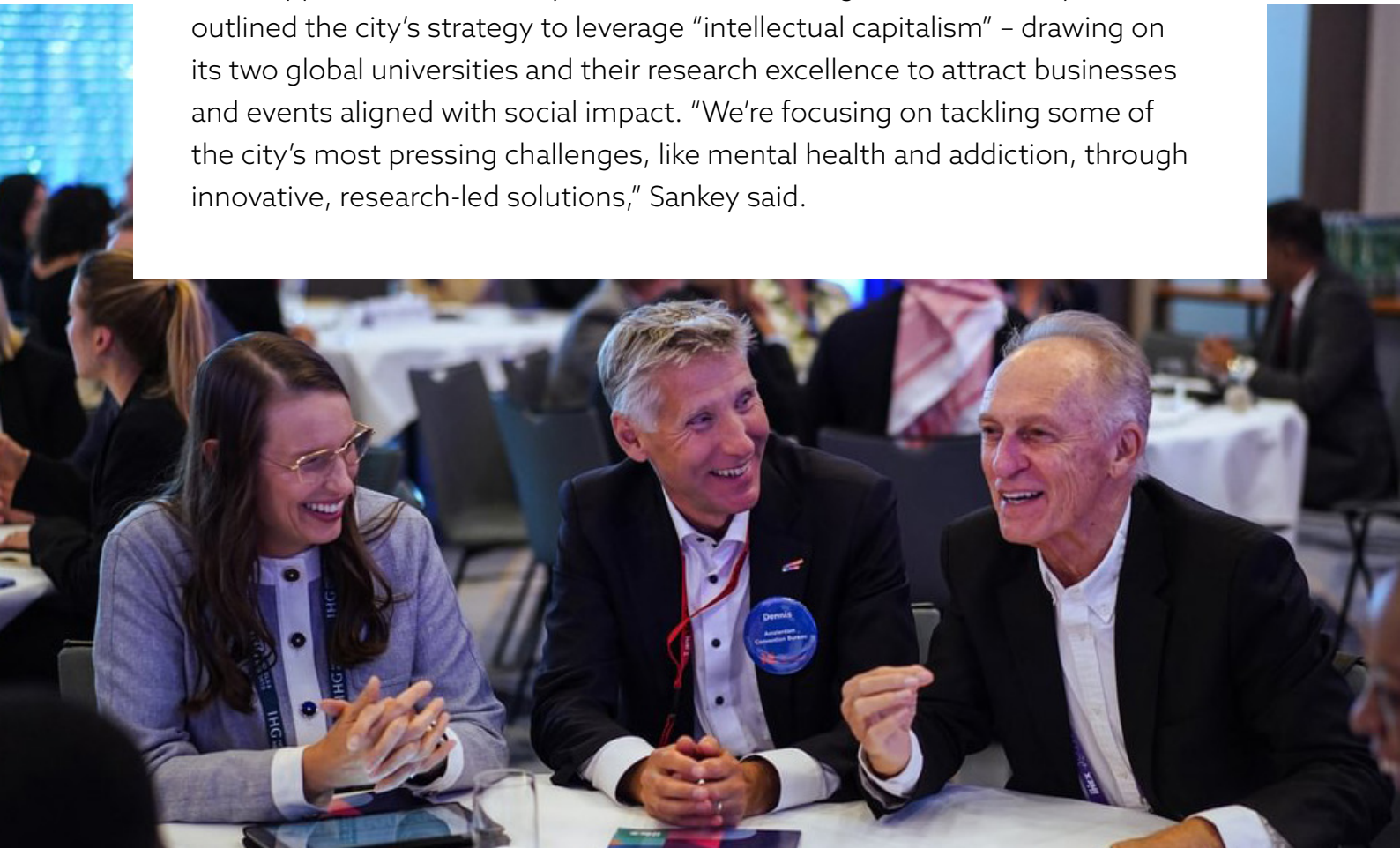
Young people are also forming their own communities and associations, and creating hybrid sports and events that simply don't exist today, such as chess-boxing, soccer-dancing and marble racing.

"There's a huge opportunity here," Jamison added. "If you want younger delegates to come, they have to come for a reason."

That sentiment was echoed across the room, with a clear call to involve younger voices more actively in shaping events and city strategies. Amy Calvert, CEO of the Events Industry Council, warned against making broad assumptions: "It's important you don't make assumptions about what success looks like when you have multiple stakeholders."

Jess Gibbons, CEO of Brighton & Hove City Council, agreed, pointing to Gen Z's desire for meaningful impact: "They're really into making a difference to places. We must involve them in the conversation because what we think they think and what they actually think are very different".

That commitment to connection and authenticity is also shaping Brighton's wider approach. Bella Sankey, Labour Leader of Brighton & Hove City Council, outlined the city's strategy to leverage "intellectual capitalism" – drawing on its two global universities and their research excellence to attract businesses and events aligned with social impact. "We're focusing on tackling some of the city's most pressing challenges, like mental health and addiction, through innovative, research-led solutions," Sankey said.

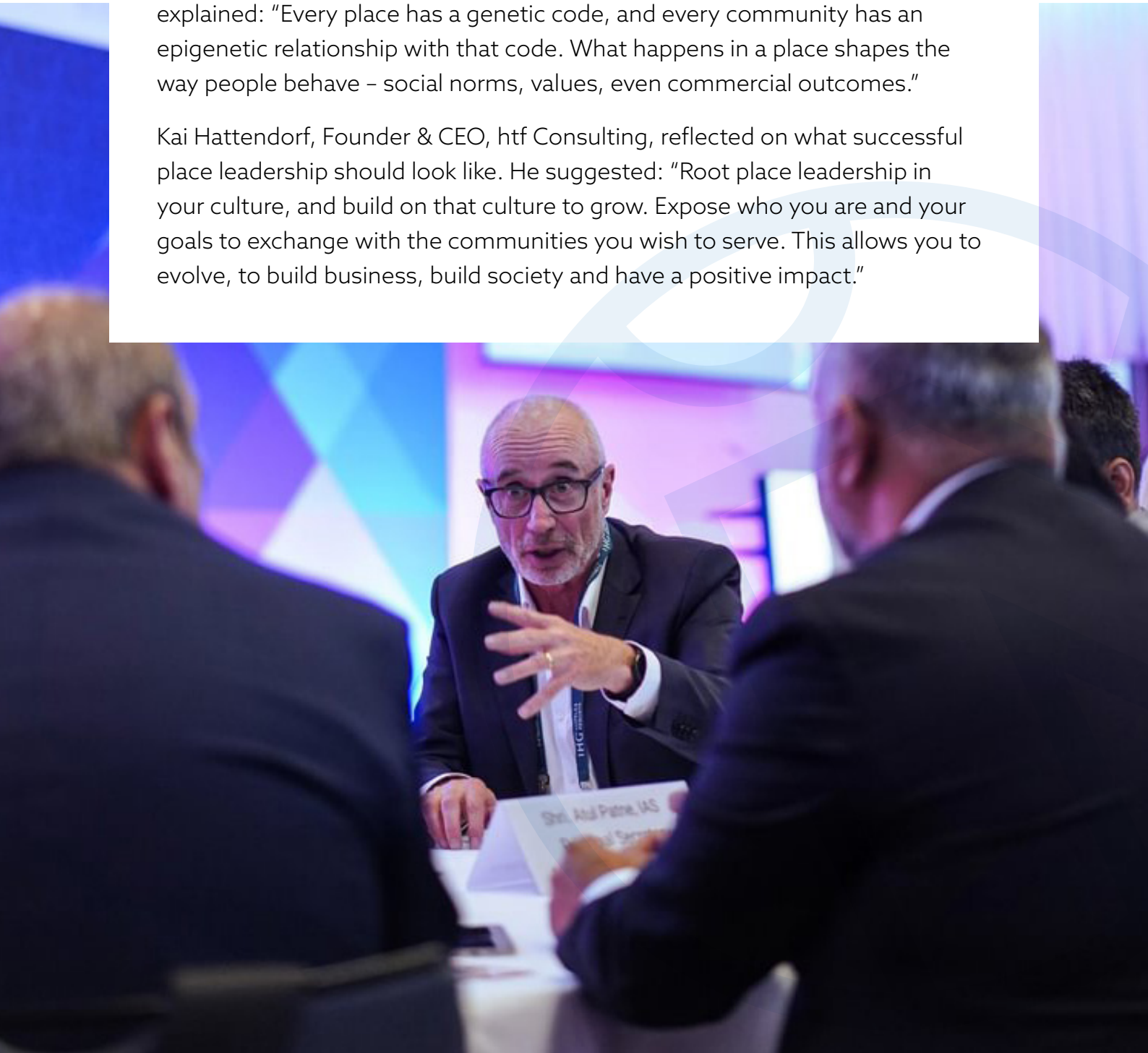


The DNA of Place: Why Business Events Are Key to Innovation and Experience Economies

Prof Clark went on to argue that understanding a place's unique "DNA" is critical to unlocking its full potential – and that business events play a vital role in this process.

Speaking about how places function, evolve, and connect people, Clark explained: "Every place has a genetic code, and every community has an epigenetic relationship with that code. What happens in a place shapes the way people behave – social norms, values, even commercial outcomes."

Kai Hattendorf, Founder & CEO, htf Consulting, reflected on what successful place leadership should look like. He suggested: "Root place leadership in your culture, and build on that culture to grow. Expose who you are and your goals to exchange with the communities you wish to serve. This allows you to evolve, to build business, build society and have a positive impact."



A Call to Action: Throw a Dinner Party

To close, Prof Clark issued a simple, powerful challenge to everyone in the room: host a dinner party.

"Think about your place. Identify your permanent stakeholders. Then ask: What kind of table would they come to? Invite them. Ask them three questions: How are the global shifts we're seeing changing our opportunities? What should we prioritise together? And how could international events catalyse the outcomes we want?"

"This is the moment," he concluded. "Some of you have done this before. But now's the time to do it again – with purpose."

**The 2026 IMEX Policy Forum
will take place on Tuesday 19 May**



Appendix A

IMEX Policy Forum 2025 – Shared Advocacy Resources

Please click on the links below to access websites where you can download or directly read the related documents, all of which have been shared between leading players in the global Business Events community who participated in this year's Forum.

These documents, along with a comprehensive library of previously published advocacy research and reports, opinions, feature stories, case studies, and advocacy-related news items can also be found on industry-wide advocacy platform The Iceberg, of which IMEX is a proud partner. We encourage all Policy Forum participants to actively support this shared resource for our industry. <https://www.the-iceberg.org/>

Source: City DNA

The Meetings Industry Manifesto: Priorities for the Next EU Leadership

City DNA collaborated with JMIC, visit.brussels and EEIA to organise an EU Dialogue event to create awareness of Business Events within the European Commission. This manifesto was the outcome, which can be used to highlight the economic development, innovation and social stability impacts of our sector with MEPs, EU officials, or national and city policymakers.

<https://citydestinationsalliance.eu/the-meetings-industry-manifesto-priorities-for-the-next-eu-leadership/>

Supportive video message & LinkedIn post: exciting new relationship for DMO's with the EU Commissioner for Sustainable Transport & Tourism.

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/citydestinationsalliance_european-commissioner-to-citydna-11042025-activity-7317535949226217474-7CYu/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAACAockBR51b8BER-F6RcLimYkZ5ft1GKaI

Source: Destinations International

Destination Reputation: Responding to Societal Issues

This initiative explores the growing impact of the socioeconomic climate, public safety, accessibility, and social values on destination reputation and the decision-making process of meeting organisers. Contains insights and tools needed for DMOs to anticipate and respond to reputational challenges and strengthen their destination's competitive positioning.

Full Report: https://destinationsinternational.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/Destination%20Reputation-Societal%20Concerns%20Against%20our%20Perceptions_FULL%20RESEARCH%20REPORT.pdf

Key Findings Summary: <https://publications.destinationsinternational.org/view/719975838/>

Source: ECA – Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance

2025 US Public Policy Agenda

Summary of our sector's primary legislative objectives in the USA: including growth-focused tax policies, workforce pathways, policies that reduce friction & increase travel to US, smart decarbonisation to build long-term competitive advantage.

<https://link.assetfile.io/2uWJo88HP1MGumBEr4e3Pt/ECA+2025+PUBLIC+POLICY+AGENDA.pdf>

Source: ECA – Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance

ECA Advocacy Network: Action Center

Sign-up page for collective advocacy programs, for all individuals and organisations interested in influencing US policy & policymakers.

<https://www.exhibitionsconferencesalliance.org/eca-advocacy-network/eca-advocacy-network-action-center>

Source: EIC – Events Industry Council

2025 Future Landscape Report

A foresight tool generated from a series of high-level "Think Tank" workshops to assist business events leaders and organisations to better understand a wide swathe of global macro socio-economic forces and societal and business trends.

<https://news.eventscouncil.org/futures/>

Source: EIC – Events Industry Council

Global Events Barometer

Every quarter, EIC in partnership with Oxford Economics issues worldwide market intelligence broken down by region, providing a snapshot of the health of the business events sector, including data on hotel room-nights booked and RFPs generated. The latest report is available here.

<https://eventscouncil.org/Leadership/Economic-Significance-Study#quarterly-barometers>

Source: GCB – German Convention Bureau

Future Meetings Space: Business Events in a Transformative Era

This latest (2024) edition of GCB's annual Future Meetings Space report on future mega-trends explores how new modes of working, demographic changes, and AI will influence the direction and purpose of our sector. Relevant worldwide, not just the German market. Past editions of this report series can also be downloaded from this webpage.

<https://www.gcb.de/en/wissen-und-innovation/future-meeting-space/research-phase-2024/>

Source: GCB – German Convention Bureau

Meeting & Event Barometer – Germany 2024/2025

In-depth analysis of the German congress and event market: an excellent model for other countries wishing to produce annual “state of the market” reports.

<https://link.assetfile.io/5Uo6CLtTscg4gZHqfo8ivi/Meeting+%26+EventBarometer.pdf>

Source: IAPCO – International Association of Professional Congress Organisers

The Global Socio-Political Impact Survey of 2025

Conducted in April 2025, this study of PCOs and their (mainly international association) clients is a “pulse test” of the impact to our sector of recent unrest and uncertainty in international relations.

<https://www.iapco.org/resource/the-global-socio-political-impact-survey-of-2025.html>

Source: ICCA – International Congress and Convention Association

ICCA Global Advocacy Pathway

Generated by “Wisdom of Crowds” workshops involving over 200 industry leaders, this is a “how to” toolkit that provides essential principles, key talking points, and concrete practical advice for designing and running advocacy programmes at local, national or international levels.

<https://link.assetfile.io/6i7wVbTc5iYsigiJURT33x/ICCA+Global+Advocacy+Pathway.pdf>

Source: JMIC – Joint Meetings Industry Council

Advocacy Resources Library

A one-stop shop to access a wide range of advocacy advice documents and supportive factual material, including those related to the Net Zero Carbon Events initiative and UN SDG Reporting guidelines and case studies.

<https://www.themeetingsindustry.org/industry-resources/>

Source: PCMA – Professional Congress Management Association

Advancing Women in the Business Events Industry

Research jointly carried out by PCMA Foundation and Business Events Sydney, highlighting specific and meaningful steps that are required to enable more women to reach C-suite and Board positions throughout our sector.

<https://www.pcma.org/advancing-women-in-the-business-events-industry/>

Source: UFI – The Global Association for the Exhibition Industry

UFI Economic Impact of Exhibitions Report 2024 (published May 2025)

In partnership with Oxford Economics, UFI has published these annual reports since 2018, all of which can be accessed here. Contains comprehensive data on the direct, indirect, and induced economic effects of the exhibition industry across all world regions.

<https://www.ufi.org/industry-resources/research/global-reports/economic-impact-studies/>

Source: UFI – The Global Association for the Exhibition Industry
The Global Exhibition Barometer (published Feb 2025)

Carried out every two years, this represents the latest business status and outlook for exhibitions across 19 different business sectors in all world regions.

<https://www.ufi.org/industry-resources/research/global-reports/global-barometer/>

Source: UFI – The Global Association for the Exhibition Industry

OECD guides – Impact Indicators and How to Measure the Impact of Culture, Sports and Business Events

UFI was instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of business events in these OECD guides, which contain advice, guidelines and good practice for measuring the economic, social and environmental impact of such events for organisers as well as policymakers in hosting destinations. <https://www.ufi.org/industry-resources/advocacy/institutions/organisation-for-economic-co-operation-and-development-oecd/>

Source: Wonderful Copenhagen Convention Bureau

Copenhagen Legacy Lab – Toolbox

Comprehensive guidelines on how to design a strategic legacy programme, and how to apply the principles and practices to individual events, from identification of challenges and desired impact, designing the process, measuring the impact, with the active involvement of local policymakers.

<https://www.wonderfulcopenhagen.com/convention-bureau/copenhagen-legacy-lab/toolbox>

Source: Wonderful Copenhagen Convention Bureau

Copenhagen, All Inclusive

Wonderful Copenhagen's new high-level strategy for tourism (including Business Events) 2024-2030, designed to "shed light on tourism's true impact on society and the world – its positive and negative effects, and its direct and indirect." A model for meaningful engagement with local citizens and deeper links to local business and scientific ecosystems.

<https://www.wonderfulcopenhagen.com/wonderful-copenhagen/about-us/strategy>

Appendix B

Recommended reading on "Place Leadership"

Keynote speaker at this year's IMEX Policy Forum was Professor Greg Clark, who provided attendees with this list of reading material on the new models that destinations are adopting to remain competitive. A particular trend is for "distributed leadership", which draws on experts from business, academia, the start-up community, and a wide range of institutions, rather than relying on elected policymakers and their officials. This strengthens the potential role of Business Events leaders as connectors and catalysts within leadership teams.

Primer on Distributed Leadership:

<https://www.mtdtraining.com/blog/distributed-leadership.htm>

Greg Clark, Harvard Business Review:

<https://hbr.org/sponsored/2021/12/global-cities-desperately-need-new-leadership-models>

Greg Clark, Connected Places Catapult:

<https://cp.catapult.org.uk/article/the-century-of-cities/>

Leo van den Berg and Luis Carvalho:

<https://www.elgaronline.com/pdfviewer/full/edcoll/9781839107474/9781839107474.00007.xml>

Brookings Institution:

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/seizing-the-moment-for-place-based-economic-policy/>

Harvard City Leadership:

https://cityleadership.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/20250420-city-leader-guide-civic-engagement.pdf?_gl=1*1kayvks*_ga*MTY5MjEzZmZk2NS4xNzQyMTQyNjE3*_ga_FVJT3QBDZM*MTc0NTk0MDQ4MS4xLjAuMTc0NTk0MDQ4Mi41OS4wLjA