A report from the
IMEX Policy Forum 2019
Tuesday 21 May, InterContinental Hotel
Frankfurt, Germany
Introduction

The IMEX Policy Forum seeks to provide a collaborative global discussion platform, critical to the creation of policy that directly benefits the global meetings and business events industry.

At IMEX in Frankfurt 2019, the theme was "The business of placemaking – how can business events act as a catalyst in developing inspiring locations?" A total of 35 political representatives and policy makers from national and regional government organisations worldwide were among more than 130 participants.

The 2019 Policy Forum Programme included four key parts:

• A national government discussion group, in collaboration with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) – "Creating a place for business events in national strategic plans."

• A city workshop designed specifically for local, municipal and regional policy makers and destination representatives – "Business meetings and the innovation economy."

• A keynote speech from Dr Julie Grail, Managing Director of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) Business. As a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, Julie’s insight helped set the tone for an impactful and lively discussion.

• An open forum featuring a panel of industry leaders, presenting case studies from the perspectives of political, urban planning and destination stakeholders. The audience also contributed to the Q&A discussion, verbally and via the Slido platform.

These key parts were enhanced by the following:

• New Forum moderator, Ursula Errington, a former Sky News correspondent who lent her vast presenting experience and business journalism expertise to proceedings.

• During the Open Forum, attendees were engaged by a new innovation, the Slido audience response platform. A series of poll questions were asked, with the audience providing answers via mobile devices. Individuals could also submit their own questions, allowing key issues and discussion points to be gauged as the forum progressed – helping the panel to deliver more relevant content.
Overview and Summary

Rod Cameron, Executive Director, Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC)

The 2019 Policy Forum represented a major step forward for this long-standing event, in that it demonstrated how the conversation around business events has matured from one largely based on making arguments about its broader economic role and value, to one in which this role is acknowledged and the issue has instead become how best to implement the resulting understandings. It would be great to think this is all a result of our work as an industry - but in reality it is likely more a product of the fact that there is now a broad and growing realisation in many parts of the world that economies must evolve - and that what we do can complement and facilitate that evolution by supporting other sectors’ strategies and priorities, be they governmental, economic, professional or academic.

The bigger question has thus become about what specific structures, mechanisms and engagements need to be created and maintained to realise these strategic benefits on an ongoing basis. And in that respect, Forum discussions are increasingly focussing on the kinds of practical outcomes participants are looking for:

• Under the theme Cities and the Innovation Economy, the City Workshop discussions illustrated a growing appreciation of how business events can be strategically applied to economic evolution by facilitating critical components, such as knowledge transfer, talent acquisition and investment attraction.

• In the National Government discussion, the top issues to emerge were how to compete effectively in attracting the most strategically valuable events and what kinds of arguments would best support the investment required to do this – demonstrating that the value proposition is largely acknowledged by attendees and their main issues now revolve around practical implementation.

• The exploration of “Placemaking” in the keynote presentation and the Open Forum acknowledged the different kinds of factors associated with a positive image for business events and how an integrated effort is required to align these with other areas like tourism/leisure, business development and investment attraction, in order to optimise the benefits of a consistent impression to a range of visitors.

This more practical orientation is a very positive sign – and we can be confident that attendees at future Forums will be bringing examples of specific achievements along these lines back to the table, based on concepts and insights discussed in previous years. In that respect, the Forum will have more than fulfilled its primary role – acting as a catalyst for action based on the convergence of industry expertise and a growing appreciation by governments of the strategic advantages business events can deliver in support of realising their overall economic priorities.

Chaired by Martin Sirk, owner of Sirk Serendipity, this session was attended by national government ministers of travel and tourism, economic affairs, and any portfolio related to the meetings and events industry. This theme was considered broad enough to encompass the interests and needs of the extraordinary spread of countries represented – from those with a decade of meetings-related strategic planning, to those in the starting phase.

With representatives from 10 countries, ranging from the Philippines to Kenya, Uzbekistan and Estonia, a team of three industry experts facilitated discussions and provided pertinent examples and insights:
Split framework for discussion:

- Using the metaphor of The Iceberg, issues “above the waterline” related to the visible delegate and organiser expenditure generated by business events.
- “Below the waterline” examined impacts of business events such as knowledge exchange, lifelong learning, inward investment and capacity building, advancing healthcare and science, and using events to turbo-charge other policy priorities of governments.
- The first half of discussions focused primarily on “what is happening today”, while the second half addressed more aspirational future objectives.
- Two round tables had representatives from five countries, each supported by two experts, addressing specific priorities, challenges, new initiatives and tangible solutions for looking at particular issues.

Learnings

- Advice was offered around advancing agendas.
- Hot topics included the ideal way to set up and fund a national convention bureau – answer: no single solution works for every country.
- How best to incorporate data on business events into national statistics.
- Models exist for incorporating business events into economic development planning.
- How to understand the roles of a country’s tourism image and culture when selling to business objective-focused event organisers.

Conclusion

- Each participant left the meeting with tangible solutions for their own biggest challenges and a shared understanding of how to think strategically about the role business events can play in their country’s wider policy making.
2 City Workshop discussing
“Business meetings and the innovation economy”.

Professor Greg Clark CBE, the world-renowned advisor on cities and new industries who led the workshop, introduced the theme ‘Business meetings and the innovation economy’ to the participants - 25 local, municipal and regional policy makers and destination managers from around the world.

He highlighted how today’s urbanised economy is meetings-intensive because it requires so much co-operation and collaboration. Meetings are important because they stimulate the collisions of ideas that lead to the collaborations and innovation that drive the digital economy; they are part of the innovation economy.

Greg’s introduction prefaced case studies presented by:
(i) Sharon Landes-Fischer, Director of Strategy and Operations, Tel Aviv Global
(ii) Lyn Lewis-Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Business Events Sydney
(iii) Tracy Halliwell, Director of Major Events & Business Tourism, London & Partners

Sharon Landes Fischer, Tel Aviv Global & Tourism

The city’s economic vision and positioning as a global capital of hi-tech and innovation is a natural reflection of its identity; a city with no natural resources, but with city-wide free Wi-Fi, with a young population, an immigrant society, very entrepreneurial, with ‘a culture of daring’, encouraged and supported by City Hall.

While it is encouraging more multi-nationals to open R&D in city, the strategy also supports the local ecosystem and verticals and engages with the local community. Delegations, tours, soft landing services and an innovation visa are all elements of the economic development approach along with conferences and events. The new Tel Aviv Expo hosts technology and innovation events that are part of the drive to bring new business to the city.

Lyn Lewis Smith, Business Events Sydney

Sydney is totally dedicated to innovation and technology with an entire precinct dedicated to it to drive the creation of new technology and commercialisation of new products and services. Business Events Sydney bids for around 100 global meetings each year and wins 70% of them. Every meeting is strategically aligned with Sydney’s future-focused agenda.

Research demonstrates that the interaction between delegates at a conference leads to collaboration on innovation and the development of new goods and services, which leads to economic prosperity. A focussed innovation economy is built on the relationship between people, organisations and place that facilitates idea generation and advances commercialisation. This is exactly what global meetings do.

Research has shown that 91% of conference delegates agreed that the conference immediately exposed delegates to new and innovative ideas, and 93% to new and innovative knowledge. 83% of respondents from the local industry sector agreed that the conference enabled the local sector to showcase expertise to a global audience.

In five years BESydney secured global meetings bringing an estimated 300,000 delegates to the city.

Tracy Halliwell, London & Partners

London & Partners promotes London internationally as the best city in which to invest, work, study and visit. It is not just a Destination Management Organisation, or a Convention Bureau, but more of an economic development organisation. It is not just about winning more events for London, but creating the right economic benefit for London. This not only builds London’s reputation as a global city which attracts visitors, business, students and investment, but also as one that works with and supports Londoners.

For the last eight years London & Partners has been concentrating on certain sectors, gaining knowledge and insights, working with citywide stakeholders and building the story of London as a knowledge economy where ideas flourish and grow, and where convergence enables creative ideas to emerge.

The strategy has been to attract/grow/develop and promote events as a big driver and an industry that underpins economic growth. Many of the activities to attract and grow events are the very things being leveraged from events – those which help to showcase emerging talent and ideas, give a platform for scaleups, highlight opportunities for investment, enable knowledge exchange and ultimately build its reputation.

Connections are often made and networks developed while pulling a bid together which further strengthen the sector, help to build the economy and leave a legacy. For example, during work on the World Congress of Paediatric Cardiology & Cardiac Surgery, three London hospital teams, Evelina, Great Ormond Street and the Royal Brompton Hospital, collaborated for the first time.

Events animate the city and tell stories. London Tech Week is a successful event, created to showcase the city as a world-class hub of innovation uniting tech with talent. Media coverage of events contributes greatly to maximising their benefits.
Several participants raised how cities must be aware of and have strategies to respond to the increasing importance of climate change. Tracy Halliwell highlighted the first event London Climate Action Week in July 2019 as a focal point of the city’s approach.

There was also general agreement on the importance of cities integrating with national bureaux to promote economic development.

Questions from the audience to the panel

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Conclusion

After Greg Clark’s statement that meetings are an important part of the innovation economy because they stimulate the collisions of ideas that lead to the collaborations and innovation that drive the digital economy, each of the three case studies highlighted the valuable role events are playing in the economic development of the city. Research shared by Lyn Lewis-Smith testified to their effectiveness.

Engaging with and gaining the support of local stakeholders, both industry and community, has to be an essential element of a strategy. Involving local industries in events can also generate a valuable legacy in new and greater collaboration between organisations within the city.

Overall, the session demonstrated how business events, when integrated with and as part of a city’s economic development strategy and plan, can through knowledge transfer contribute significantly to the development of new industrial investments and the further growth of established assets.
Open Forum

The opening keynote address was delivered by Dr Julie Grail, Managing Director of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) Business and Senior Fellow at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. Julie is a leading expert in partnership and place management. She focused on breaking down the exact process of placemaking and what it means to the wider business and events industry, by addressing a few key principles:

**Place management and collaboration**

Once a city or area is identified as a place and is clear about what it wants to achieve, collaboration is key. Multiple stakeholders have to be in play, moving towards a joined-up voice for advocacy and lobbying – and within that, minor interventions and investments that formalise into BIDs. A commercial place looking to create an opportunity through this model will need to have a joint bank account for co-investment. This is done by inviting trading businesses in that area to jointly come together around a series of themes.

**Public sector and engagement of community – power to the people**

Of course, politicians, service providers and regulators are seeking to make a profit, but the most important people are those at a local level. Creative contributors, especially, must be involved from the beginning rather than ‘helicoptered’ in later. Different voices should include:

(i) Local resident associations
(ii) Conservation societies
(iii) Special interest groups
(iv) Elected council members
(v) Community voices
Places in crisis, in stagnation, or offering opportunity

Julie used a number of examples to demonstrate this, remembering that places are fragile:

**Salisbury (crisis):** An idyllic cathedral city, but in March last year that global image was damaged by the Russian nerve agent story. Nobody could have seen that coming, but how to respond? Through a catalogue of deep and broad economic recovery discussions at all levels of government and business sectors, to understand how to build the city back up.

**New York (stagnation):** The Times Square of today is so different from three decades ago. Many neighbourhoods of New York were in desperate need of investment and this came from the private sector – the tax dollars were not available in the public sector. This investment became the growth and evolution of the BID model in New York and other cities; the stagnation of a city and a need to invest their way out of it.

**Leeds (opportunity):** While opportunity is the easiest to see, it can be the most difficult to evolve. But Leeds, UK, is an example of developing mechanisms for collaboration. The city only adopted the BIDs model in 2015, but 1000 businesses co-invested in the Leeds bid company by paying a mandatory levy, so the joint bank account had £2.4m a year with other monies levered in. A shared vision to bring together a group of disparate initiatives around the vibrant cultural scene became an over-arching festival that filled a void. Year one (2017) saw a £150,000 investment in the start-up. The 2019 event (2-12 May) had a £350,000 investment from the bid fund, with 69 event partners, consuming the city.

Conclusion

The business of placemaking is a whole series of complex processes. The priority is to recognise the social relationships at the heart of any project – it’s not just bricks and mortar; it’s about people. Authenticity is represented by those in the local community. They may not have financial agility, but the power of that voice cannot be underestimated.

Places are fragile and one single user cannot operate in isolation. Collaboration is key and systems have to be put in place to engage all of the actors. Planning how to orchestrate this is complicated, but imperative. Far more can be achieved when working as a team.
The following panel of industry leaders responded to a number of key questions.

Panel:

**Professor Greg Clark CBE**, Advisor on Future Cities and New Industries (GC)
**Dr Julie Grail**, Managing Director of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)
**Geoff Donaghy**, CEO International Convention Centre Sydney (GD)
**Sharon Landes-Fischer**, Director of Strategy and Operations, Tel Aviv Global (SLF)
**Tracy Halliwell MBE**, Director of Major Events & Business Tourism, London & Partners (TH)

**Questions:**

**How do you define place in terms of brand development and collaboration?**

**GD:** We were privileged with a wonderful location in Sydney. The convention centre had served us well for 30 years, but had outgrown its purpose and design - so the state government took a brave decision to put it into a public-private partnership. It was an opportunity to use the venue to make a real difference. Our boundaries weren't physical, they were metaphysical, so we sought to engage immediate community, broader community and even the wider farming and wine-producing communities.

**SLF:** Tel Aviv doesn't really have an icon of the city (no Eiffel Tower or Tower of Pisa), so we ask ourselves what is our asset? The ambience, atmosphere, non-stop action environment and the residents themselves. With this in mind, we started to engage with the residents to make visitors more welcome. An example is the Eurovision Song Contest where our people had the chance to volunteer in welcoming visitors - thousands approached us. Our locals are an asset and we're co-working with them emotionally, but also digitally. We won the World Smart Cities Award 2014 (Smart City Expo and World Congress) and have an interactive digital platform to help engage with residents.

**Can events create new places or do they only benefit from existing places?**

**TH:** Events can absolutely create new places. The London 2012 Olympics took over the whole regeneration of the east side of London. We had to build a place in part, but also use our existing venues, i.e. seven events held at Excel. A whole new Olympic Park has grown with regeneration housing, new venues and even a cultural quarter.

**GD:** The venue hosts the event, but the experience and footprint is much broader. Think about what happens both inside and outside the venue. We at ICC Sydney have created a formal legacy programme of five different streams presented to event planners. We engage with first nation communities, start-ups, students, cultural performers, artists and poets. That engagement beyond the walls and boundaries of the venue goes towards contributing to place, and place contributes to events.
What are the best methods of engaging with local community around placemaking?

GC: There are many examples around the world that deliberately practice this, but there are a few key points:

(i) You have to demonstrate that the events industry creates amenities, infrastructure, services, places and opportunities for everyone

(ii) Animate that relationship to make it real. Examples include a community arts facility inside your innovation hall or a local sourcing strategy for your products

(iii) Invite people to play a role. Perhaps it’s volunteering, as per the Eurovision Song Contest in Israel, or the BID-type model where people are acting as civic guardians of place – there are many different ways of animating your community. But it takes a lot of thought, planning and creativity.

The Mobile World Congress in Barcelona has animated a whole community of tech entrepreneurs locally and the city has used that event to give itself an innovation brand. They’re not just being seen as a visitor destination, but also a business destination. This has played out with a number of school and university students also engaging.
What do you do if the number of visitors is no longer balanced with the local community and authenticity of the city?

SLF: In Tel Aviv we are not there yet, but as we’ve seen in the likes of Amsterdam, tourists are being told to go home. In Israel, Airbnb is very popular, but we are discussing the regulation of Airbnb in Tel Aviv to try and avoid conflict between residents and tourists. We are working proactively around this.

TH: Whilst placemaking, we must place manage to ensure enlightened engagement. There can’t be a focus on just one sector or location. Liverpool is an example with a conversation around visitor numbers vastly increasing in the last decade – particularly in relationship to cruise ships. The talk is around a tourism tax. Two BID models have been combined into one, covering retail and commercial areas. Let’s not do something separately that focuses on tourism and visitor numbers, without thinking about what’s going on in our streets.

GD: Balance and authenticity are critical but also subjective, so it’s important to have a formal structure where those value judgements can involve the commercial sector and positively impact the community.

GC: This is a much-discussed topic right now, a big debate in urban tourism. Low-cost aviation, socialisation of accommodation, urbanisation of entertainment and the experience economy story. There are three strategies that cities can adopt:

(i) Deconcentrate in terms of place by creating more locations

(ii) Deconcentrate in terms of time, thinking about different times of the year and days of the week when you can have tourists there

(iii) Place manage very actively, protecting public goods from spoliation and make a link between the users and payers

How do you protect the brand of your place from political and other damaging events (Brexit, civil unrest)?

TH: In Tel Aviv we do not explain the conflict to the world. We find our USP, advantages, good trade and take this to market. We talk about what we DO have to offer, continuing to send the messages we want to send.

GC: Branding activities associated with how you respond are crucial. If a city is part of some kind of turmoil, it’s how the city responds and the attitude it adopts – the degree of humanity in its branding. Understand the DNA of your city and always make it an evolutionary brand, rather than a static brand. Be proactive on your own identity, otherwise you are more vulnerable to external influences.

GD: Remember that brand isn’t names or logos, but the images and emotions recalled when someone sees your place or product. But how you react and respond, emotionally and honestly, is the key. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand is an example. Leadership is critical, but there must be plans and strategies in place.
How do you keep your appeal wide in a very competitive market?

**TH:** London means so many things to so many different people – you need people to tell you about the brand. We tell the stories and get under the skin of what London is about, the audience build the brand for us. But we also look at tone of voice combined with a huge amount of research about what resonates with people about London. It’s a city of creative energy, which can appeal across multiple markets. To be more specific, regarding an area or venue, unique spaces can be used. These include:

(i) Unusual venues, such as historical houses and castles

(ii) Pop-up venues used for different markets

(iii) With clever thinking look to utilise the night-time economy. Same venues and places, but a completely different market in a 24-hour city.

What are the biggest challenges around placemaking?

**JG:** This is difficult stuff. Community/commercial/public sector have different modus operandi and it’s tricky bringing all this together. We have to be bold and believe in leadership. Early criticism in East Coast America was around concerns of displacement/privatisation of public space. Ultimately, if you can define a wider strategy that pays dividends to all partners, BIDs will happen. It’s co-investment, NOT expenditure.

**SLF:** There is often a clash with stakeholders and conflicting powers. If you’re a wonderful placemaker, it can become expensive with a lack of room. The cost of living in such cities is rising, so what do you do? In Tel Aviv, we value the artists. Wherever we have empty assets and places, we let them work there, keeping their artwork in non-residential areas where we have space. A city without artists is not worth a lot. We have to find a way to help them stay – and one example is affordable housing, with perhaps a municipal currency. How can we help with this cost of living? You cannot lose the young people.

**GC:** Good placemaking is a kind of asset that doesn’t have a champion, or budget. In most local government constitutions, it says you must represent the people, regulate the environment and provide services – it doesn’t say “you must make place”. Health, education, transport or housing are all factors. It’s nobody’s responsibility, which is why you have budgetary problems. Land ownership is fragmented across a large number of private sector players. You must create a joint bank account, by getting everybody who has an interest in the place around the same table.
Are we seeing different trends in terms of venues and events?

**TH:** It’s driven by audiences. We have to be smart and deliver – they’re looking for something different. Is it about coming to a specific city or a venue? – what does the customer want? Venues have to be multi-purpose enough to suit the audience level. Is it an indoor-outdoor space relating to wellness and quality of life? Are there places where people can do things off the beaten track? Pop-up venues are huge in London, with sewer tours and rooftop gatherings. Basically, collecting experiences, rather than paying money for ‘five star’. You have to be as agile as you can.

**GD:** Convention centres can be monolithic concrete curtains that divide a place and precinct, so we broke ours up into three different buildings: convention centre, exhibition centre and large theatre, with pathways from residential to recreational parkland. We used lots of glass, with an inside-out and outside-in visual. Unless it’s a place for the community, delegates won’t get the best experience for the four/five days they’re with us.

**GC:** There are three different scenarios:

(i) Occasional hosting of a global event that travels around, which gives you an opportunity to reveal things about your place the world didn’t know

(ii) This is different from the likes of (music festival) SXSW that gradually evolves. You pace the evolution of the event according to what the market can sustain – and develop to a high-investment, high-return equilibrium

(iii) The one-off event that you think is extraordinary, telling the world, then finding out that perhaps the idea doesn’t gain the traction you want. Be careful of sinking money into something that doesn’t work. Visitors want authenticity

How influential is the issue of sustainability in relation to how event organisers make decisions on venues?

**TH:** People absolutely care about this and therefore so must we. It’s easier than ever before to make changes – lots of avenues, so there’s no excuse. The sea-change will be when corporates or the end user are willing to put the pressure on destinations and event organisers to actually do it. Stakeholders don’t want to pay over the top, but prices are coming down. Adapt or die.

**GC:** We are getting much better at sustainable sourcing and construction. But how sustainable is it to have an industry that relies on people flying? An emerging innovation is the event that is simultaneously physical and virtual, conferences where streaming occurs at the same time. Face to face is huge, but what about the sustainability issue?

What about cities that have no established leisure or business structure – how do you even get started on the placemaking journey

**JG:** Place management doesn’t need to be about growth – it can be about change. There are a number of small-to medium-sized towns failing currently because of retail transformation and high-street challenges. A place won’t die, it will change. It’s about managing that change. Everywhere has something, and the saviour will be increased residential development to bring another new community into the space.

**GD:** The core is about serving your citizens. Create places that your citizens like and eventually visitors will like them too. Manage this relationship and build around it.
The IMEX Policy Forum 2020 will take place on Tuesday 12 May

To register your interest please email natasha.richards@imexexhibitions.com