AEO & AEV CEO Summit: What do political, economic and leadership trends mean for business events?

Presentation highlights

Every event sits within a much bigger picture. Economic conditions change. Governments set new priorities. Organisations have to adapt. The presentations at this year's AEO & AEV CEO Summit explored what those changes could mean for business events in the months ahead.

The economy: a stronger start than expected, followed by fresh uncertainty

Henry Glasspool, EY Parthenon

Henry Glasspool showed how quickly economic forecasts can change.

The UK entered 2026 in a stronger position than many had expected. Growth was improving, inflation was easing and further interest rate cuts looked increasingly likely.

That picture changed following renewed conflict in the Middle East. Higher energy prices and continued uncertainty have weakened growth forecasts and pushed expectations for interest rate cuts further into the future.

For the events industry, however, the more important story is consumer behaviour.

Household incomes have largely recovered, but discretionary spending has not. Consumers are spending more on essentials and saving more of what remains. Hospitality, leisure and live events are all competing harder for the same pound.

Higher-income households are not cutting back because they have to; many are choosing to save instead. The opportunity still exists, but organisations need to give people a compelling reason to spend.

What this means for leaders

- Expect customers to examine value more closely.
- Keep reviewing pricing and commercial models rather than assuming demand will return on its own.
- Plan for a range of economic scenarios, including weaker-than-expected conditions.

Westminster in flux: what the political picture means for events

Nick King, Henham Strategy

Nick King examined the changing political picture and what it means for business events.

Henham Strategy's work with the Events Industry Alliance remains focused on securing a dedicated government strategy for business events. That means building recognition of the sector's economic contribution and the role it plays in delivering the UK's Industrial Strategy.

The expected arrival of Andy Burnham as Prime Minister could bring fresh opportunities. Devolution is likely to move further up the agenda, giving local and regional government more influence over economic development. For business events, that could mean stronger local support for attracting investment, visitors and major events.

Changes in ministers mean relationships will need rebuilding, employment reforms could increase pressure on employers and proposals such as a mandatory overnight visitor levy remain firmly on the table.

What this means for leaders

- Keep making the economic case for business events.
- Build relationships beyond Westminster, particularly with regional and local decision-makers.
- Be ready to respond quickly as government priorities develop.

Go slow to go fast: helping teams adapt

Hannah Alexander-Wright

The final presentation shifted the focus from external pressures to something leaders can influence directly: how their teams work together.

Hannah Alexander-Wright introduced a four-step framework - **Pause, Disrupt, Realign, Sustain** - that encouraged leaders to step back, challenge assumptions and create lasting change. It gave delegates a practical approach to take back to their organisations and set the tone for the roundtable discussions that followed.

Practical exercises brought the framework to life. **Stinky Fish** encouraged teams to raise concerns that everyone senses but nobody has voiced. The **Role Expectation Matrix** helped colleagues compare what they expect from one another's roles, exposing assumptions before they became frustrations.

Make time to stop, talk openly and tackle issues before they grow into bigger problems.

What this means for leaders

- Build regular opportunities for teams to stop, reflect and discuss what's working.
- Deal with difficult conversations early, before issues become harder to resolve.
- Make role clarity part of everyday management, particularly during periods of change.

Bringing the presentations together

Together, the presentations explored the forces shaping business events and how leaders can respond.

Uncertainty is becoming part of everyday business. Political priorities can shift quickly, economic forecasts can change in a matter of weeks and organisations need to be ready to respond.

Value also matters more than ever. Whether making the case to government or persuading customers to buy, organisations need to communicate clearly why they matter.

While leaders cannot control politics or the economy, they can shape how their organisations respond. Businesses that question assumptions, adapt quickly and keep learning will be better placed to deal with whatever comes next.

These presentations provided the context for the organiser and venue discussions that followed in the roundtables, where Hannah Alexander-Wright's **Pause, Disrupt, Realign, Sustain** framework helped shape the conversation. The key discussion points from those sessions are summarised separately.