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Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EVIDENCE BRIEF · SUSTAINABILITY

The Footprint Nobody Can Compare

Can event sustainability be measured consistently?

Sustainability ranks last among the short-term business issues of exhibition companies, while clients and regulators increasingly ask for the footprint of an event. Festival measurements show that the environmental impact of events can be calculated, but different methods produce results that differ by a factor of 22 and cannot be compared across events.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026 Worldwide, Sweden, UK, Australia

5 studies · 2 industry sources

event sustainability | event carbon footprint | ecological footprint | triple bottom line | event impact assessment | sustainable events | festival travel emissions | greenhouse gas reporting | net zero events | event evaluation

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KEY FINDING

Events can measure their environmental impact, and visitor travel is the largest part of it. There is no common method yet: the choice of method changes the result many times over, and figures from different events cannot be compared.

Five studies covering 2,021 respondents and 580 publications, 2007–2024; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Sustainability ranks last on the industry's agenda.** In July 2026, sustainability accounted for five percent of the most important short-term business issues named by exhibition companies worldwide, the lowest share of all issues[1].
- **Event evaluation counts money first.** Of 20 key impacts of special events identified from 309 evaluation sources, 13 were economic, six social and one environmental[2].
- **The method decides the number.** The same festival footprint of 773 tonnes of CO2 equivalent was valued at 9,276 euros at the EU carbon price and at 209,374 euros as a cost of land, a 22-fold difference[3].
- **Events are mainly a travel problem.** Visitor travel accounted for 61 percent of the ecological footprint of the 2012 Hay Festival in Wales[4].
- **Results cannot be compared yet.** Inconsistent greenhouse gas protocols make footprints of different events impractical to compare, and no study reports the financial costs and benefits of greening[5].

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FOR THE MARKET

Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Organisers & associations	Visitor travel is the largest and most controllable part of an event's footprint, which makes it the first item to measure. Every published figure is more useful with its boundary and method stated.
Venues & destinations	A standard data pack for organizers, covering energy, waste, catering and transport links, would let footprints of events at the same venue start from the same inputs.
Investors & advisers	Event footprints calculated with different methods are not comparable. The protocol, boundary and year determine whether two figures can be read side by side.

Sustainability on the industry agenda

Sustainability ranks low among the exhibition industry's current priorities. In UFI's Global Exhibition Barometer of July 2026, sustainability accounted for five percent of the most important short-term business issues named by exhibition companies, the lowest share, and for 10 percent of medium-term issues, in joint fifth place[1]. The first reporting cycle of the Net Zero Carbon Events initiative in October 2025 showed a wide gap between pledges and published reduction plans[6].

Pressure is coming from outside the industry. European sustainability reporting rules push large organizers, venues and their corporate clients toward audited figures, and buyers increasingly ask for the footprint of an event before booking it.

A footprint that cannot be compared across events cannot be benchmarked, priced or improved against peers.

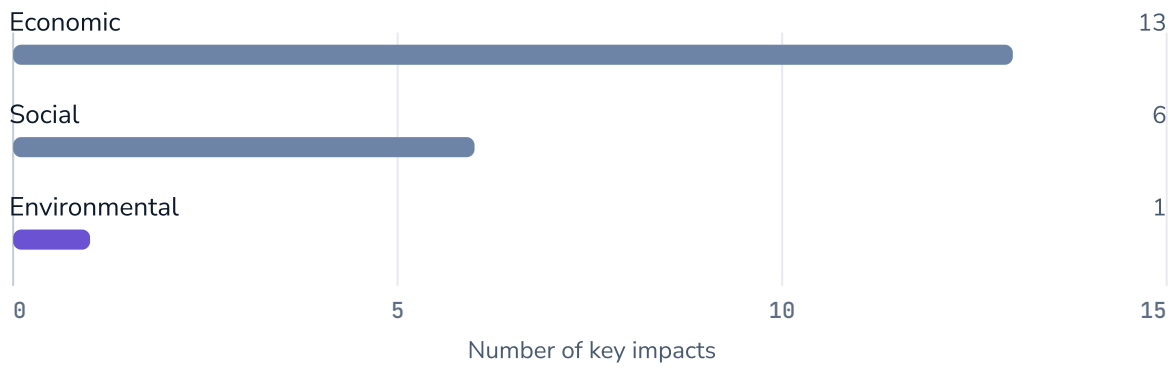
What event evaluation counts

Event evaluation grew out of economic impact studies for public funders, and it still shows. An analysis of 309 publications and impact assessments, reviewed by a panel of 38 experts, identified 20 key impacts of special events: 13 economic, six social and one environmental[2]. Only two of the 309 sources focused on the environment[2].

Recent research shows the same imbalance. In 24 articles on environmental sustainability published in the journal Event Management between 2011 and 2023, definitions of sustainability were inconsistent or missing, evaluations of actual performance were rare and only one article covered business events[7].

Key impacts of special events identified in evaluation practice, by type

Number of key impacts out of 20.



Source: Sherwood (Victoria University) · Release date: 2007 · Region: Worldwide; Australia · Number of sources analyzed: 309 · Expert panel: 38

Three impacts in one currency

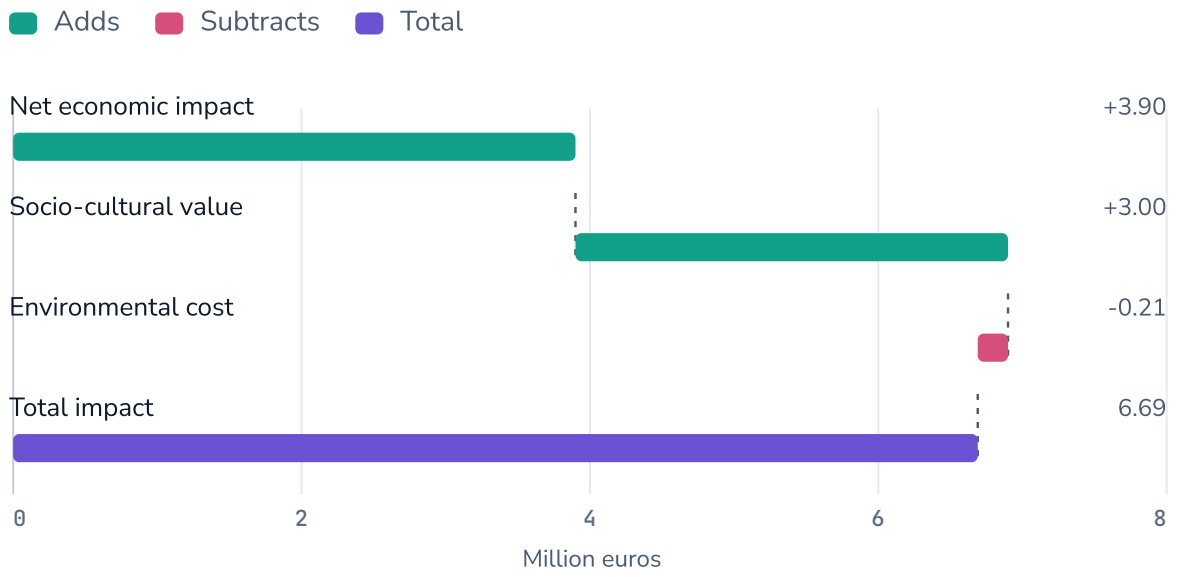
Converting all impacts into euros makes the environment almost disappear. For the Way Out West festival in Gothenburg in 2010, the net economic impact

amounted to 3.9 million euros, based on a survey of 719 visitors[3]. Residents' willingness to support the festival, valued at around six euros each across 507,000 residents, gave a socio-cultural value of 3.0 million euros[3]. The environmental cost came to 0.21 million euros, under four percent of the total impact of 6.69 million euros[3].

The same footprint looks very different under another measure. If sustained for a year, the festival's resource use per visitor would be more than six times the world's average footprint per person[3]. Market prices make that impact look negligible, and the choice of price changes the result by a factor of 22: the festival's 773 tonnes of CO2 equivalent cost 9,276 euros at the EU emissions trading price of 12 euros per tonne, or 209,374 euros when valued at the cost of the land needed to absorb them[3].

Economic, socio-cultural and environmental impact of the Way Out West festival in Gothenburg in 2010

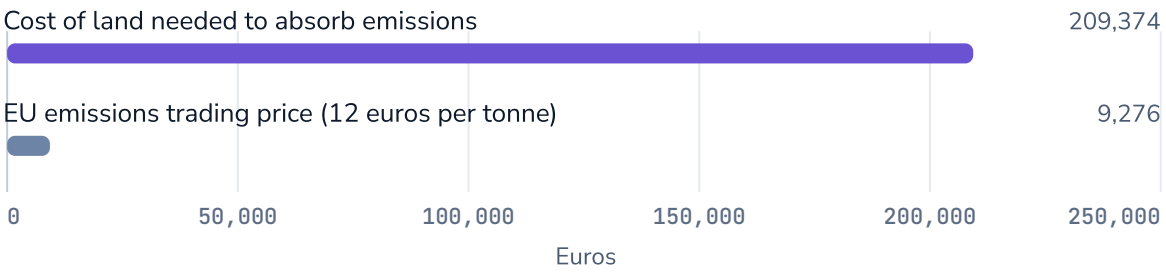
In million euros.



Source: Andersson & Lundberg · Release date: 2013 · Region: Sweden (Gothenburg) · Number of respondents: 1,367 (719 visitors; 648 residents)

Value of the Way Out West festival's carbon footprint in 2010, by valuation method

In euros. Footprint of 773 tonnes of CO2 equivalent.



Source: Andersson & Lundberg · Release date: 2013 · Region: Sweden (Gothenburg)

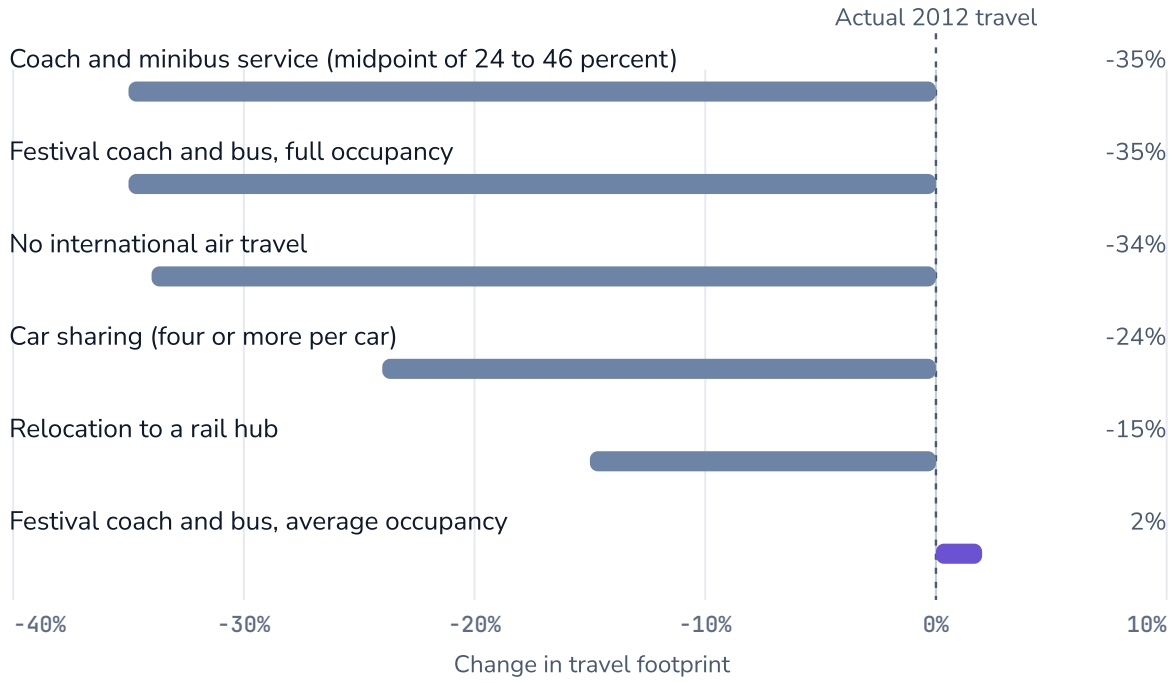
Visitor travel as the main lever

A footprint becomes useful when it guides decisions. Visitors to the 2012 Hay Festival in Wales generated an ecological footprint of 3,300 global hectares, 1.8 times what they would have used at home in the same period[4]. Travel accounted for 61 percent of the footprint; of the 71 million passenger kilometers traveled, 59 percent were by car and 35 percent by air[4]. Only 7.5 percent of the distance was covered by rail, coach, bus or bicycle[4].

Modeled travel scenarios showed where reductions lie. Removing international air travel would cut the travel footprint by 34 percent, a coach and minibus service by 24 to 46 percent, car sharing by 24 percent and relocating to a rail hub by 15 percent[4]. A festival coach and bus service would cut it by 35 percent when full but raise it by two percent at average occupancy[4].

Change in the travel footprint of the Hay Festival in Wales under modeled travel scenarios

Change compared with actual 2012 travel.



Source: Collins & Cooper · Release date: 2017 · Region: United Kingdom (Wales) · Survey period: 2012 · Number of respondents: 654

Why results do not compare

Two careful measurements do not yet make a benchmark. A review of 247 studies on environmental sustainability in the event industry found at least six measurement tools in use, from carbon footprints and life-cycle assessment to waste audits and ecological footprints[5]. Studies differ on whether attendee travel, accommodation or suppliers are included, and checklist models, the easiest to apply, record what was done rather than what changed[5].

The review concludes that inconsistent greenhouse gas protocols make results across events impractical to compare, and it found no study reporting the financial costs or savings of greening[5]. Around 89 percent of lead authors published only once on the topic, so methods rarely build on one another[5].

Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2007 and 2024: impact valuations of the Way Out West festival with 719 visitor and 648 resident respondents, an ecological footprint of the Hay Festival from 654 visitor surveys, and three reviews covering 309, 247 and 24 publications[2–5,7]. Neither festival measurement covers a trade fair or congress, and no study compares the same event across methods. Socio-cultural values rest on one resident sample. The Net Zero Carbon Events result is taken from the publisher's summary.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 UFI. (2026, July). Global Exhibition Barometer, 37th edition [Survey report]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from ufi.org — First-hand

2 Sherwood, P. M. (2007). A triple bottom line evaluation of the impact of special events: The development of indicators [Doctoral thesis]. *Victoria University, Melbourne*. — First-hand

3 Andersson, T. D., & Lundberg, E. (2013). Commensurability and sustainability: Triple impact assessments of a tourism event [Journal article]. *Tourism Management, 37, 99–109*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.12.015 — First-hand

4 Collins, A., & Cooper, C. (2017). Measuring and managing the environmental impact of festivals: The contribution of the Ecological Footprint [Journal article]. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 25(1), 148–162*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1189922 — First-hand

5 Cavallin Toscani, A., Vendraminelli, L., & Vinelli, A. (2024). Environmental sustainability in the event industry: A systematic review and a research agenda [Journal article]. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 32(12), 2663–2697*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2309544 — First-hand

6 Net Zero Carbon Events. (2025, October). Reporting results, executive summary [Report]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from netzerocarbonevents.org

Reported

7 Mair, J., Trendafilova, S., & Werner, K. (2024). Environmental sustainability in event management: A critical commentary [Journal article]. *Event Management, 28(3), 477–484.* https://doi.org/10.3727/152599524X17046754077334

First-hand

The evidence

5 studies · 2 industry sources

SAMPLE

Two festival measurements with 2,021 respondents; three reviews of 580 publications and a 38-member expert panel

YEARS

2007–2024 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Festival impact valuation and ecological footprint calculations in Sweden and the UK; reviews of event sustainability research

About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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