

A new era for events and experiences



Understanding the immediate and longer-term impact of Covid-19
on the format and organisation of events and experiences.
December 2021

Introduction

RIBA at 66 Portland Place recently undertook research to understand the immediate and longer-term impact of Covid-19 on the format and organisation of events and experiences.

Rather than speculating about what's ahead, we asked corporates for their thoughts on how they'll be engaging with their people and clients going forward so we can try and grasp the implications of Covid and how the need to mitigate its spread is affecting the industry.

The quantitative study was carried out between September and October 2021 with responses from corporate organisations across sectors including hospitality, banking, marketing, IT, the creative arts, education and construction.

This report points to a new outlook and rules for the events industry, which is underlined by an acceptance that there will be no return to pre-pandemic business as usual, at least not yet, and Covid-safe protocols will continue to have a significant influence on the organisation of events and experiences for the foreseeable future.

Event organisers will need to adapt to new methods, metrics and influences when engaging with clients and teams: a new era for events and experiences.



A see-saw effect

Face-to-face events are acknowledged for helping to engage, educate and entertain audiences. As expected, the majority of events that took place prior to the pandemic were in-person occasions (95.8%); with fully virtual events utilised by none of the survey respondents. This of course, was turned on its head when the pandemic hit with digital platforms holding a monopoly over all events.

This changed once again as we edged our way out of lockdown in the summer of 2021, with a large majority of respondents – almost 80% - indicating that they had already hosted or planned to host an in-person event before the turn of the year. Of the 20% who said they hadn't yet hosted an in-person event, two thirds opted to remain virtual, whilst 33% indicated that their events were on hold this year.

With the Government lifting all Covid-19 restrictions in late July, venues were no longer required by law to implement any Covid-safe protocols, such as social distancing, mask wearing and reduced numbers. This report however reveals that despite no legal requirements to implement any Covid-safe protocols, corporate organisations still have a very close eye on Covid-19, and their duty of care to employees.

Of the 20% of respondents who have continued with virtual events, their reasons for this included the level of Covid cases, budget, delegate preferences and travel restrictions on overseas guests.

If your upcoming events are virtual, what has been the biggest influence on choosing this format?



60%

Covid cases are too high



60%

It is more cost effective



60%

Our delegates prefer not to travel



40%

We can reach more attendees



0%

Our delegates aren't double vaccinated

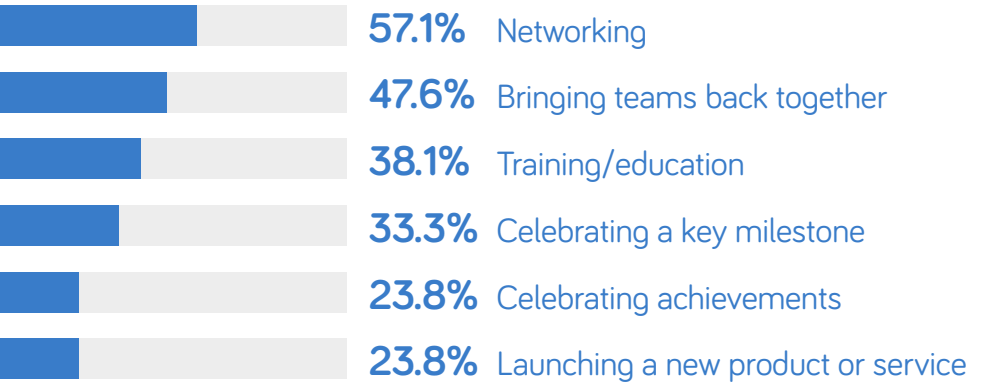


20%

Other – travel restrictions

In person events vs virtual events

Respondents were asked to indicate the main objectives for their in-person event spends from August to December 2021 with networking and bringing teams back together the biggest priority, followed by training/education, celebratory events and client entertaining.



During the pandemic, the digital event format become a lifeline for many organisations, but it quickly became apparent that it was impossible to replicate the experience of in-person networking, client entertaining and teambuilding online.

Employee well-being, creating successful teams and positive employee and client experiences were impacted the most during the pandemic as corporates became largely reliant on digital communications and fought to build positive and successful remote working cultures. It is telling that when questioned on the type of events that they had organised or were planning before the end of the year, it was events that brought teams back together such as company conferences, AGM's and senior management meetings, as well as social events including summer parties and team building, that topped the list.



Long covid for events

"Getting our lives back to some sense of normal following the pandemic is a huge challenge and doing it in a safe and measured way even more so."

—Professor Malcolm Cook from Loughborough University

When Covid restrictions were lifted in late July, the onus was shifted to organisations and venues to make their own decision as to whether they implement any Covid protocols or guidance for their events following their own risk assessment.

The pandemic forced organisations into a balancing act of protecting the health and safety of their employees and clients while continuing their business operations under a new normal – and this is still the case months later. Duty of care has become a key determining factor in the organisation of events. And on the delegates' part, health and safety protocols are accepted by many as a necessary component of face-to-face events now.

When asked whether the implementation of Covid-safe protocols would influence their choice of event venue, half of respondents indicated that they would only consider a venue if it has demonstrated measures that help to mitigate risk, and 46% noted that they are working to the new 'guidelines' and consider these protocols a 'nice to have'. Just 4% of respondents said they would prefer a restriction-less environment and won't be swayed by procedures.

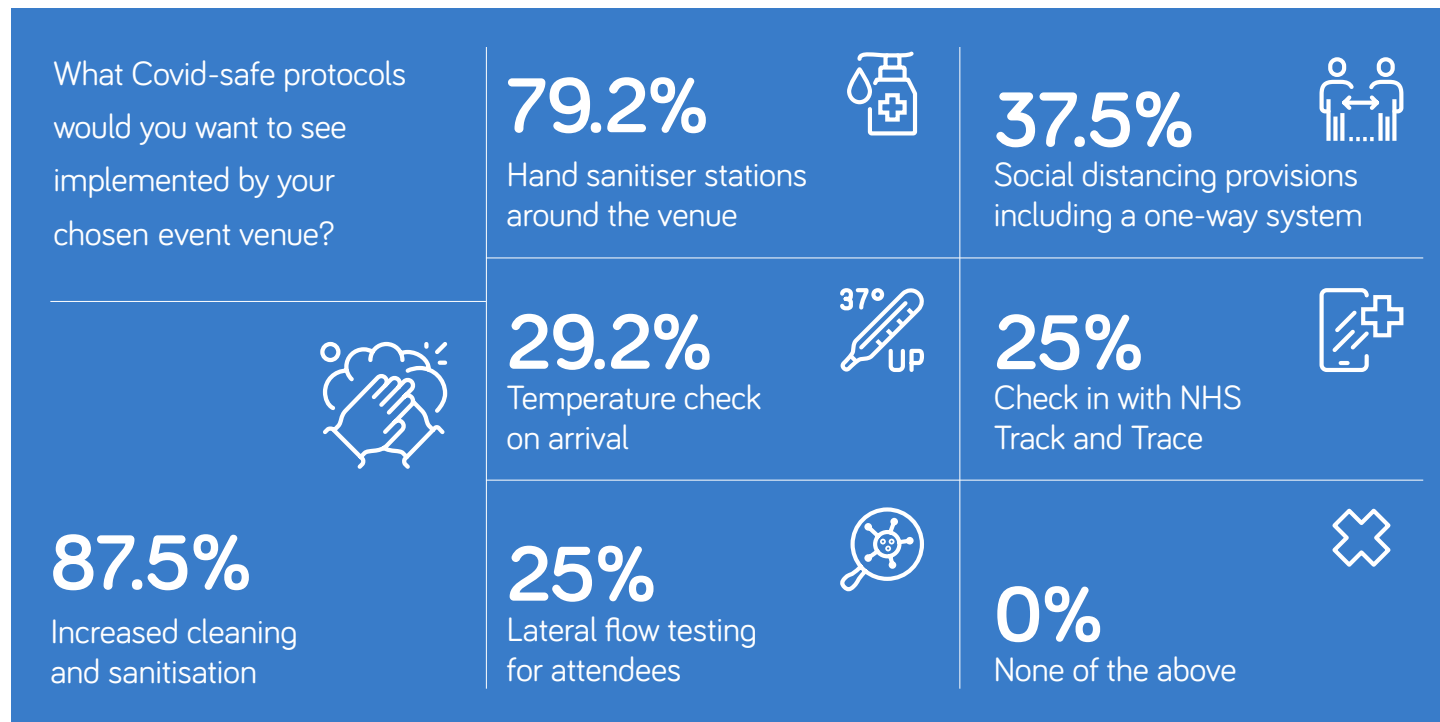


Respondents were asked what Covid measures they are enforcing for in-person events since the lifting of restrictions, regardless of whether their venue recommended them or not, and the results show that Covid continues to have a significant impact on the organisation of events, with just 25% indicating they would organise an event with no Covid precautions in place.

Reducing the number of guests was a priority for almost 55% of respondents, followed by social distancing, lateral flow testing and the wearing of face masks.

When asked what Covid-safe protocols they would like to see venues implementing as standard, increased cleaning and sanitisation was the primary focus, alongside hand sanitiser stations around the venue.

Social distancing provisions including a one-way system was requested by 37.5% of respondents, followed by temperature check on arrival, check in via the NHS Track and Trace app and lateral flow testing for attendees.



"We will easily adapt to these safety and health protocols as part of meeting with others in person at an event. These protocols may become a seamless part of the backdrop of events and barely visible to attendees as so many people have grown accustomed to promoting safety in their everyday lives."

— Jennifer Best, Forbes

A new way of working = a new way of meeting

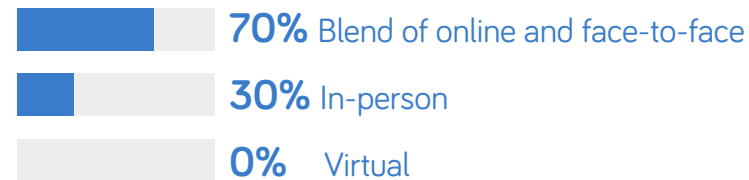
The survey highlighted that a hybrid routine of office and home is the evident new norm for many corporate organisations, with 60% of respondents now working in this way and just 4.2% back to a centralised office function. For an industry built upon face-to-face interaction, this will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect.

"After almost two years of working remotely, it will be nearly impossible to demand people return to the office." — Forbes

There is a marked desire to bring clients, partners, and teams back together in a face-to-face format; as we've already seen from the number of respondents returning to in-person events this year. However, the benefits associated with including an online element to an event such as cost savings, reaching more delegates and keeping delegates remote if they prefer, resulted in 70% of respondents predicating that their meetings will be hybrid in 2022.

When we consider that 80% of those surveyed stated that they expect their event spend to increase next year, events look likely to be back as a key part of the marketing mix for many businesses in 2022.

How do you envisage your events in 2022 onwards?



Despite the dramatic reliance on digital event formats during the pandemic and the significant cost savings and expenses associated with attending events, corporates remain focused on providing a format other than solely digital. Equally, despite many corporate organisations returning to fully in-person models over the last few months, it appears the longer-term strategy is a hybrid model that allows companies to reap the benefits of both in-person events and virtual events.

"One of the strongest ways for companies to protect their time, money and resources when planning a future event is to pursue the hybrid event model."

— Forbes

2022 and beyond

No matter the global situation, the event objective or format - engagement is an absolute requisite for businesses. Events, experiences and being able to engage with people is the lifeblood for conversation, creativity and commercial success.

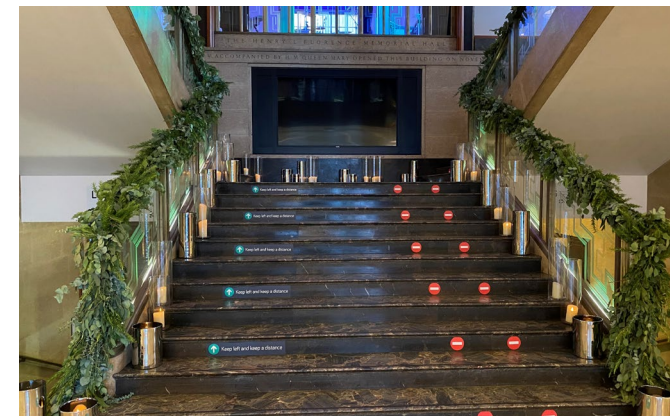
When the pandemic hit and when the world realised it was not going away anytime soon, the events industry, like many other fields, was forced to adapt or shut its doors. Digital platforms were utilised with virtual experiences becoming the norm. And in turn, a slew of untapped benefits were quickly realised – more cost effective, eco-friendly, the ability to reach more people, to name just a few.

However even with these benefits everyone missed the face-to-face connection that the industry is built upon. The value of in-person events lies in the opportunity to build relationships and communicate unhindered. There is still a strong need, perhaps stronger than pre-pandemic, for live, physical events for human interaction and business development.

Hybrid event models look to be the approach well past the pandemic. Attendees who prefer to go to a live, physical event have the option to attend, and those who prefer the convenience of online events or are unable to attend in-person can also participate.

Corporate organisations still have a very close eye on Covid-19 due to their duty of care to employees. As such, Covid protocols will continue to have a significant influence on the organisation of events and experiences.

The priority given to implementing Covid protocols by organisers and venues shows delegates that their safety and welfare has been addressed and they can comfortably return to in-person events.



2022 and beyond

What we are doing at RIBA at 66 Portland Place...

Since reopening in July, we have implemented several measures to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and keep our teams and guests safe. We request that all delegates and guests provide either a negative Lateral Flow test or proof of double vaccination, and our mia Track and Trace system must be used for all events. These measures have been well received by clients and guests who want reassurance they will be attending an event in a safe environment.

Understandably, events are currently being booked with much shorter lead times than pre-Covid. To help our clients navigate the organisation of last-minute events, we have created a range of 'Build Your Own' packages which feature pre-packaged F&B options and a selection of architecturally stunning rooms to suit different party sizes, budgets, and preferences.



To find out more about hosting an event at RIBA at 66 Portland
please contact the team at: venues@riba.org
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