DESTINATION GUIDE TO SUBVENTION

How to build a subvention programme from scratch, step by step



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Report at a Glance
From Financial Incentive to Strategic Driver for Sustainable Change

Who We Asked

115 destinations

55 associations

Surveys, in-depth interviews, and live workshops

Subvention Use Remains High, But its Role is Evolving

77% of surveyed destinations offer subvention

55% of associations depend on subvention

Associations are looking beyond financial assistance.

Mismatch Between What Destinations Offer and What Associations Need

Destination Priorities

Economic Impact

Delegate numbers or hotel nights

Sector alignment

Association Needs

- Financial support (87%)
- Tools to measure impact (66%)
- Sustainability guidance (53%)
- Local stakeholder connections (45%)
- Accessibility and inclusion support (34%)

Subvention as a Driver of Change: Momentum, But Not Yet Mainstream

91% of destinations do believe subvention can be a driver for positive change

Only 6% of destinations have fully integrated change-driven objectives into their subvention strategies

62% of associations believe subvention should help drive positive change.

Associations are ready, but many destinations are still in catch-up mode.

Key Barriers

Destinations

- Budget constraints (66%)
- Administrative burden and complexity
- Lack of political support or understanding of subvention's strategic value
- Difficulty measuring impact

Associations

- Lack of awareness of subvention availability (55%)
- Complex or inflexible application processes (41%)
- Limited internal resources to manage applications

From Transaction to Transformation

Subvention is no longer just about economic stimulus. For both, it is becoming a strategic platform for shared value. To fully realise this potential, subvention programmes must evolve!

Source: Conferli Subvention Market Study 2025

How to use this guide

Subvention is destination support (cash, services or access) offered to attract an international conference. Done well, it brings economic activity, knowledge, networks and visibility to a city. Done poorly, it fills hotel rooms for a few days and leaves nothing behind.

This guide is the follow-up to the Conferli Subvention Market Study 2025, in which we surveyed 115 destinations and 55 associations across Europe, Asia, North America and Oceania. That research showed a striking gap: 91% of destinations believe subvention can drive positive change. Only 6% have designed their programme to actually do that. The barriers were consistent: budget constraints, administrative complexity, political resistance, difficulty measuring impact. But the most common one was simpler than any of those: most destinations do not have a clear framework for how to start, what to offer, or how to defend it.

This guide is that framework.

It does not assume you have an existing programme, a large team or a big budget. It assumes you have a city, a set of goals, and a willingness to think strategically about what conferences can actually do for both.

Building a subvention programme requires doing things in the right order. Start with what your city has before deciding what to offer. Know which associations belong here before approaching them. Build your internal coalition before making external promises.

On the next page we show you a nine step approach. These nine steps take you from a blank page to a functioning programme. Work through them in sequence if you are starting from zero, or use individual steps as reference if you are improving something that already exists.



Who this guide is for

Convention Bureau directors and strategy managers setting up or redesigning a Subvention programme. City strategists who fund or govern destination support. Tourism boards evaluating where subvention should sit. Anyone who has ever been asked ‘why are we giving money to conferences?’ and needed a better answer.

Nine steps at a glance

Step	Task	
1	**Understand your city** Map the ecosystems, strengths and priorities that make your destination distinctive.	
2	**Map the association landscape** Find which international associations operate in your ecosystems and what they look for.	
3	**Define what you can offer** Starting from zero: map what you have, what you can offer, and how to build from there even with limited resources.	
4	**Build your internal coalition** Identify the departments, budgets and political champions you need.	
5	**Find and approach associations** How to identify prospects, make contact and start the conversation.	
6	**Design the support package** Structure the offer, set the conditions, and agree what both sides commit to.	
7	**Build and defend the business case** How to measure, report and justify the investment to funders and politicians.	
8	**Deliver, learn and improve** Managing the relationship, capturing outcomes and building a programme that gets better.	
9	**Communicate your offer** How to make sure the right associations know what you have, and want it.	

STEP 01 · Understand your city
What does your city actually stand for?

Before you can attract the right conferences, you need to know what your city genuinely offers, not what it says on the tourism website, but what is actually there. Strong subvention programmes are built on real assets: academic institutions, industry clusters, policy priorities, community strengths. This step is about honest self-assessment. The more specific you are, the more targeted your programme can be.

Map your ecosystems

An ecosystem, in this context, is a cluster of connected activity in your city: a sector, a discipline, a community of practice. Ecosystems are where conferences live. Your job is to find which ones are strong enough to support a credible bid.

Questions to answer

- What are your city's strongest academic institutions and research areas?
- Which industries are headquartered, clustered or growing here?
- What does your city have that other cities in your region do not?
- Where do international visitors already come to your city, and why?
- What problems is your city currently trying to solve? (housing, health, sustainability, economic transition, digital infrastructure)

What a strong ecosystem looks like

- At least one major university or research centre active in the field
- Industry presence: companies, start-ups, scale-ups or a chamber of commerce with sector focus
- A policy or civic priority that aligns with the ecosystem topic
- Local professionals who could engage with an international conference in their field, ideally already active within a certain association
- Existing events, networks or communities that show the ecosystem is active



Practical tip

Interview five people: a university rector or research director, a chamber of commerce representative, a city planning official, a local industry leader and a civic organisation. Ask each: what is this city trying to become in the next ten years? The overlaps between their answers are your ecosystems.

Identify your city's priorities

Your city government has strategic priorities: economic development plans, sustainability targets, public health goals, educational ambitions. These matter for subvention for two reasons: they help you identify which conferences align with what the city actually needs, and they help you build the political case for funding.

Sources to consult

- The city's strategic development plan or vision document
- Coalition agreement or municipal policy programme
- EU or national funding priorities your city has applied for
- Department-level plans: health, education, sustainability, economic development

Why this matters

When a conference aligns with a city priority, you can bring in departments beyond tourism. That means more budget, more political support, and a stronger impact case. A medical conference in a city trying to become a health innovation hub is a completely different proposition from a medical conference that just happens to land in that city.

Your role: also identify the mismatches

Reading the city's strategic priorities is not the same as accepting them uncritically. Part of a CvB's role is to identify where the official priorities and the actual conference opportunity do not line up, and to say so.

A city government may have declared a focus on, say, digital technology and smart cities. But your research may show that your destination's academic institutions, industry base and international networks are far stronger in life sciences or sustainable construction. Chasing conferences in an ecosystem where your city has little real depth is a losing strategy, regardless of what the policy document says.

The opposite is also true: destinations often underestimate strengths they have not formally named as priorities. A city with a long history in textile manufacturing may not have 'circular fashion' in its strategy, but it may be exactly the right place for a conference on sustainable materials.

- Bring your conference intelligence into city strategy discussions, not just the other way around
- If your research shows a stronger conference opportunity in a different ecosystem than the official priority, make that case internally, with evidence
- The CvB is often the only body in the city with a clear view of where international conference activity is growing, which associations are looking for hosts, and where the city genuinely competes. That is a strategic asset, use it.

Know your assets

Beyond ecosystems and priorities, identify the physical and institutional assets you can offer. These will form the basis of your in-kind support package.

Venues & infrastructure		**Networks & access**
Convention centres and congress halls		Political contacts: ministers, mayors, MEPs
University auditoria and campuses		Academic networks and research institutions
Cultural venues, heritage sites, unusual/ unique spaces		Industry associations and chambers
Hotel capacity and preferred rate agreements		Community organisations and NGOs
Transport links and accessibility		Local media and communications infrastructure



STEP 02 · Map the association landscape
Which associations belong in your city?

International associations are the primary market for subvention. They hold congresses that rotate between cities, often on multi-year cycles. Understanding how they work, and what they look for, is essential before you make any approach.

How associations choose a host city

Lots of international associations use a formal bidding process. A local chapter, national member society or motivated individual proposes a city to the association's board or congress committee. The board evaluates bids against criteria that typically include:

- Venue quality, capacity and technical specification
- Hotel availability and pricing for delegates
- Accessibility: international flight connections, visa requirements
- Local chapter or member presence (who is championing the bid)
- Financial support offered by the destination
- Destination appeal: tourism, culture, safety, prior conference reputation
- Potential for legacy: local engagement, community impact, scientific or professional relevance



Key insight

Most associations do not start with the destination, they start with the local champion. Someone inside the association who is based in or connected to your city proposes it. This is the person you need to find. No local champion, no bid.

Identify associations that fit your ecosystems

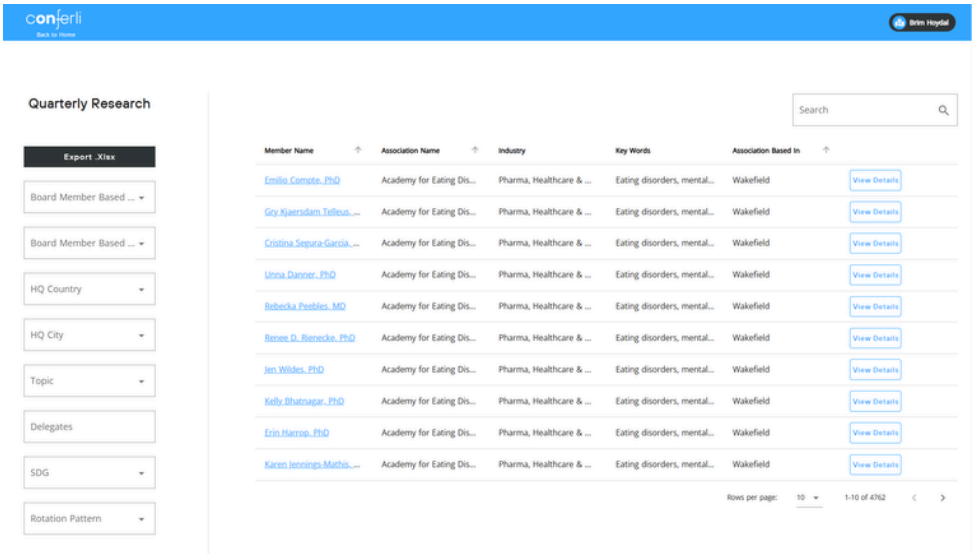
Start with your ecosystem map from Step 1. For each ecosystem, look for international associations active in that field. The goal is a target list of 10–20 associations per ecosystem that are plausible matches for your city.

Where to find them?

- **Union of International Associations (UIA) database:** the broadest global source, covering over 70.000 international organisations. Useful for identifying associations by subject area, geography and meeting frequency.
- **ICCA database:** tracks international association meetings that have rotated between at least three countries and have a minimum number of attendees. Strong for identifying congresses that are actively in the market for host cities and finding where they have been before.
- **BoardBase by Conferli:** a database of board members and decision-makers within international associations, mapped to their geographic location and field. For each association, it also shows congress history, rotation patterns and upcoming bid windows. Use it to find who holds decision-making power within a target association, whether any of them are based in or near your city, and when the next opportunity to bid is open.
- **Your own academic institutions:** ask faculty which international associations they belong to or lead.
- **Local industry:** ask companies and sector bodies which international associations they engage with.
- **National member societies:** many are affiliated with an international parent association that rotates.

Qualifying questions for each association

- Does this association rotate its main congress between cities? (Not all do)
- What is the rotation cycle? (Typically 1-4 years)
- How large is the congress? (Delegate numbers, duration, revenue)
- Is there a local chapter, national society or member in our city who could champion a bid?
- When is the next open rotation? Are we in the right window to bid?
- Have they been in our region recently? (Associations often avoid returning too soon)



Understand what associations actually need

Associations have operational needs and strategic needs. Subvention addresses both, but the associations that are worth winning for a destination are those whose strategic needs align with what your city can offer.

Operational needs		Strategic needs
A venue that fits their size and format		Access to policymakers and decision-makers
Hotel rooms at rates their delegates can afford		Connections to local industry or research partners
A PCO (professional congress organiser) they can work with		Opportunities to grow membership in the region
Financial support to offset costs or reduce delegate fees		Visibility in new markets or geographies
Clear and simple application processes		A legacy, something that lasts beyond the event
Reliable local contacts who know the city		A city that understands and cares about their field

Research finding

55% of associations are not aware of what subvention is available to them. 41% find the process too complex. This means the associations most worth attracting are often not applying, because no one has told them what is on offer or made it easy to engage.

STEP 03 · What can I offer?
Starting from zero: what does your city actually have?

The most common reason destinations do not develop a subvention programme is not a lack of ambition. It is a belief that they have nothing to offer. No budget. No free venues. No political connections. No famous attractions.

This belief is almost always wrong, but understandable. When you look at what larger or more established destinations offer, it is easy to conclude that you cannot compete. The truth is that you are not trying to replicate what they do. You are trying to identify what you have that they do not. This chapter is about finding that.

The honest starting point

Most destinations that say they 'have nothing to offer' mean one of three things: (1) they have no cash budget, (2) they do not have obvious flagship venues, or (3) they have not yet mapped what they do have. The third is the most fixable, and it usually reveals more than expected.

Before you decide what to offer: do the inventory

Do not start from what other destinations offer. Start from what exists in your city. Go through each category below and write down what you actually have, not what you wish you had.





Spaces	Any publicly owned or institutionally owned space that could host a meeting, reception or session. University lecture halls, city council chambers, a museum after hours, a library reading room, a converted industrial building, a sports facility with a conference wing. Do not only think of purpose-built congress venues.
People	Individuals who can open doors, make introductions, add credibility or share their expertise. The mayor, a university rector, a hospital director, a prominent local researcher, a CEO of a sector-relevant company, a civil society leader. These people are an asset even if they never show up in a budget.
Networks	Connections your city already has to the outside world. Partner city agreements, EU funding networks, academic consortium memberships, national association affiliates, alumni of your local universities now working internationally, diaspora communities with roots in your city.
Knowledge	What your city knows about and is working on. Ongoing research at local universities. Policy experiments the city government is running. Social programmes being piloted. Community organisations doing innovative work. This is often invisible because it is not packaged, but it is exactly what an international association in the relevant field wants access to.
Services	What your administration and its partners can provide. City staff time, tourism board logistical support, local transport connections, promotional reach through city channels, translation or interpretation capacity, access to local media, student volunteers from local universities.
Story	What your city represents. A city in transition: industrial, demographic, ecological. A city with a specific heritage. A city that is deliberately small and affordable. A city building something new. Story is not spin, it is context that makes a conference feel like it belongs somewhere, rather than anywhere.



Practical tip

Do this inventory with other people, not just your CvB team. Sit down with someone from the university, someone from the chamber of commerce, someone from the city's social or sustainability department. They will name things you have never thought of as an 'asset'. That is the point.

When you have no cash budget

The most common constraint. Many destinations, especially smaller cities, new CvBs or those in public sector budget-cut cycles, simply do not have a cash subvention budget. Here is what to do: Start with what you can influence, not what you can fund.

Cash is one tool. Access, introductions and in-kind support are others. A destination with no cash but strong political will and genuine ecosystem connections can put together an offer that a cash-rich but disengaged destination cannot match.

- Free use of a city-owned space: even a city hall meeting room for a side event, has real monetary value and signals genuine engagement
- A letter of support from the mayor costs nothing and can be the deciding factor for an association choosing between destinations
- An introduction to the right researcher, ministry official or industry leader can open doors the association has been trying to open for years
- Staff time from your CvB to help with local logistics, supplier introductions and city navigation is a real contribution that saves the association money, time and stress

Build the budget incrementally

If you have no budget now, that does not mean you cannot have one. Start small and build the case.

- Win one conference with a non-cash offer. Document what it brought to the city: economic activity, visibility, community engagement. Use that evidence to make the case for a small cash budget next year.
- Ask whether other departments (health, education, economic development) could co-fund support for a conference in their area. A health conference supported partly by the public health department is a model that works even where tourism budgets are thin.
- Look at national or EU funding streams: some programmes fund the development of international conference capacity in regions that are building it for the first time.
- Start with smaller, specialist conferences rather than large flagship congresses. Smaller associations often need less cash and respond more to genuine fit and engagement.



The honest conversation to have with an association

If you have no cash, say so early. Do not build a relationship on a promise you cannot keep. Instead, lead with what you do have: 'We cannot offer cash subvention at this stage. What we can offer is (specific things). We are genuinely committed to making this work. Here is what that looks like in practice.' An honest offer of limited support is worth more than an inflated offer that falls apart later.

When you have no obvious venues

A dedicated congress centre is an asset, but the absence of one does not make subvention impossible. Some of the most successful conference bids are won precisely because a city offered a venue that was unexpected, memorable and deeply connected to the conference topic.

Look beyond purpose-built congress spaces

- University aula, lecture theatres and faculties: often available, usually well-equipped, always connected to the academic world
- Museums and cultural institutions: many actively seek conference revenue and offer unique settings
- City hall and municipal buildings: free in many cities for events with civic relevance, and a powerful signal of city commitment
- Renovated industrial or heritage spaces: increasingly valued by associations that want their conference to feel like it is somewhere specific
- Hotels with conference facilities: smaller congresses (under 300 delegates) often run entirely within a hotel
- Outdoor and hybrid venues: depending on the conference format, programme and season

Be honest about what works for which size

Every destination has a natural conference size. A city with university lecture halls and a 200-room hotel capacity is not the right host for a 2.000-delegate congress, and trying to be is a waste of everyone's time. But it may be an excellent host for a 150-delegate specialist meeting in the exact field those lecture halls support.



Size fit matters more than size ambition

A smaller conference in a city where it genuinely fits will produce better outcomes (for the association, the delegates and the city) than a large conference squeezed into an undersized destination. Know your natural size range and target accordingly.

When you have no political connections

Political access: ministers, senior officials, policy influence, is a powerful form of subvention. But many destinations, especially those new to conference attraction, do not have established pathways to these levels.

Start with what you do have access to

- Local government: even a city councilor or a department head attending a session sends a signal of civic engagement. It does not need to be the minister.
- University leadership: rectors and research directors carry real weight in academic fields. An association in a scientific or academic field will notice if the local university president attends their opening plenary.
- Industry: a sector-relevant company CEO or chamber of commerce president can open industry networks that an association may have been trying to access.
- Civil society: for associations working in social, environmental or community fields, connections to relevant NGOs and grassroots organisations can be more valuable than political access.

Build the connections before you need them

Political and institutional connections are built over time. Start now, before you have a specific conference to bid for.

- Meet with the relevant department heads at the city or regional level. Explain what subvention is and what it can do for their area. Ask them to nominate a contact person for future conference opportunities.
- Attend local events in your target ecosystems. Show up at university symposia, industry roundtables, chamber of commerce meetings. Build the relationships before you need a favour.
- Create a small 'conference ambassador' network: 5-10 senior local figures who agree to be available for a welcome speech, a session participation or a hosted dinner when the right conference comes. This costs almost nothing to set up and transforms your offer.



When you have very little of anything

Sometimes the honest answer is: our city genuinely has very limited assets to offer right now. The budget is minimal, the venues are constrained, the political connections are not there yet. What then?

Focus on one thing, not everything
A destination with limited resources is better served by one strong, specific offer than by a long list of weak ones. What is the single most compelling thing your city can put on the table? It might be a genuinely unique venue. It might be the presence of a world-leading researcher. It might be that your city is the only place in the region where a particular community exists. Find that one thing and lead with it.

Start smaller than you think
A city with very limited resources should not begin by bidding for large international congresses. Start with:

- Regional or national meetings of associations that also have international editions; build the relationship at the smaller level first
- Satellite or pre-conference events alongside a larger congress in a nearby city; you get the delegates and the exposure without needing full congress infrastructure
- Academic workshops and specialist seminars; often 30-100 people, very low infrastructure requirement, but high value to the participants and strong evidence of city engagement
- Working groups and committee meetings of international associations; small, regular, relationship-building

Be honest about your stage
There is no shame in being early in the development of a conference destination. Many cities that now have strong programmes started with almost nothing. What distinguishes them is not the size of their initial offer, it is the honesty of it and the consistency with which they showed up.



What associations remember

Associations talk to each other. The cities that get referred are not always the ones with the biggest budgets. They are the ones that were easy to work with, did what they said they would do, and made the conference feel like it was genuinely wanted. Those things cost very little.

A decision guide: matching your offer to what you have

Use this table to identify what kind of offer is realistic given your current situation. Be honest. Start where you are.

Your situation	What you can offer	Where to start
No cash, but I have venues and political access	Strong in-kind and access offer. Lead with that. Be specific about what access means: names, departments, what meetings are realistic.	Mid-size specialist congresses (200-600 delegates) in your ecosystem strengths. Full non-cash offer with clear euro values.
No cash, some venues, limited political access	In-kind offer focused on venue and services. Supplement with local network connections: universities, industry bodies, civil society.	Smaller specialist meetings (50-200 delegates). Academic workshops. Working group meetings. Build the track record first.
Small cash budget, limited venues, limited access	Cash offer supplemented by whatever you can genuinely commit to. Do not over-promise. One specific non-cash element is better than five vague ones.	Regional meetings. Satellite events. National editions of international associations. Start the relationship at a smaller scale.
No cash, no usable venues, no political connections	Honest conversation about your current stage. Focus on one unique thing: a person, a place, a community, a story. That is your offer.	Very small meetings (under 50 people). Committee meetings. Site visits. Famtrips for associations considering the region. Relationship-building, not bidding.
Good cash budget, strong venues, strong political access	Full offer: cash, in-kind, access, co-programming. You are ready for a formal subvention programme. Focus on fit and impact, not just capacity.	International flagship congresses in your strongest ecosystems. Invest in long-term association relationships, not just individual bids.



The most important thing

Start with what you have. Do not wait until you have the budget, the venue or the connections you think you need. The destinations that build strong subvention programmes over time are the ones that started honestly, showed up consistently, and learned from every interaction, not the ones that waited until everything was in place.

STEP 04 · Build your internal coalition
Who do you need, and how do you get them?

Subvention cannot be run by the CvB alone. A programme that delivers real value to the city requires budget, political cover and delivery capacity from across the organisation. This step is about building the internal coalition before you make any external promises.

Who you need		What you need from them
Tourism department: primary funder and political home		Budget contribution, KPIs beyond hotel nights
Economic development: sector growth, investment, jobs		Budget contribution, commitment to act on findings
Education/ academic liaison: university connections		A named contact who engages with the programme, willingness to provide a speaker
Public health/ social services: for health-related congresses		A named contact, commitment to receive and act on findings
Sustainability/ environment: for climate and transition topics		A named contact, commitment to receive and act on findings
City communications: storytelling and media		Storytelling support , willingness to co-produce the impact narrative
Finance: budget approval and reporting		Budget approval, reporting framework
Mayor's office: political endorsement for high-profile bids		Political endorsement, letter of support, willingness to attend or host

Make the internal case

Different departments need different arguments. Know what matters to each one before you walk into the room.

- Tourism department: delegate numbers, hotel nights, economic multiplier effect, destination positioning
- Economic development: sector growth, investment attraction, local business visibility, job creation
- Education: student access, research collaboration, international network membership for local academics
- Health/ social: community access, public lectures, knowledge transfer, policy influence
- Mayor's office: headline visibility, international positioning, alignment with city strategy

The critical question to answer internally before approaching any association

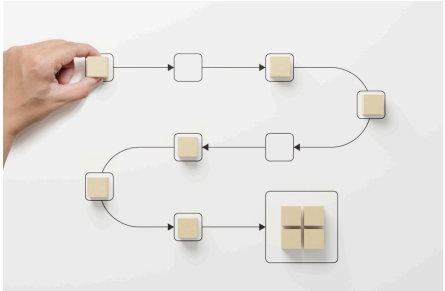
If this conference comes to our city, what changes? Not 'more hotel nights', what actually changes? If you cannot answer that question, you are not ready to make the offer. If you can, you have the beginning of a business case.

Set up governance for your programme

A subvention programme needs clear governance: who decides, who approves, who delivers, who reports.

Minimum viable governance

- A decision-making committee with representatives from the relevant departments
- Clear criteria for which conferences qualify for support
- A defined budget and a process for allocating it
- Named contacts for each active subvention agreement
- A reporting calendar: what gets reported, to whom, and when



When government will not fund it: the impact and legacy argument

One of the most common blockers for subvention programmes is a government or city council that does not see conferences as a legitimate use of public funds. "Why are we subsidising hotel stays for foreign academics?" is a question many CvB directors have faced.

The answer is not to argue harder for the same case. It is to change the frame entirely.

From cost to investment

A conference is not a cost to the city. It is an investment that pays back in multiple ways, most of which do not show up in hotel occupancy data. The table below shows how to reframe the case for a sceptical government body.

The old frame	The impact frame
We are giving money to attract delegates	We are investing in bringing international expertise to our city to help solve a specific local challenge.
Success = hotel nights	Success = policy influenced, research published, partnerships formed, community reached.
The tourism department benefits	Health, education, sustainability and economic development all benefit, and can co-fund.
It costs €50.000	It generates € X in local spend, plus knowledge, networks and visibility we could not buy otherwise.
We need to attract more conferences	We need the right conferences, the ones that align with what this city is trying to become.

The questions that unlock the budget

When approaching a government funder who is sceptical, lead with these questions rather than a pitch:

- What are the three biggest challenges this city is trying to solve in the next five years?
- Which international communities of practice are working on those challenges?
- What would it mean for this city if those people gathered here, engaged with local institutions, and left behind a concrete output?

These questions reframe subvention as a policy tool, not a tourism subsidy. They also force a more specific conversation about which conferences belong in this city, rather than a generic argument about business events.

Bring the departments that benefit

The tourism case for subvention is real but limited. The education case, the health case, the sustainability case and the economic development case are often stronger, and if those departments have a seat at the table when the budget is being decided, the argument changes fundamentally.

- A medical congress that brings 500 international clinicians to a city with a health innovation agenda: does the public health department have a view on that?
- An urban planning congress that will produce a policy brief for the city: does the housing or planning department want to be involved?
- A sustainability congress aligned with the city's net-zero goals: does the environment department have a budget line for it?

Our research shows that only 23% of destinations currently involve non-tourism stakeholders in subvention design. That is the gap. Closing it is not complicated, it requires a conversation that most CvBs have not yet had with the departments next door.



When the budget genuinely does not exist

If there is truly no budget available; not in tourism, not in other departments, not from national or EU sources, then non-cash subvention is your tool. A city with political will, institutional connections and a compelling story can win conferences that better-funded destinations lose. See Step 3 for how to build and value a non-cash offer. The impact argument matters here too: an in-kind offer tied to a named legacy outcome is far easier to defend than cash with no strings attached.

ImpactAIQ

Your event creates value.
Now let's prove it.

AI-Powered impact intelligence for events. *For destinations, associations, and event organisers*

Go beyond attendance and satisfaction.

Plan the change that matters, organise your evidence, and use AI-assisted analysis to understand your event's contribution.

MAKE A CASE FOR INVESTMENT
Show progress towards change that matters. Build a case for leaders, funders and partners.

BUILD STAKEHOLDER TRUST
Explain who benefited, what the evidence supports and where gaps remain.

GUIDE FUTURE DECISIONS
Use findings to guide your next decisions. Identify which activities to continue, adapt or strengthen.

From impact intention to evidence

1. SET UP YOUR PROJECT
2. MAP YOUR EVENT'S IMPACT
3. PLAN YOUR ACTIVITIES
4. DECIDE WHAT TO MEASURE
5. BRING YOUR EVIDENCE TOGETHER
6. COMMUNICATE YOUR IMPACT



Meet Q

Your impact assistant helping you structure your strategy and make sense of your evidence

EXPLORE IMPACTAIQ'S PILOT PROJECTS

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Ready to explore your event's impact?

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STEP 05 · Find and approach associations
How to start the right conversations

Having the right offer is necessary but not sufficient. You also need to find the right associations and approach them at the right moment. This step is about the outreach process.

Find your local champions

How to find them

- Ask your universities: which faculty members hold leadership roles in international associations?
- Ask your industry bodies: which companies are members of international sector organisations?
- Look at previous conference programmes: who from your city presented, chaired or served on scientific committees?
- Check LinkedIn for people in your city who list international association memberships or board roles
- Ask your national convention bureau, they may have lists of local ambassadors already identified
- Use BoardBase by Conferli it maps over 25.000 association board members worldwide, and grows every week. Use it to find who holds decision-making power within a target association and whether any of them are based in or connected to your city.



Support your champions

Once you have found a potential champion, do not just ask them to propose your city. Give them the tools to do it: a bid template, venue information, a letter of support from the mayor, data on your city, and your personal commitment to support them through the process. Champions burn out when they feel alone.

Make direct contact with associations

For associations where you do not have a local champion, direct outreach is sometimes appropriate. It is harder and slower, but possible.

The right moment to approach

- When the association has just announced or confirmed their next host city, start the conversation for the edition after
- When you have a specific connection to offer, not a generic pitch, but something tied to what the association is working on
- At an international conference in the field, industry events are where associations and destination professionals meet
- Through your national convention bureau, which may have established relationships with key associations

What to say in a first approach
Do not lead with the money. Lead with why your city makes sense for this association, right now. Then mention what you can offer. The sequence matters.

"We have been following your organisation's work on (topic) and we think (City) has something specific to offer: (one concrete thing). We would like to explore whether there might be a fit for a future edition of your congress."

Use the right channels

- ICCA and PCMA industry events; where associations and CVBs meet professionally
- Your national convention bureau; joint marketing and shared intelligence
- Academic conferences in your target ecosystems; where you will meet the people who lead associations
- LinkedIn and association websites; to identify the congress committee and outreach contacts
- Your own alumni networks; universities often have graduates in senior association roles



STEP 06 · Design the support package
How to structure an offer that works for both sides

A well-designed subvention package is not just a number and a venue. It is a structured agreement that defines what the destination offers, what the association commits to in return, and how both sides will know whether it worked.

Structure of a subvention package

What the destination offers	Cash grant, venue, services, access; with clear euro values attached to each element
What the association commits to	Minimum delegate numbers, reporting, community inclusion, legacy outputs; specific and measurable
The impact commitment	One or more named outcomes the conference is expected to contribute to in the city; agreed by both sides
Reporting and accountability	What gets measured, who measures it, when it is reported; for both sides

What the association commits to

Standard commitments

- Minimum number of delegates (with a clawback clause if significantly under)
- Post-event reporting: delegate numbers, nationalities, satisfaction data
- Use of local suppliers for a defined percentage of event expenditure
- Acknowledgement of the city's support in programme materials and communications

Impact commitments, ask for these

- Community access: free or discounted places for local students, professionals or community members
- Legacy output: a policy brief, research summary or community workshop delivered after the event
- Local engagement: at least one session co-designed with a local institution
- Knowledge transfer: findings shared with a named city department within a defined timeframe

Non-cash offers, what to know

Cashless and in-kind subvention is increasingly common, particularly where tourism budgets are constrained. It works, but only if both sides agree on how to value it and what it means in practice.

The rule for non-cash offers

Every non-cash element must have: (1) a clear euro value, agreed with the association. (2) A named person at the destination who owns its delivery. (3) A way to verify it happened. If any of those three is missing, the element is an aspiration, not a commitment.

The biggest blocker we consistently see in practice, confirmed by destinations and associations professionals at Impact Day 2026 in Szczecin[1], is a good idea with no named owner. Assigning internal ownership to each element of your offer is not bureaucracy, it is the difference between a promise and a plan.



1) Impact Day is an annual gathering of the global meetings industry organised by Meet4Impact in cooperation with GDS-Movement. In 2026 Conferli facilitated a working session on designing subvention for impact.

STEP 07 · Build and defend the business case
Numbers, story and long-term thinking

A subvention programme without a defensible business case will not survive the next budget cycle. This step is about building the evidence you need, not just to satisfy an auditor, but to sustain political support and keep improving the programme.

The two-language approach

Government bodies need two things to defend an investment: numbers and story. Numbers satisfy the audit requirement. Story sustains political support. A destination that can only offer one will struggle.

Numbers to collect		Story to build
Total delegate attendance		What changed in the city because of this conference?
Delegate nationalities and regions of origin		Who was reached who would not otherwise have been?
Estimated direct spend (accommodation, F&B, transport)		What did the city learn from hosting this field internationally?
Hotel occupancy rate during the event vs baseline		What relationship was created that did not exist before?
Number of local organisations engaged		What is the city now known for that it was not before?
Number of local participants (students, community members)		What policy, programme or initiative was influenced by the congress findings?
Local supplier spend as a percentage of total event cost		
Legacy outputs delivered (reports, workshops, publications)		

The ROE (Return on Experience) question

Before you bid, ask: what has this conference brought to the previous three destination cities? If the association can answer that question with concrete examples, you have the start of your business case. If they cannot, you have identified a gap in their programme that your city can help fill, and a way to differentiate your offer.

What to measure, and when

Most destinations measure at one point: immediately after the conference. That captures activity, not change. Outcomes take time. Build a reporting structure that tracks at multiple points.

- Before the conference: baseline data on local industry, academic output or community capacity in the relevant field
- During the conference: attendance, local participation, community engagement
- Immediately after: delegate satisfaction, economic activity, local supplier data, media coverage
- 6 months after: follow-up collaborations, publications, local community outcomes
- 18 months after: policy changes influenced, long-term partnerships established, repeat visits or referrals

Reporting to funders

Different funders need different reports. Know your audience before you write.

- Tourism funder: delegate numbers, economic impact, hotel occupancy, media reach
- Economic development funder: local business engagement, supplier spend, sector visibility, investment attracted
- City government/ mayor: headline narrative, international positioning, community benefit, strategic alignment
- EU or national programme: SDG contribution, sustainability metrics, cross-border collaboration, knowledge transfer



STEP 08 · Deliver, learn and improve
Building a programme that gets better every time

A subvention programme is not a series of isolated transactions. It is a long-term strategy. Each conference you support should teach you something that makes the next one better.

Managing the relationship

Once the bid is won and the agreement is signed, the real work begins. How you manage the relationship during the conference determines whether the association comes back, refers others, and fulfils their commitments to the city.

Essentials

- Assign a named CvB contact for the duration of the partnership, not just the event itself
- Build regular check-ins into the timeline, one year out, six months out, three months out, during, and post-event
- Make introductions early, connect the association with local partners before the programme is set
- Be present at the conference, someone from the city should attend, engage and be visible
- Thank and recognise the local champion, they are your most valuable long-term asset

After the conference: close the loop

Most subvention programmes focus on winning the bid and running the conference. Few invest in the post-event phase. This is where the best programmes differentiate themselves.

- Collect all data within 30 days of the conference closing
- Follow up with the local champion and the association's congress committee
- Deliver the legacy commitments you made, before you ask the association to deliver theirs
- Write and distribute the impact report; to your funders, to the association, and to the local community
- Identify which elements of the programme worked and which did not
- Ask the association formally: would you recommend this city to others? Would you consider returning?

Build a portfolio, not a pipeline

The most effective subvention programmes think in portfolios: a mix of large and small conferences, across multiple ecosystems, at different stages of the relationship. A portfolio approach is more resilient than chasing individual large events and gives you more data to improve from.

- Balance large flagship congresses (high visibility, higher cost) with medium and smaller specialist meetings (easier to win, more agile, often better alignment with city priorities)
- Track your win rate by ecosystem; where are you strongest? Where are you losing?
- Identify repeat opportunities; associations that have been before and could return, or that have sister organisations in the same field
- Build long-term relationships with 5-10 associations per ecosystem rather than constantly seeking new ones



STEP 09 · Communicate your offer
How to make sure the right associations know what you have to offer, and want it

The most common reason associations do not apply for subvention is not that they are uninterested. It is that they do not know what is available, or they find the process too confusing to bother with. 55% of associations in our research cited lack of awareness as their primary barrier. 41% said the application process was too complex.
This chapter is about closing that gap. How do you communicate your offer clearly, to the right people, in the right places, so that the associations you want to attract actually come to you?

Know your audience before you communicate

Subvention communication is not a press release. It is a targeted message to a specific person who has a specific problem. Before you design any communication, answer these questions:

- Who makes the decision about where to host the congress? (The board? A congress committee? A single president or secretary-general?)
- Who first proposes a city? (The local champion: this is your primary audience, not the association's central office)
- What does this audience know about subvention? (Often: very little. Do not assume familiarity with the term or the concept)
- What problem are they trying to solve? (Budget pressure, delegate growth, legacy, access to a specific region)

Your communication should speak directly to the person holding the bid proposal, not to the events industry in general.

Your bid book

The bid book is the primary tool for communicating your subvention offer to an association that is actively choosing between destinations. It needs to be specific, credible and easy to evaluate.

What to include on subvention

- The total value of your offer: cash and in-kind combined, with a clear breakdown
- What each element covers (venue, transport, welcome reception, marketing, cash grant) and what it is worth in euros
- Any conditions attached to each element: stated clearly, not buried
- What you need from the association in return: minimum delegates, reporting, community commitments
- Evidence of delivery: a previous event you supported and what actually happened

How to present it

- Put the total offer value in a single clear figure near the top; associations compare offers side by side and need to see the headline number quickly
- Break down cash and in-kind separately. Many associations can only count cash as income in their financial planning; in-kind is valued differently
- Avoid jargon. "Subvention" means different things to different people. "Financial and in-kind support" is clearer
- Include a one-page summary. Bid books are long; the subvention section will be skimmed first
- Name the contact person for subvention questions; a named individual is more credible than a generic email address



What makes a bid book stand out

Most bid books describe what the destination offers. The ones that win describe what the destination and the association will achieve together. Show the association what their congress could look like in your city, with specific local connections, a named legacy outcome, and a clear sense that you understand their field.

Your website and online presence

Associations research destinations independently, long before they make contact. Your website is often the first place they look. Yet most CvB websites make it difficult to find out what subvention is available, how to apply, and who to contact.

What your website needs

- A dedicated page for meetings and conferences (not buried in general tourism content)
- A clear statement of what support is available: cash ranges, in-kind options, access to networks
- Eligibility criteria stated plainly: size of event, type of organisation, timeline
- A simple application process or an invitation to make contact, with a named person and a response time commitment
- Case studies: two or three specific events you have supported, what you offered, and what happened
- Testimonials from association contacts who have worked with you, peer credibility matters more than your own claims

What to avoid

- Vague language: "we offer tailored support" tells an association nothing
- A process that starts with a lengthy application form. Many associations will not start an application without first having a conversation. Make it easy to reach a human being.
- Content that is only updated when you remember to. Outdated information destroys trust.

Proactive outreach

Most associations will not find you. You need to find them. Proactive outreach is the most effective way to reach associations that are the right fit but have not yet thought of your city.

Channels that work

- Industry conferences and trade shows: IBTM World, IMEX, PCMA Convening Leaders, and sector-specific events in your target ecosystems. Show up where your target associations are, not just where other destinations go.
- Direct email or LinkedIn outreach: a short, specific message to the congress manager or association president. Lead with your city's fit for their field, not your offer. The offer comes second.

- Your national convention bureau: they often have relationships with associations you do not yet know. Ask for introductions, not just referrals.
- Academic and professional networks in your city: the fastest way to reach an international association is through one of their members who already lives/ works in your city. These local champions are your best ambassadors.
- Association databases: Union of International Associations (UIA), ICCA and BoardBase by Conferli let you search for associations active in your target sectors. Use them to build a target list, then work the list systematically.

What a good first message looks like

A first outreach message to an association should be short, specific and personal. It should not lead with a list of what your city offers. It should lead with why your city makes sense for this association, right now.

Example opening

"We have been following (Association)'s work on (specific topic) and noticed that your next congress rotation is open. (City) has (one specific thing that is genuinely relevant (a research cluster, a policy environment, a community)). We think there could be a strong fit. Would you be open to a short conversation?" Then, in the conversation: what you can offer, what you are asking for, and what the association could achieve here that they could not achieve as easily elsewhere.



What to communicate about impact

If your subvention offer includes an impact or legacy component: community access, co-programming, policy connections, communicate it explicitly. Do not assume associations will infer it from a list of in-kind items.

- State what local institutions are ready to engage: not "we have universities" but "the Faculty of Public Health at (University) is interested in co-hosting a session on your congress's theme"
- Name the political connections you can offer: not "access to government officials" but "we can arrange a briefing with the Deputy Minister for Health"
- Describe what local community access looks like in practice: "we will provide 50 free delegate places for professionals from community health organisations in the city"
- Show what legacy has looked like before: if a previous congress produced a policy brief that was used by the city, say so. Evidence beats claims.



The communication principle

Associations choose destinations they trust. Trust is built through specificity, consistency and follow-through. A city that says "we will connect you to the Mayor and the Head of the University" and then delivers those meetings will be recommended to other associations. A city that promises them and does not deliver will not. Your communication sets the expectation. Your delivery builds the reputation.

This is what possible looks like

Six destinations - Six different approaches - One shared direction.

91% of destinations believe subvention can drive positive change. Only 6% have designed their programme to do that. The destinations below are in the 6%. They are not bigger or better funded than the rest. They just decided to build differently.



Hamburg
No cash. All intent

Hamburg does not offer a cash grant. They offer marketing, venue access, logistics support and, the part that matters, introductions to the right people in the city. Every element is chosen to embed the conference into Hamburg's ecosystem, not just host it.

Take-away: In-kind support is only as valuable as the thinking behind it.

The Vienna Meeting Fund targets January, February, March, April, July, August, November and December only. Not the busy months, the quiet ones. Events that also achieve green certification get extra support. 700 conferences funded since 2021. €8 million deployed. Up to €60.000 per event. ROI measured, reported, renewed.

Take-away: Where you point the money determines what kind of conferences you get.



Vienna
Cash that shapes behaviour



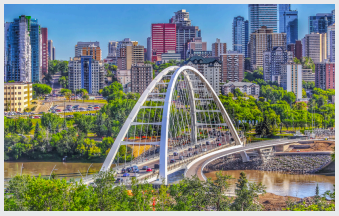
Flanders
Show us your plan first

Flanders does not publish a standard grant. They ask associations to submit a vision: how will your conference be more sustainable and impactful? If it is credible, they fund it: flexibly, tailored to what the event actually needs. The application is part of the design.

Take-away: Asking the question changes the answer.

ICAF provides up to $1 million per event: but only for conferences in six national priority sectors. It does not fund events after confirmation. It funds bids, with a formal letter of support that changes the competitive balance before the decision is made. Available only to destinations already investing in international business events.

Take-away: National funding works when it amplifies local capacity, not replaces it.



Canada
National strategy. Local delivery



Wales
Four pillars. No exceptions

Every application is evaluated against Place, Planet, People and Profile. Sustainability and legacy planning are not encouraged, they are required. For SQLBits, support funded chaperones, chill-out zones, wellness sessions and Welsh cultural integration. The conference committed to return.

Take-away: A clear framework, applied consistently, makes subvention defensible, to politicians and to associations.

The Legacy Investment Fund supports events aligned with six city growth sectors. The winning bid for the International Play Association World Conference 2026 did not promise to 'benefit the knowledge economy'. It promised that international researchers would engage with local educators and planners working on play-based urban design. The award-winning Margaret Mahy Playground is steps from the venue. 1,000 delegates. First time in the Southern Hemisphere.

Take-away: Name the outcome. Don't describe it.



Christchurch
Specific beats generic

"You do not need Canada's budget to use Flanders' thinking. You do not need Vienna's infrastructure to use Christchurch's approach to specificity. Start with the principle. Build the programme around it."

Quick reference: a checklist for each stage

Step 1: Understand your city

☐ We have mapped at least three ecosystems with real assets in our city
☐ We know the city's strategic priorities for the next 5 years
☐ We have inventoried our venues, networks and political contacts

Step 2: Map the association landscape

☐ We have a target list of associations per ecosystem
☐ We know the rotation cycles and bid windows for our priority targets
☐ We have identified potential local champions for each target association

Step 3: Define what you can offer

☐ Our offer includes at least one element beyond cash
☐ Every element of our offer has a euro value attached
☐ We know which elements are funded from which budgets

Step 4: Build your internal coalition

☐ We have identified and briefed the key departments we need
☐ We have cross-department budget and political endorsement for our programme
☐ We have governance: a decision committee, criteria and a reporting structure

Step 5: Find and approach associations

☐ We have supported at least one local champion with a bid toolkit
☐ We have attended at least one industry event in our target ecosystem this year
☐ We lead with fit and relevance, not with the money

Step 6: Design the support package

☐ Our agreement includes commitments from the association, not just from us
☐ Every non-cash element has a named owner at the destination
☐ We have agreed at least one named impact outcome with the association

Step 7: Build the business case

☐ We have a numbers case and a story case, not just one
☐ We are tracking outcomes at 6 and 18 months, not just immediately post-event
☐ Our report format matches what each funder actually needs to see

Step 8: Deliver, learn and improve

☐ We have a named CvB contact managing each active relationship
☐ We close the loop after every conference: data, report, follow-up
☐ We are building a portfolio, not just a pipeline

Step 9: Communicate your offer

☐ Our website has a clear, up-to-date page on available support with a named contact
☐ Our bid book states total offer value, breakdown of cash and in-kind, and conditions
☐ We have a target list of associations and a proactive outreach plan
☐ We lead with fit and relevance in every first contact, not with the money

A final note

Subvention is often treated as a transactional tool: money in, conference out. The destinations that get the most from it treat it differently. They think of it as a strategic investment in what their city is becoming, and they choose conferences accordingly.
That does not mean every conference needs to change the world. It means knowing why you are supporting each one, what you expect from it, and whether it delivered.
The questions at the heart of a good subvention programme are simple: What does this city stand for? Which conferences belong here? And what do we want to be true about our city that is not yet true?

Start there. The rest follows.

How Conferli can help

Building a subvention programme is strategic work. It requires understanding your city's ecosystems, knowing which associations are in the market, designing offers that hold up internally and externally, and building the evidence to defend the investment over time. Most CvBs do not have the time or the dedicated research capacity to do all of that from scratch.

Conferli works with destinations at every stage of this process. We can help you map your city's conference ecosystems and identify which international associations are the right fit. We can give you access to BoardBase, our database of over 25.000 association board members mapped to geography and field, so you can find the local champions already sitting in your city. We can support you in designing your subvention framework, structuring your offer, and building the business case for your funders.

Some destinations need support across the full programme. Others need one specific thing: a target list, a market analysis, a bid strategy for a single association. We work both ways.

If you want to talk about what that could look like for your destination, schedule a meeting here.

Conferli is the neutral connector between associations, destinations and venues in the global conference ecosystem.

This report is developed with the participants of Impact Day/ GDS Forum 2026, Szczecin, Poland.
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THANK YOU FOR READING

Questions or suggestions, please contact us



NIENKE VAN DER MALEN
CEO CONFERLI
NIENKE@CONFERLI.COM



BREGJE FRENS
CCO CONFERLI
BREGJE@CONFERLI.COM

conferli