

Annual Conference

Monday 18 September 2023

Meet Our Host



Mark Simpson

Mark Simpson is one of Belfast's best known broadcasters and conference hosts. He has covered major political, business and sporting events for the past 25 years for the BBC, at home and abroad. From the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 to Referendums, Elections and Presidential visits, he has reported on every major news event over the last quarter of a century. He was previously a journalist at the Irish News, News Letter and Belfast Telegraph newspapers. He is a retired rugby player and former triathlete, most often found at weekends swimming in the sea off the County Down coast.

Meet Our Speakers



Neil Gibson

As Permanent Secretary, in the Department of Finance (DoF) Neil is responsible for a portfolio of major services to the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

This includes the delivery of the Executive's budget (c.£16bn pa), procurement delivery, HR, shared public services in IT, property management, statistical services and rates collection. He also has management and responsibility for DoF budget and financial expenditure (C.£210M) and 3,791 staff.

Neil was previously Chief Economist for EY in Ireland, professor of Economic Policy and the first Director of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. He has also run his own consultancy business and led a global economics team for Oxford Economics.

Neil is a Visiting Professor of Economic Policy at Ulster University. He has a bachelor's degree in Applied Economics from Ulster University and a Master of Computer Science and Applications from Queen's University, Belfast.

Neil is married and has two teenage children.



David Phillips

David Phillips is an Associate Director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies where he helps lead two main areas of research. First is work on devolved and local government finance, with a particular focus on the distribution of funding, and the incentives and risks that different funding regimes entail for sub-national government, as well as responses to these incentives. This includes work on the fiscal frameworks of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and on the ongoing major changes to English local government finance. Second is work on tax and social protection policy in developing countries, including the joint IFS - ODI Centre for Tax Analysis in Developing Countries (TaxDev) funded by FCDO. This centre aims to generate new research, analysis and in-country analytical capacity in the area of tax and social protection policy and administration in (or of relevance to) low and middle income countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda.



Gerald Holtham

Gerald Holtham is a Visiting Professor at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales. He is a former Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford University and of the Brookings Institution, Washington DC.

Gerald chaired the Welsh Government's Independent Commission on Funding and Finance for Wales, which helped set the form of tax devolution to Wales and devised the "floor", underpinning Wales' block grant under the Barnett formula. He subsequently advised the Welsh Finance Minister on infrastructure finance.

He served as Chief Investment Officer of the investment arm of Aviva Insurance Group, which managed a portfolio of over £100 billion. He launched his own investment company in 2005, where he continues as a senior partner.



Iain McLean

Iain McLean is Senior Research Fellow in Politics, Nuffield College, Oxford, and a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the British Academy (Vice-President for Public Policy 2012-16). He has worked for decades on fiscal policy, most recently as one of the four members of the NI Fiscal Commission. Prior to that he was a member of the Independent Expert Group, Calman Commission (on tax devolution in Scotland) and a witness before the Holtham Commission (on tax devolution in Wales). He has worked at the universities of Oxford, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Warwick, and held visiting appointments at Stanford, Yale, and Monticello (Thomas Jefferson Foundation). He has published widely in UK politics, history of political thought, and social choice theory.

He is also a musician and railwayman (for many years a steam locomotive driver).





Jill Rutter

Jill Rutter is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government and Senior research fellow at UK in a Changing Europe. She is the co-author of “Governing without Ministers: Northern Ireland since the fall of the power-sharing executive” (2019) and led Institute for Government work on policy making and Brexit. She is a former UK civil servant, having worked for DEFRA, HM Treasury and No.10.



Dorinnia Carville

Dorinnia graduated from Queen’s University Belfast with a degree in Law, with Politics. Dorinnia is a Chartered Accountant who trained and worked in “Big 4” private sector accountancy firms in London and Belfast, before moving into public sector audit, joining the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and gaining experience auditing a wide range of public bodies in Northern Ireland. Over the course of 11 years, Dorinnia held a number of positions in the NIAO including Financial Audit Director and Director of Corporate Services. Following the review of public administration, Dorinnia moved into local government as Director of Corporate Services at Newry Mourne and Down District Council in 2016. She was the senior financial officer within the Council and was responsible for the Audit Committee of Council and the Strategy Policy and Resources Committee. Dorinnia also held the position of Deputy Chief Executive and was Acting Chief Executive of the Council from February to May 2022. Dorinnia has also held a number of voluntary roles in the public sector as well as the voluntary and community sector.



Scherie Nicol

Scherie Nicol leads the Public Management and Budgeting Division’s workstream on parliamentary budget oversight and independent fiscal institutions. As part of this, she manages the OECD Working Party of Parliamentary Budget Officials and Independent Fiscal Institutions. She works directly with countries to help review and strengthen parliamentary budget oversight and institutions such as parliamentary budget offices and fiscal councils. She also has expertise across a range of PFM topics including budget transparency, performance budgeting, gender budgeting, green budgeting, and spending review. She moved to the OECD from the Scottish Parliament where she helped set up the Financial Scrutiny Unit and worked on the devolution of fiscal powers.





Cathy Gormley-Heenan

Professor Cathy Gormley-Heenan is the University Provost at Ulster University, playing a major role in institution-wide strategic leadership and planning, including shaping institutional strategies and priorities. She has worked in Higher Education for 26 years, having also served previously as Deputy-Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Impact) and Research Institute Director. She is a Professor of Politics with research interests in political elites, peace processes, the politics of divided societies, public policy and governance and in 2021 was appointed by the Minister for Finance (NI) as a fiscal commissioner in the Independent Fiscal Commission for Northern Ireland to consider the case for increasing fiscal powers available to the NI Assembly. She is a founding member of ARINS (Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South), and is also Chair of the Advisory Body for UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE). Cathy has recently been appointed to DLUCh's Levelling Up Advisory Council and UKRI's Research England. Awarded an OBE in 2020 for services to higher education in Northern Ireland, Cathy is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (FACSS), and also a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy (FHEA).



Andrew McCormick

Andrew McCormick is a retired civil servant, who worked at Permanent Secretary level in five different Departments of the Northern Ireland Civil Service from 2002 until 2021. For most of the time between 1980 and 2005, he worked on public expenditure issues in Department of Finance and Personnel. Most recently, as Director General for International Relations, he was the lead official for the Northern Ireland Executive on EU Exit issues and was Secretary to the Executive Committee in its EU Exit mode. Andrew studied Geology at University College, Oxford, and subsequently at Queen's University Belfast, for a PhD on the isotope geochemistry of the granites of the Mourne Mountains.



Graeme Roy

Professor Graeme Roy has been Chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission since 2022. He is Professor in Economics and Dean of External Engagement in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. Between 2016 and 2021, he led the Fraser of Allander Institute and was the Head of the Department of Economics at the University of Strathclyde. He is a former Senior Economist and Senior Civil Servant in the Scottish Government. Graeme has research interests in fiscal devolution and regional economic development. He is an editor of the Economic and Social Research Council's Economic Observatory and a past adviser to the cross-party Economy Committee of the Scottish Parliament.





Ann Watt

Ann has been Pivotal's Director since its launch in September 2019. Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank, which aims to promote better policy making in Northern Ireland. Examples of Pivotal's recent publications include Who is governing Northern Ireland? and Youth voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland . Ann is a former senior civil servant, who worked for 15 years in London in the Treasury, Home Office and Cabinet Office. After returning to Northern Ireland, Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission for five years. Ann is a former primary school governor and is now a board member of a housing association.



Frances Ruane

Dr Frances Ruane is an Honorary Fellow at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and a Research Affiliate at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). An Economist, she held academic and senior administrative positions at TCD between 1977 and 2006 and was Director of the ESRI from 2006 to 2015. Her research interests are in economic development, international economics and public policy, and she has published widely in these areas.

Frances was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2003 and served as President of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland from 2016-2019 and as President of the Irish Economic Association from 2000-2002. Frances is currently a member of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB), the Advisory Board at the Fraser of Allander Institute in Scotland, and the Scientific Advisory Board at the Kiel Centre for Globalisation. She has



Alan Bridle

Alan is a UK economist & market analyst at Bank of Ireland UK, having held a number of positions within the BOI group in a 35 year career, including with the Investment Bank of Ireland, Global Markets and UK Strategy Divisions.

A graduate of Queen's University, winning the Adam Smith prize, Alan has appeared regularly as a commentator and co-authored the NI quarterly housing survey with Ulster University for more than a decade, as well as making regular contributions in regional media.

Alan has been a member of CBI Northern Ireland's economic strategy group and the steering committee of catalyst's knowledge economy index. Currently, Alan is a Northern Ireland representative on the all-island economy project with IBEC & ESRI and Inter Trade Ireland's research reference group. Previously, he was also appointed by the DSD minister to the independent panel of experts on housing affordability in the region.