



Annual Conference

Friday 12 September 2025

Meet Our Host



Mark Simpson

Mark Simpson is an award-winning TV and Radio broadcaster. He started his career in the 1990s and worked for all three Belfast daily newspapers: the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and News Letter. He was appointed political correspondent at the BBC in 1998, the same year as the Good Friday Agreement. He went on to work for BBC network news as Ireland Correspondent and North of England Correspondent, before returning to Belfast. He is now a TV and Radio correspondent, and radio programme presenter. He has interviewed every British Prime Minister and Taoiseach who has held office in the past 30 years. Away from work, he is a year-round open water swimmer.

Meet Our Panellists



Professor
Jodie Carson

Jodie Carson is a Professor of Strategic Policy in Practice at Ulster University. She was educated at the Queen's University of Belfast and holds a Masters and PhD in Finance.

Dr Carson has served as a Senior Parliamentary Adviser in the House of Commons and as a Special Adviser to the Minister of Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Executive. Previously, she was a Senior Economist within the Economic Policy Centre at UU, and subsequently a Course Director at the Business School. She has also been a Senior Economist with Oxford Economics, an Economist in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, a committee subject specialist in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and worked in corporate banking.

She has been involved in negotiations between the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive on a financial package for the devolved government, and participated in political meetings with UK Ministers, including the current and previous Prime Ministers.



Robert Watt

Robert Watt is Secretary General of the Department of Health in Ireland. Robert is leading the Irish Health Service through an unprecedented period of expansion and reform in implementing the Government's Slaintecare programme. This involves integration and reform of governance, cross sectoral delivery and managing complex stakeholders including negotiations with Trade Unions and other Representative bodies. Notable reforms to date include Enhanced Community Care, the new Public Only Consultant Contract, new rostering and work patterns, reformed clinical pathways and enhanced affordability measures.

Robert spent ten years as Secretary General in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. With the Department of Finance, he managed the annual budget and estimates process. During this period Robert was one of the principal advisers to the Government on economic, budgetary and financial policy issues. He was centrally involved in the management of the Troika Programme.

Robert is an economist and has over 3 decades experience in both the public and private sectors. He has worked in several roles within the Department of Finance, numerous external economic consultancy roles including assignments for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. He has been a member of numerous boards including the board of the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) and the Economic Management Council (EMC). He is currently a board member of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI).





Mike Farrar

Mike is a highly respected health and care leader, latterly as an independent management consultant with 13 years of CEO experience in the NHS. He has built two successful independent consulting practices, working with clients such as PwC, Celesio, ABPI, J and J, Health Foundation, Medtronic, Intuitive, RCGP, Visionable, Hanover and Pfizer,

He remains a prominent thought leader and consultant to the NHS, supporting over 15 ICSs and NHS Boards. Additionally, he works internationally, transforming healthcare in the Middle East, Japan, Northern Ireland, US, and Australia.

Mike was previously the chief executive of the NHS Confederation, North West England SHA, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire SHAs, Tees Health Authority and Head of Primary Care at the Department of Health, where he negotiated and introduced PMS and then the new GMS Contract including the use of QoF, moving away from the previous fee for service model.

He also works in the charitable sector and in sport, where he has held a variety of influential roles including Chair of Swim England, having also served as the Vice and Interim Chair of Sport England, and as National Tsar for Sport and Health.

He was awarded the CBE in 2005 for services to the NHS and is an Honorary Fellow of both the Royal College of GPs and of the Royal College of Physicians. During the COVID-19 Crisis and Recovery, Mike worked between March and July 2020 on a pro bono basis as the Acting Deputy CEO at Kings College Hospital NHSFT in London. Mike was appointed as ProChancellor and Chair of Keele University in 2022 and also, in the same year, as Chair of ukactive the national representative body for the physical activity and leisure sector.





David Phillips

David is an Associate Director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and helps lead two main areas of research at the Institute. 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 and Wales 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 DfID. 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) DfID-priority countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda.

David also has experience of working on a range of other issues including inter-personal and geographical inequalities; labour supply; consumer demand; human capital investment; and social capital. This experience helps inform his ongoing research, especially on tax policy design in developing countries.



Professor
Gerald Holtham

Gerald Holtham was chair of the Independent Commission on Funding and Finance for Wales, which analysed and proposed changes to the Barnett formula, including a needs-based element. He is currently managing partner of Cadwyn Capital, an investment management boutique, and visiting professor at Cardiff Metropolitan University. His previous positions include Chief Investment Officer for Aviva and Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research.





Joanne McBurney

Joanne McBurney is the Deputy Secretary, in the Public Spending Group in the Department of Finance (DoF).

Public Spending Group (PSG) is responsible for maximising the resources available to the NI Executive, advising on their allocation and ensuring the effective use of available resources through allocating and monitoring public expenditure, in line with the priorities set in the Programme for Government (PfG), as well as setting the ground rules for the administration and use of public funds.

Joanne is a Chartered Management Accountant who took up the role of Deputy Secretary, Public Spending in April 2019. She has been Head of the NICS Finance Profession since April 2024. Having worked in the NI Civil Service since the age of 17, Joanne has predominantly worked in the area of public expenditure since 2000 and was previously the Head of Central Expenditure Division in DoF and the Director of Finance and Corporate Services in the NI Prison Service.

