Annual Northern Ireland Economic Conference 2026

Wednesday 18th November
Titanic Hotel • Belfast

An agendaNi event

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Northern Ireland's economic conference

The Northern Ireland Economic Conference, now in its 31st year, is Northern Ireland's premier forum for economic analysis and debate.

As the only event dedicated to providing a strategic, high-level assessment of the performance and future prospects of the Northern Ireland economy, it has become firmly established as the annual autumn summit for the region's economic community, bringing together policymakers, business leaders, academics and other key stakeholders.

Creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, raising productivity and reducing carbon emissions

The Northern Ireland economy continues to face significant challenges. Fiscal pressures have constrained public spending at a time when the region must address long-standing issues, including persistently low productivity and high levels of economic inactivity among the working-age population. Against this backdrop, Economy Minister Caoimhe Archibald MLA has set out an economic vision centred on four strategic priorities: creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, raising productivity, and achieving a net zero carbon economy by 2050. Underpinning these ambitions is a refocused skills agenda, supported by a range of policy interventions designed to equip people, businesses and communities with the capabilities needed to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Why attend?

- ✓ **Expert local and visiting speakers**
- ✓ **Major economic summit**
- ✓ **Economic outlook and forecast**
- ✓ **Unique information presented**
- ✓ **Not-to-be-missed annual conference**
- ✓ **All sectors represented — government, business, third sector**

Other key issues to be addressed at the **conference:**

01 Global and UK economic outlook
02 Medium term economic outlook for Northern Ireland
03 Narrowing the productivity gap
04 Creating good jobs and tackling economic inactivity
05 Infrastructure investment as an economic driver
06 Making City and Growth Deals count
07 Achieving net zero by 2050
08 Assessing the impact of trade tariffs
09 Recalibrating the skills agenda
10 Promoting innovation and R&D
11 Analysing public expenditure
12 Addressing regional balance

Sponsorship opportunities

There are still a small number of available sponsorship opportunities at this year's conference. Sponsorship of the annual Northern Ireland Economic Conference is an excellent way for organisations to raise their profile with a key audience of economic decision-makers and senior business leaders. For further details or to discuss how your organisation can benefit from close association with Northern Ireland's premier economic analysis event, **contact Lynda Millar on 028 9261 9933 or email lynda.millar@agendani.com.**

Northern Ireland's economic conference

Programme 2026

09:00 THE NORTHERN IRELAND ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

WELCOME

Chair's welcome and introduction: **John Campbell**, Economics and Business Editor, **BBC**

MINISTERIAL ADDRESS

Caoimhe Archibald MLA, **Minister for the Economy**

UK ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

The economic outlook for the UK

Chris Giles, Economics Commentator, **FT**

LOCAL OUTLOOK

Northern Ireland's economy: What comes next?

John Campbell, Economics and Business Editor, **BBC**

PUBLIC FINANCES

Challenges and opportunities for the Northern Ireland Executive's budget

Ann Watt, Director, **Pivotal**

Questions & answers / Panel discussion

10:45 Networking break

11.15

CITY & GROWTH DEALS

Making City & Growth Deals count: Delivering better outcomes and value, and lasting economic impact

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, **Northern Ireland Audit Office**

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

Fiscal sustainability for Northern Ireland: The route to stable and sustainable public finances

Paul Mac Flynn, Co-director, **Nevin Economic Research Institute**

ECONOMIC INACTIVITY

Unlocking potential: Supporting employers and tackling economic inactivity

Ana Desmond, Head of Policy, **Federation of Small Businesses**

PRODUCTIVITY

Rethinking productivity: Building a high-road economy

Seán Ó Riain, Professor of Sociology, **Maynooth University**

TARIFFS

The macroeconomic impact of tariffs on Northern Ireland

Adele Bergin, Associate Research Professor, **Economic and Social Research Institute**

Questions & answers / Panel discussion

13:15 LUNCH BREAK

14.15

SKILLS

Skills for tomorrow: Unlocking the productivity potential of the future workforce

Andy Dickerson, Professor of Economics, **University of Sheffield** *(invited)*

Turning AI potential into economic growth: Ensuring we have the skills Northern Ireland needs

AI

Speaker TBC

PANEL DISCUSSION: SKILLS FOR GROWTH: BUILDING THE WORKFORCE NORTHERN IRELAND NEEDS

Damian Duffy, Principal and Chief Executive, **Belfast Metropolitan College**

Gareth Hetherington, Director, **Ulster University Economic Policy Centre**

Fionnuala McKenna, Head of Strategic Development, **Construction Futures NI**

Kathleen O'Hare, Chair, **Northern Ireland Skills Council**

Graeme Wilkinson, Head of Skills in Industry, **Department for the Economy**

16:00 CHAIR'S SUMMARY AND CONFERENCE CLOSE

Speaker **panel**

Caoimhe Archibald MLA was appointed Economy Minister on 3 February 2025. Previous to this, Caoimhe served as Finance Minister from February 2024. She attended Loreto College, Coleraine and graduated from Queen's University, Belfast with a BSc in Molecular Biology and a PhD by research with a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development studentship. She also completed a Postgraduate diploma in Management & Corporate Governance at Ulster University. Caoimhe was elected as an MLA for East Derry in May 2016 and re-elected in March 2017 and again in May 2022. She is formerly Chair of the Assembly's Economy and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs committees. Prior to being elected in May 2016, Caoimhe had worked for almost a decade in applied horticulture and plant pathology research including on collaborative EU funded projects.

Adele Bergin is an Associate Research Professor at the ESRI and joint coordinator of its macroeconomics research area. Her research focuses on labour economics and macroeconomics. She is also an Adjunct Professor of Economics at Trinity College Dublin and a Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA). Dr. Bergin served on the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council from 2021 to 2025 and was a Council Member of the Irish Economic Association from 2014 to 2020. She currently chairs Economic and Social Studies and previously served as Policy Section Editor of the Economic and Social Review.

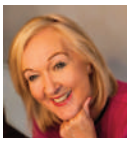
John Campbell is Economics and Business Editor for BBC Northern Ireland, a position he has held since September 2013. Prior to that he was a senior BBC producer working across TV, radio and online with special responsibility for business coverage. He began his career on the Liverpool Daily Post and Echo.

Dorinnia Carville is Comptroller and Auditor General at the Northern Ireland Audit Office. As C&AG, Dorinnia is responsible for auditing NI's central government departments and agencies, as well as non-departmental and health & social care bodies. She also publishes a range of reports based on independent and objective studies by her Office. Dorinnia is a Chartered Accountant. Starting her career in private practice, she has worked in the NI public sector for over 20 years, including leadership roles in the NIAO and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. She has also held voluntary board member roles in the C&V sector.

Chris Giles is an economic commentator at the Financial Times, writing columns and newsletters on global economics, the UK economy and central banking. Previously, he was the FT's economics editor for 19 years, having previously served as a leader writer. His reporting beat covered global and UK economic affairs. Before joining the FT as economics editor, he was an economics reporter for the BBC, worked for Ofcom, the telecommunications regulator and started his career with seven years as an economist for the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Chris loves numbers.

Gareth Hetherington is the Director of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. The Centre is self-financing and carries out a broad range of economic policy focused research to inform Central and Local Government on key policy and strategy decisions. Typical areas of research cover skills, competitiveness, tax, community planning, economic forecasting and more recently COVID recovery. Gareth works closely with senior stakeholders in the public and private sector, providing briefings to NI Executive Ministers, evidence to Assembly Committees and engages with senior business leaders. He also provides regular economic commentary in the media. Separately Gareth is the non-executive chair of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) and is a member of both the High Streets Task Force and the newly established Northern Ireland Skills Council.

Paul Mac Flynn is Co-Director of the Nevin Economic Research Institute and is based in the Belfast office. In addition to managing the Belfast office he has co-responsibility for the NERI's research programme and for its strategic direction. He leads on the NERI's analysis of the Northern Ireland economy along with all research into the impact of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Other research areas include regional productivity, the all-island economy and the future of work. He is a graduate of University College Dublin with a BA in Economics and Politics and the University of Bristol with an MSc in Economics and Public Policy, specialising in the economic impacts of political devolution in the UK.



Kathleen O'Hare, Chair of the Northern Ireland Skills Council, has held roles such as Vice-Chair of the CCEA, and membership on the QUB Senate, Belfast Metropolitan College Governing Body and Director of the Integrated Education Fund. She serves on the Teachers Regulation Body in England and Wales and contributed to the Department of Education's Fair Start panel. She was Principal of St Cecilia's in Derry (2002-2018) and Hazelwood Integrated College in Belfast and is a Fellow of the International Peace School at Messines. She was honoured as Freeman of the City of London in 2011. Currently, a leadership consultant for the British Council, she presents globally and supervises Action Research Projects with school leaders. Her accolades include UK Headteacher of the Year (2009), Headteacher of the Year in Belfast (2017), and being awarded an OBE in the King's New Year's Honours List.

Seán Ó Riain is Professor of Sociology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. He is the author of The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger (2014) and The Politics of High Tech Growth (2004). Recent publications examine the growth of 'lean' workplace regimes in Europe and their effects on work intensity and employment insecurity; digitalisation, public services and building capabilities; Ireland's foreign investment-led growth model; and, the determinants of low pay across Europe. He was part of the team which drafted the New Economic Model adopted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 2025.

Ann Watt is Director of Pivotal, the independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. Since its launch in 2019, Ann has developed Pivotal's role as an independent policy voice, through research, analysis and commentary. Before Pivotal, Ann was the Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland from 2014-2019. Ann started her career as a civil servant in London, working in the Treasury, Home Office and Cabinet Office for 15 years.

conference **registration form**

I wish to

☐ Reserve _____ delegate places at the conference

Conference delegate rate **£275** + VAT @ 20% = £330

☐ Discounted rate for voluntary/community/councils

Conference delegate rate **£195** + VAT @ 20% = £234

☐ Receive details of **sponsorship & exhibition opportunities** at the conference

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Acknowledgement of registration

Confirmation of registration will be emailed to all delegates following receipt of registration details. If you have not received your acknowledgement within 48 hours of registering, please contact registration@agendaNi.com to confirm your booking.

Terms and conditions

For those unable to attend, a substitute participant may be sent at any time for no additional charge. Please note once purchased delegate places cannot be cancelled.

Who should attend?

The Annual Northern Ireland Economic Conference is aimed at key decision-makers and those across business and government/the public sector with an interest in tackling the challenges to ensure Northern Ireland's economy is fit for the future. It will also appeal to those interacting with the public sector, both in policy advisory and service delivery or advocacy roles. Those interested in attending will include:

- Chief Executives / Directors / senior managers
- Finance directors / managers
- Central government / department officials
- Agencies, advisory bodies and NDPBs
- Frontline service delivery professionals
- Auditors / value-for-money specialists
- Local government officers and elected representatives
- Budget-holders
- Corporate planners
- Voluntary / community sector leaders / NGOs
- Services organisations – IT / telecoms
- Financial and legal advisors

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