PROGRAMME: NI SME BUSINESS CONFERENCE & EXPO 2026

DATE: Tuesday 17th November 2026 **VENUE:** Canal Court Hotel, Newry
TIME: 8:30am - 2:40pm **COST:** FREE TO ATTEND

8:30am **Registration, Breakfast, Networking & Exhibition Area**

9:00am **Conference Welcome**
MC, Deborah Loughran, Managing Director, King Communication

9:05am **Welcome Address & Conference Overview**
Conor Patterson, President, Newry Chamber

9:10am **Sponsors Welcome**
Cllr Glyn Hanna, Chairperson, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

9:15am **The Current Landscape for SMEs in Northern Ireland**
Roger Pollen, Head of FSB Northern Ireland

9:30am **Accessing Emerging Talent**
Karl Webb, Business Engagement & Employability Manager,
William J Clinton Leadership Institute at Queen's University Belfast

9:40am **Presentation: Demystifying AI - Challenges & Opportunities for SMEs**
Tadgh Hickey, Head of AI & Digital Ethics Policy, Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre (AICC)

10:00am **Sales & Marketing:**

Presentation: Consumers & AI - Exploring Trust, Fears & Changing Behaviours in the Age of AI
Joe Birch, Senior Analyst, Mintel

10:10am **Panel Q&A**

- Joe Birch, Senior Analyst, Mintel
- Sarah McCracken, Founder, The PR Club
- Kieran Swail, Tourism Innovation Specialist, Southern Regional College
- Neil Cole, Co-Founder, OCCO Coffee

10:45am **Interactive Roundtable Discussion**

10:55am **Slido Feedback Session**

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11:00am **Tea, Coffee, Networking & Exhibition Area**

11:25am **Finance & The Economy:**

Presentation by BCF Lending
Gareth Graham, CEO, BCF Lending

11:35am **Panel Q&A**

- Gareth Graham, CEO, BCF Lending
- Anna Desmond, Head of Policy, FSB Northern Ireland
- Amanda Smyth, Assistant Director of Economy, Growth & Tourism, NMDDC
- Clare McGee, CEO, AwakeHub

12:10pm **Interactive Roundtable Discussion**

12:20pm **Slido Feedback Session**

12:25pm **Presentation by the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA)**
Representative of the CMA

12:45pm **Fireside Chat with Representative of the CMA**

1:00pm **Lunch, Networking & Exhibition Area**

1:50pm **Skills, Recruitment & Innovation:**

Presentation by Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
Gareth Hetherington, Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre

2:00pm **Panel Q&A**

- Gareth Hetherington, Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
- Tracy Rice, Assistant Director of Business & Economic Engagement, Southern Regional College
- Michelle McKevitt, Company Secretary, McGuinness Mechanical Engineering
- Patrick Cunnigham, Contracts Director, Water Solutions Ireland

2:25pm **Interactive Roundtable Discussion**

2:35pm **Slido Feedback Session**

2:40pm **Depart**

NEWRY CHAMBER SINCE 1820

Comhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

fsb

src Southern Regional College

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Ulster University

BCF Lending

CMA Competition & Markets Authority