

ACORNS

Accelerating the Creation Of
Rural Nascent Start-ups



Providing early stage female entrepreneurs, living in rural Ireland, with the knowledge, support and networking opportunities to meet and even exceed their current aspirations.

***RUNNER UP AT THE EUROPEAN ENTERPRISE PROMOTION AWARDS 2018,
INVESTING IN ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS***



**An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara**
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



'If you are interested in participating in an ACORNS cycle you can register your interest on the website at www.acorns.ie.

Those who successfully completed a previous cycle of ACORNS are also offered the opportunity of further support'.

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ACORNS

The ACORNS programme, now in its seventh year, has been designed to support early-stage female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland. The aim is to provide up to 50 entrepreneurs on each cycle of the programme with the knowledge, support and networking opportunities to meet and even exceed their current aspirations. Past participants report increased sales, exports and employment creation.

The programme runs over six months part-time, from October to April. Selected participants are those who, on a competitive basis, best demonstrate their potential to advance their businesses and their commitment to fully engage in the initiative.

If you would like to find out more about the initiative or have any questions about ACORNS, please feel free to contact us at info@acorns.ie or phone the office at 01 8450770.

This innovative programme is funded through the **Rural Innovation and Development Fund** by the **Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)**. Thanks to this funding, there is no charge for those selected to participate in ACORNS and their accommodation costs associated with the residential elements of the initiative are covered.

WHO QUALIFIES FOR THE PROGRAMME?

ACORNS is designed for nascent female rural entrepreneurs. To qualify for consideration, a woman (i) must have recently set up a new business which she owns or part owns, and which has less than two years' sales or (ii) must be at an advanced stage of planning a new venture and have a clear idea of what she wants to achieve. If she is not already trading, activities such as organising the start-up team, looking for equipment/facilities, saving money for the start-up, or writing a business plan would all be considered as active commitments to starting a business.

She must also be living in a rural area. These are all areas of the country outside the administrative city boundaries of Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford.

There is no restriction on the sector in which the new business is focused. Favourable consideration is given to those who expect to grow their business and to employ others over the following three years.

If selected, applicants must be available to attend the first residential session, usually held over two days in October.

HOW TO APPLY

Those interested in participating in future ACORNS Cycles are requested to register their interest on the website www.acorns.ie in the first instance and they will be sent an application by email when the call for applications for the next cycle opens.

SELECTION PROCESS

There are usually many more applications from those wishing to participate on a cycle of ACORNS than there are places available. Accordingly, the selection process is competitive. The ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs are central to the selection of successful candidates. They seek those who are prepared to fully engage with the programme; demonstrate a determination to advance their fledgling businesses; are prepared to work hard in pursuit of their entrepreneurial goals; and expect to become employers.

There are up to 50 places available for suitable candidates for each cycle. The ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs meet to assess the applications received, and successful candidates are notified in the following days.

WHAT TIME COMMITMENT IS INVOLVED?

The cycle starts with a two-day Development Forum, usually held in October. The theme of this Forum is *Establishing Good Foundations*. At this event, the participants meet each other, their ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur and their round table group for the first time. The Forum will take place in a residential setting, involving an overnight stay, or by zoom, depending on prevailing circumstances.

Participants subsequently meet with their ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur and their group of eight peers in separate round tables on four occasions between November and March. These sessions last for about three hours and explore the themes of Strategy, Marketing/Sales, Finance, and Implementation. These sessions may be held in person or by zoom, again depending on prevailing circumstances. If in person, they will be held close to the assigned ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur. Some travel may be involved on the part of the participants.

A second Development Forum is usually held in April. The theme of this Forum is *SMART Planning - The Roadmap Ahead*.

Selected candidates are expected to attend all events, whether held remotely or in person.

WHAT'S THE APPROACH?

Based on a belief that entrepreneurs learn best from each other, the ACORNS initiative is focused on interactive round table sessions that are facilitated, not by consultants, academics or professional trainers, but by female entrepreneurs who have started and successfully grown businesses in rural Ireland.

Those who facilitate the interactive round table meetings and the residential developmental sessions, have the practical knowledge that comes from first-hand experience of owning and managing a successful business in rural Ireland. They believe in the philosophy of *entrepreneurs supporting entrepreneurs* and are giving their time to assist others on a voluntary basis. They are known as ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs.

Working with a group of about eight participants each, the Lead Entrepreneurs facilitate round table meetings, addressing enterprise challenges and supporting participants to consider how best to start, develop and position their businesses for sustainability and growth.

ALL PROGRAMME ARRANGEMENTS WILL TAKE FULL ACCOUNT OF GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOLS AND WILL BE SUFFICIENTLY FLEXIBLE TO DELIVER A QUALITY PROGRAMME APPROPRIATE TO PREVAILING CIRCUMSTANCES.



Coronavirus
COVID-19
Public Health
Advice

LEAD ENTREPRENEURS

The voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs are the backbone of the ACORNS programme. They are not, and cannot be, experts in every area of business but they have faced the challenges of starting and growing a business. All are past participants of the Going for Growth programme and have first-hand experience of the round table peer learning approach and of its benefits. All are entrepreneurs with businesses based in rural Ireland.

ANNE REILLY - Paycheck Plus, Louth

Paycheck Plus was founded by Anne Reilly in 2005. Headquartered in Drogheda, Co Louth and with an office in Manchester, Paycheck Plus processes Irish and UK payrolls for domestic and international organisations of all sizes. Paycheck Plus helps employers structure their payroll in the most cost efficient way, while ensuring legislative and compliance requirements in a timely and accurate manner. In 2020 Anne founded The Payroll Panel, a specialist payroll recruitment company to meet the needs of employers requiring in-house payroll processing resources. Paycheck Plus is the recipient of over 30 national and international awards accolades, including Best Payroll Provider at the Global Payroll Awards and Great Places To Work. Anne, recognised as Payroll Leader of the Year, is a former lecturer in Irish payroll, a graduate of the Institute of Directors and sits on a number of Boards. www.paycheckplus.ie



CAROLINE REIDY - The HR Suite, Kerry

Caroline Reidy runs The HR Suite which offer specialist tailored and effective human resources, employment law and business solutions to over 500 clients throughout Ireland. Many of these are SME's who have no HR function and the HR Suite are their HR partner to advise them in this area. The HR Suite also assist with complex investigations, training in all areas of people management and skills development and representation at third party forums. The HR Suite has offices in Dublin and Kerry. Caroline is a past Commissioner on the Low Pay Commission and is also an adjudicator in the Work Place Commission. Caroline has completed a Masters in Human Resources in the University of Limerick and is a trained mediator. She is also the author of 'The Art of Asking the Right Questions' that provides top tips to people managers throughout the employment journey. To mark 10 years in business in 2019 Caroline launched a children's book 'Celebrating You' to advocate diversity and the importance of celebrating individuality in children. Caroline also contributes as a thought leader to national media, as a conference speaker and through articles in national press. www.thehrsuite.com



DEIRDRE MCGLONE - Hospitality & Tourism Advisor, Donegal

Deirdre McGlone is a hospitality and tourism advisor / keynote speaker with expertise in helping businesses deliver an exceptional customer experience. Following her graduation from University of Limerick with a degree in European Studies, Deirdre played a pivotal role in the development of the multi-award winning Harvey's Point Hotel, Lough Eske, Donegal. In 2019, she sold her hotel and her entrepreneurial spirit continues with a new holiday rental business venture in France. Deirdre is a member of the 'Going for Growth' women in business community. She is also a member of the Tourism Leaders Group, set up to help shape government policy to 2025 and a board member of Donegal Tourism.



EIMER HANNON - Hannon Travel, Meath

Eimer Hannon is Managing Director of Hannon Travel, which she founded in 1999. Eimer is a leader and enabler and has grown Hannon Travel to be one of Ireland's leading corporate travel management companies, providing travel services from its two bases in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Hannon Travel are at the forefront of emerging travel trends and this allows them to service a large number of national and international clients on a global scale. Hannon Travel is the trusted travel partner to a wide range of business sectors, including aviation, finance, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, equestrian, engineering and mining. Eimer was awarded the Matheson WMB Female Entrepreneur of the Year 2019. She sits on the Irish International Air Transport Association Agency Programme Joint Council and also on the Amadeus Consumer Advisory. www.hannontravel.com



LARISSA FEENEY - Accountant Online, Donegal

Larissa Feeney began her career as a qualified chartered accountant spending several years as a sole practitioner before setting up the award-winning online accountancy firm Accountant Online. Based in Letterkenny, Co Donegal, the company also has offices in Dublin. Their service is focused on early stage small businesses and growing companies. They provide clients with a secure and easy service for forming a company, launching, and scaling the business. Accountant Online has been widely recognised, seeing them selected as winners in the Irish Accountancy Awards 2017, 2018 and 2019 and in 2020, they were awarded Medium Practice of the Year and overall Practice of the Year. www.accountantonline.ie



MARY B WALSH - Ire Wel Pallets, Wexford

Mary B Walsh is the founder and Managing Director of Ire Wel Pallets Ltd. Established in May 1990, IWP is a sustainable pallet and packaging solutions provider, supplying pallets, boxes and crates to its exporting customers in the Medical Devices, Pharmaceutical, Food, Drinks, Electronics and Engineering industries, amongst others. Based near Gorey, Co. Wexford, IWP operates from the first purpose-built pallet manufacturing facility in Ireland, incorporating a state-of-art ventilated storage facility for kiln dried timber and pallets in addition to the production facilities on-site. Investments of €4.5m between 2015 and 2019 have introduced new technology on site that has given the company more control over its production, quality and stock. www.iwppallets.com



TRIONA MAC GIOLLA RÍ - Aró Digital Strategy, Galway

Triona Mac Giolla Rí is the co-founder and director of Aró Digital Strategy, a digital agency specialised in maximising direct bookings for hotels, based in Na Forbacha in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Aró is recognised as one of the leading full-service providers for independent luxury properties, offering website design, technology solutions and marketing strategy to over 200 luxury hotels in Ireland, the UK and all around the world. Aró delivers cutting edge strategies across the three key areas of customer acquisition, engagement and conversion, helping companies grow their direct bookings. www.aro.ie



LULU O'SULLIVAN - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

Lulu O'Sullivan is the Chief Executive and founder of GiftsDirect.com & TheIrishStore.com. In the twenty years since its inception, the company has grown from a small office in Dublin 2 with an initial investment of £2,000, to Ireland's largest online gift company. GiftsDirect.com carries a large range of gifts for every occasion and its products can be delivered worldwide. Lulu is a former recipient of the Ulster Bank Business Achievers Award, The Irish Internet Association's Online Entrepreneur of the Year, Ernst & Young Finalist 2019 and Online Exporter of the Year. Lulu also launched a second website, The Irish Store, which is aimed at the Irish diaspora around the world selling high quality Irish products. She is based in Dublin and is married with 4 older children. www.giftsdirect.com



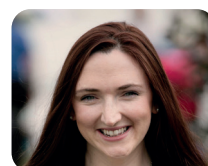
MONICA FLOOD - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

Monica Flood established IT training and consultancy business Olas in 1981, one of the premier IT training companies in Ireland and the sole appointed education partner for SAP. Monica sold Olas to French public company, Assima plc. and went on to pursue other business and investment interests. Her experience of building a service business and a loyal customer base in a very competitive market provides an important perspective for growth and success. A great supporter of the arts in Ireland, Monica is a Patron of The Model in Sligo, home of the Niland Collection and one of Ireland's leading contemporary arts centres, and is a non-executive Director to the Projects Arts Centre in Dublin.



ALISON RITCHIE - ACORNS Advisory Panel

Alison Ritchie is the Managing Director of Polar Ice Ltd., Ireland's leading manufacturer of dry ice products since 1996. Polar Ice is located in Portlaoise, Co Laois. As a serial entrepreneur, Alison established her second business Polar IceTech Ireland Ltd. in 2005, growing the business to become the market leader in Cryogenic Cleaning, and successfully selling the business in 2016. Alison has a Business Degree from DCU, is a Financial Accountant (CPA) and a certified Tax Advisor. Alison is a former ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur. www.polarice.ie



PREVIOUS PARTICIPANTS

ACORNS is now in its 7th year. There is a clear desire on the part of those who previously completed an ACORNS cycle to stay connected with the initiative and to participate in a further development phase. Thanks to the funding being provided through the Rural Innovation and Development Fund by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, past participants of ACORNS are offered the opportunity to participate in a further development phase and to join the ACORNS Community. This helps ensure that they continue to reap the benefits of the programme and of the valuable connections they have made through broadening their support network.

The Further Development phase is offered to participants in the year after their initial ACORNS cycle and includes:

- Two round table sessions with their ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur,
- An opportunity to attend topic based workshops relevant to their development,
- Further networking opportunities,
- Development of individual participant profiles,
- Tracking of progress against agreed goals and milestones.



ACORNS previous participants left to right: Kay Lyng, K Kajoux Jewels; Deirdre Doyle, The Cool Food School; Triona Spellman, Darcybow; Mary B Walsh, Ire Wel Pallets, Lead Entrepreneur; Aisling McElwain, Aisling McElwain Ceramics; Vicki O'Donnell, Wilder Wander; Anna Dobson, Love Mo Chuisle.



Annamarie McNally, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, presenting a certificate of successful completion of an ACORNS cycle to Emily Brick, Athena Analytics. Emily is now a member of the ACORNS Community and is currently participating in ACORNS Plus.

Former participants are also invited to continue to avail of ACORNS support through the ACORNS Community, through which they can attend a variety of topic-based workshops over a six-month period and take part in the annual ACORNS Forum and networking event. Those that have already completed a Further Development phase and who wish to strongly drive growth in their business, can also apply to participate in ACORNS Plus, a growth-focussed round table initiative.

Over 300 female entrepreneurs have successfully completed a cycle of ACORNS to date and progress made by previous participants demonstrates encouraging outcomes. Many report increased sales, exports and job creation and continue to grow their businesses. Many become members of the ACORNS Community, having completed a cycle of ACORNS, and are excellent ambassadors of the benefits associated with continued participation and ongoing support.

'Getting a new business off the ground has its challenges. ACORNS has been a fantastic experience and support to me over several years. It helped me drive my business forward. Without it, my business would never have progressed to where it is now.'

LISA LARKIN, DURROW MILLS



'The support, motivation and energy from the group I participated on was electric. I recommend ACORNS to every ambitious female entrepreneur I meet. I also networked beyond and outside my group and have engaged in wonderful collaborations with some of the women I have met.'

NIAMH HOGAN, HOLOS SKINCARE



WHO WE ARE

FITZSIMONS CONSULTING

Fitzsimons Consulting specialises in areas related to entrepreneurship and growth. Paula Fitzsimons, founder and managing director of Fitzsimons Consulting, is a recognised expert on entrepreneurship. Paula has been the national coordinator for GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) for Ireland since 2000, is a former President of the consortium of GEM national teams, and a former member of the governing body of GERA, the governing body for the Global Entrepreneurship Research Association.

Recognising that fewer women start new businesses and, of those that start, fewer have significant growth ambitions than do men, Paula Fitzsimons designed and developed the Going for Growth initiative, which is focused on peer support as a means of assisting established women entrepreneurs who wish to grow their businesses (www.goingforgrowth.com). Going for Growth, which is funded by Enterprise Ireland and KPMG, has completed 13 cycles and has supported over 800 women entrepreneurs to achieve their growth ambitions. Going for Growth was awarded the European Enterprise Promotion Award 2015, Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills, and featured extensively in a book *Inclusive Business Creation – Good Practice Compendium*, published in May 2016 by the OECD and European Commission. Successful past participants of Going for Growth have become voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs on ACORNS.

ACORNS, an initiative for early stage female entrepreneurs, is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

(www.acorns.ie). ACORNS was selected to represent Ireland in the European Enterprise Promotion Awards 2018, Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills, and was awarded runner up in this category. ACORNS also featured prominently in the Manifesto for an Innovative Europe, which was developed by the participants of the 2018 SME Assembly.

Back for Business is another initiative developed and implemented by Fitzsimons Consulting to support early stage entrepreneurs among returned Irish emigrants. This programme is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and has now completed its fourth year (www.backforbusiness.com).

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO CONTACT US

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SPONSORS

ACORNS is funded through the **Rural Innovation and Development Fund** by the **Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine**. Its objective is to encourage a stronger level of enterprise development in rural areas by seeking out and assisting start-up female entrepreneurs living in rural areas to start and develop their businesses.

Following a competitive tendering process, the ACORNS initiative developed by Fitzsimons Consulting was selected by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as most suitable to achieve the stated objectives. It is designed to unleash the potential of female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland, who have recently started a business or who have taken concrete steps towards starting a business. The objective is to equip these early stage entrepreneurs with the appropriate knowledge, confidence and networks to successfully start and develop sustainable businesses.



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
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Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

CHARLIE MCCONALOGUE TD, MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Minister McConalogue said ***“My Department is pleased to be in a position to support such a successful and progressive initiative. Now in its seventh year, and going from strength to strength, ACORNS continues to support early stage female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland. This innovative programme is funded through the Rural Innovation and Development Fund. Over 300 female entrepreneurs have taken part in ACORNS to date and a significant proportion of these are still actively involved. The progress made by participants in previous years has been remarkable, with many reporting increased sales, exports and job creation.”***



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