

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 eighth 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.

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 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.

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.

'I highly recommend ACORNS for any woman in business. The sense of community the programme has built is amazing and it is a brilliant way to connect with other women in business.'

NIAMH DOOLEY, *BiaSol*



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 - Louth

In 2005 Anne founded Paycheck Plus, Ireland's leading payroll outsource provider. Acquiring multiple accreditations, accolades and awards along the way, Anne led the company through a series of changes and developments creating value for their clients, their people and the business. On completion of the sale of Paycheck Plus in 2022, Anne retired from the position of CEO to pursue other business and investment interests. Qualified from the Institute of Directors, Anne serves on a number of Boards as a Non-Executive Director and is a member of the National Committee of ISME, supporting Small & Medium Enterprises. An advocate of continuous learning, Anne recently completed her Masters in Business Practice and enjoys sharing her passion for strategy and growth through mentoring with those striving to develop their business.



CAROLINE REIDY - The HR Suite, Kerry

Caroline Reidy runs The HR Suite which offers specialist tailored and effective human resources, employment law and business solutions to clients throughout Ireland. They work with a variety of clients from large multinational with HR departments to smaller organisations. 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 assists 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, the hotel was sold and her entrepreneurial spirit continues with a new holiday rental business venture in France. Deirdre is a member of the Going for Growth community. She is also an ambassador for Donegal Women in Business Network.



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 Board. www.hannontravel.com



LARISSA FEENEY - Accountant Online, Donegal

Larissa Feeney began her career as a qualified chartered accountant and spent several years as a sole practitioner before setting up Ireland's largest online accountancy firm, Accountant Online, providing compliance, payroll, bookkeeping, company formation, and company secretarial services to Irish and UK micro, small, and medium enterprises. The company has employees working at its offices in Dublin, Donegal, Northern Ireland and remotely throughout Ireland. Accountant Online has been widely recognised, being selected as winners in the Irish Accountancy Awards 2017, 2018 and 2019. 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. The company is exploring export markets, including the UK, and is continuing expansion plans for the business. 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 hotel-tech agency with head office 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



GERALDINE KELLY - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

Geraldine Kelly is a senior level Executive with CEO/Non-Executive Director experience in the Technology, Energy, Clean Tech and Fin Tech sectors. She has international experience in Europe, US and Asia-Pacific, achieved at both Executive and Non-Executive Director Levels. Geraldine has a very successful track record in generating innovative solutions, getting results and creating value for all stakeholders in a number of sectors. A qualified Non-Executive Director who works with Boards to develop innovative initiatives with the ability to constructively challenge the status quo. Currently, Geraldine works as a Strategy Advisor and is a non executive director of the Ervia/Gas Networks Ireland board, Non Executive Chair of both Accountant Online Ltd and SnapDragon International Ltd. She previously served on the boards of Bank of Ireland Mortgage Bank, Gaelectric, MicroFinance Ireland and the Plan International Ireland Ltd.



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 Portlaoine, 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 9th 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 Plus Lead Entrepreneur Clare Duignan with her group (l-r) Aisling Kelly, WB's Coffee House and Sligo Oyster Experience, Polly Doyle, Polly & Andy, Katie Mugan, Nursing Mama, Maura Sheehy, Maura's Cottage Flowers, Sarah Hoban, OHS Consulting, Caitriona Cullen, Cullen Nurseries and Mary O'Sullivan, Beara Bitters.



Lead Entrepreneur Deirdre McGlone with some of her ACORNS 8 group (l-r) Lisa O'Donnell, Reel Irish Music Tours, Niamh Walsh, TDL Horizons, Helen Phelan, Zootkayz and Eimear Healy, Visual Heritage.

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 400 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.

'I couldn't recommend the ACORNS programme enough. It opens up a massive supportive network of inspiring female entrepreneurs who all learn from one another. This programme celebrates initiative, courage and success in a positive and open environment. The roundtable sessions are invaluable - you really share and learn from each others' businesses and you walk away feeling empowered. Overall, a top class programme!'

ALI MOLLOY, HIGH TIDE EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT



'ACORNS is a such wonderful initiative to help women in rural Ireland develop their businesses. The support given by the programme, the Lead Entrepreneurs and the other ACORNS is so valuable and there will always be someone in the ACORNS community with a solution to your problem.'

LYNN SHEAD, NATURES ALCHEMY



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 was the national coordinator for GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) for Ireland from 2000 to May 2023, 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 15 cycles and has supported almost 1000 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 has now started its seventh 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 ***"I am delighted, along with my Department, to be in a position to support such a successful and progressive initiative. Now in its ninth 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 400 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. This is an incredible opportunity and a wonderful support for rural-based female entrepreneurs. I encourage those who have recently started or are about to start a new business to apply to participate in this very exciting initiative."***



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