



ACORNS

A 10 YEAR REPORT & EVALUATION

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





(Left to right) Lisa Breslin, founder of Imagine Lab; Antoinette Moore, founder of Pyramid Holistic Centre; Niamh Walsh, founder of TDL Horizons; Larissa Feeney (Lead Entrepreneur); Sinead Smyth of Inishowen Artists' Retreat and Studio; Claire McDonough, Wild Atlantic Interiors; Feena McBride of The Arty Fox.

Photo: Conor Doherty

ACORNS

A 10 YEAR REPORT & EVALUATION

ACORNS: ACCELERATING THE CREATION OF RURAL NASCENT START-UPS

A Programme Designed and Delivered By Fitzsimons Consulting



MAY 2025

Report Prepared by:

Prof. Colm O’Gorman

Prof. Theo Lynn

Ms. Maggie O’Gorman

DCU Institute for Research in Business and Society

DCU Business School, Dublin City University Collins Avenue, Glasnevin Dublin 9, Republic of Ireland

Tel: +353 1 700 5265 Fax: +353 1 700 5446 Email: business.dcu.ie



Disclaimer: DCU has prepared this report based on an agreed scope of work with Fitzsimons Consulting. In compiling the report the authors used information provided by Fitzsimons Consulting. The authors have attempted to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information contained in this report. No responsibility can be accepted, however, for any errors and inaccuracies that occur.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	06
2. ACORNS - 10 YEAR TIMELINE	07
3. SUPPORTING RURAL ENTREPRENEURS	08
4. PROGRAMME DESIGN AND LEARNING APPROACH	10
5. LEAD ENTREPRENEURS	14
6. PRE-PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT ANALYSIS	19
7. POST-PROGRAMME OUTCOMES	23
8. WHY ACORNS WORKS - PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES	25
9. ACORNS IN ACTION - PARTICIPANT PROFILES	36
10. CONCLUSIONS	43

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the completion of the tenth cycle of ACORNS, this report reviews the ACORNS Programme - Accelerate the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups, developed and delivered by Fitzsimons Consulting,¹ led by Paula Fitzsimons, and funded under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

ACORNS is a six month part-time development programme for rural female entrepreneurs. Through ACORNS, female entrepreneurs develop the knowledge, confidence and networks that enables them to successfully start and develop sustainable businesses in rural areas. ACORNS is based on the philosophy that entrepreneurs best learn from entrepreneurs. ACORNS is structured around a peer-to-peer roundtable of participants, facilitated by a Lead Entrepreneur. These Lead Entrepreneurs, who are core to the success of the ACORNS initiative, are themselves entrepreneurs who have successfully started and developed businesses in rural Ireland and who have firsthand experience of a peer-to-peer learning model.²

In reviewing the ACORNS programme, this report draws on data collected from participants during the ACORNS application process, from feedback provided by participants at the end of each ACORNS cycle, and the testimonials freely provided by ACORNS participants in the knowledge that these could be attributed and used in the public domain.

By April 2025, over 550 women have participated across the ten cycles of ACORNS. These are enterprising women – seeking to turn ideas into businesses and to develop early-stage businesses, by growing revenues, employment, and frequently exports. In their ACORNS application form, they are invited in an open question to identify three barriers related to starting and developing their business. In their responses, those selected to participate include barriers related to their business (in the main, marketing challenges and issues related to finance and access to funding). They also identify more personal issues related to them as entrepreneurs (lack of supports and expertise, issues related to time management and a lack of confidence).

Over the course of six months, the ACORNS programme supports these women to develop business goals, to hold themselves accountable to their peers, and to take actions to advance their businesses.

This process is facilitated by Lead Entrepreneurs. The skills and expertise of the Lead Entrepreneurs in leading the roundtables and nurturing the peer support results in ACORNS participants reporting very significant benefits from the programme – including developing business skills that result in tangible improvements to their businesses, and personal development as entrepreneurs, including ‘Mindset Shifts’, and the development of ‘A Sense of Solidarity’ with their peers and the ACORNS community.

What follows is a review of the ACORNS initiative and the experiences of the over 550 women entrepreneurs who have participated in the ACORNS programme.



Deirdre Doyle, The Cool Food School

¹ Paula Fitzsimons and her team in Fitzsimons Consulting are experienced in supporting female entrepreneurs to achieve their growth ambitions, having designed and implemented a number of initiatives, including the award winning Going for Growth suite of initiatives, that seek to support ambitious female entrepreneurs to realise their growth ambitions. (www.goingforgrowth.com)

² All are members of the Going for Growth Community and have experienced at first hand the benefits to be derived from a round table of peers, facilitated by a Lead Entrepreneur.

2. ACORNS - 10 Year Timeline

3. Supporting Rural Entrepreneurs

3.1 RURAL FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

International research evidence suggests that entrepreneurship is an important engine of economic development, and this is particularly so in rural areas. Across Europe many rural areas have experienced stagnation or decline in economic activity, often associated with limited job opportunities that results in outward migration by young people, resulting in a downward spiral of declining population and declining economic activity. Entrepreneurs in rural areas can help address these challenges by creating new jobs, providing new products and services to local markets, diversifying the economic base, and in so doing, help sustain rural communities.

Entrepreneurship is a process embedded in local contexts. International research demonstrates that rural contexts can both enable and constrain entrepreneurship. Like all entrepreneurs, rural entrepreneurs face specific challenges in resourcing their new ideas and in building awareness and demand for their products/services, and in bringing products/services to market. Some of these challenges are intensified in rural contexts, as rural locations are frequently peripheral to entrepreneurial eco-systems, to markets and customers, and are characterised by fewer role models and less diversified networks.

While the focus of international research is typically on how aspects of rural contexts – such as remoteness, lack of role models, rural values, depopulation, market access, etc., may constrain entrepreneurship, rural contexts are heterogenous, however, with some specific aspects acting to enable entrepreneurship, for example, by offering opportunities for businesses in food and agriculture, tourism, and local services. Moreover, the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, including the *working from home* requirement, illustrated the possibility of delivering services remotely. This made specific location less relevant and opened greater possibilities for those living in rural locations.

In Ireland, there has been a consistent gender gap in the rates of entrepreneurship between men and women, with fewer women aspiring to start a new business, fewer women starting new businesses, and fewer women ambitious for the growth of their new businesses. In this regard Ireland is not different from most other developed countries, where entrepreneurship, and high-growth entrepreneurship in particular, is more prevalent among men than women. Research suggests that female entrepreneurs face additional challenges to those faced by male entrepreneurs. Barriers to female entrepreneurship include gendered social roles and stereotypes, which may result in higher levels of ‘fear of failure’, lower levels of self-efficacy (self-confidence), and a lower appetite for risk. Female entrepreneurs have less access to resources, including risk capital. Many of these

obstacles to entrepreneurship are amplified in rural contexts, for both men and women.

In summary, international research suggests that female entrepreneurs face many challenges in starting and developing new businesses. These include business challenges, such as access to markets and access to finance, and personal challenges, such as access to appropriate networks, lack of role models, lower confidence and risk aversion. These challenges are exacerbated for enterprising women living in rural areas.

3.2 SUPPORTING ENTREPRENEURS

Reflecting the importance of entrepreneurship and the barriers that entrepreneurs face, many governments support the delivery of programmes to support entrepreneurship. Research on entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs), organisations that support individuals through the stages of the entrepreneurial process, suggests that the programmes they deliver differ significantly in aims, focus and design. While there is limited research on what makes an effective entrepreneurial support programme, there is evidence that publicly funded business support initiatives can encourage entrepreneurship and that they are associated with sales growth and business survival. One way that this may be achieved is through support for knowledge sharing by stakeholders.

The entrepreneurial process is idiosyncratic, context specific, and dynamic – no two entrepreneurs face the same challenges in the same way at the same time. This means that enterprise development programmes face the twin challenges of being cognisant of ‘what’ entrepreneurs need to learn and ‘how’ entrepreneurs learn.

Entrepreneurs differ in terms of their ‘preparedness’ for entrepreneurship, and their learning needs are diverse in respect of their own self development and that of their business.

When seeking to explicitly develop their skills and knowledge, research suggests that entrepreneurs have a preference for learning-by-doing, learning through trial and error, and learning through direct observation and direct experience.

The variety in prior skills, knowledge and experience, and the preference for ‘direct’ forms of learning, makes designing effective enterprise support programmes difficult. These difficulties are heightened in rural contexts, as rural entrepreneurs may face further challenges in accessing programmes.

3.3 POLICY CONTEXT - DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND THE MARINE

Ireland's industrial policy has long focussed on the twin strategy of developing Ireland's indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses, and the attraction of export-orientated inward foreign direct investment. Within the sphere of developing entrepreneurs, policy makers have recognised the additional challenges and barriers that women entrepreneurs face, as well as the challenges of starting and growing a business in a rural area.

In 2015, having recognised the need for a programme to support female rural entrepreneurship, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) issued a call (through a public procurement competition) for tenders for the provision of a service for the development and delivery of a tailored pilot programme to address the skills, enterprise and capability gaps of nascent female entrepreneurs living in rural areas.

The ACORNS initiative designed to Accelerate the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups, developed by Fitzsimons Consulting, was selected as most suitable to achieve the stated objectives, and Fitzsimons Consulting were awarded the contract to deliver the pilot programme. This pilot programme was funded under the 2015 Rural Innovation and Development Fund. Following the success of the ACORNS pilot, funds were allocated for a further development of the pilot initiative, and a second competitive tendering process was undertaken. Fitzsimons Consulting was awarded this and subsequently won further tenders to continue the development and delivery of the ACORNS programme.

DAFM have been an active stakeholder in ACORNS, reviewing the programme and building in additional requirements to subsequent calls for tenders. This included a recognition of the vulnerability of an enterprise in its very early years, as all ACORNS businesses are at an early-stage, and the expressed desire of participants to stay connected with ACORNS beyond the six months of their initial cycle. As a result, additional support was provided for the further development of the pilot initiative to include the following:



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

- **ACORNS Further Development**, which saw the original groups meet again with their Lead Entrepreneurs on two occasions over the following cycle.
- The development of an **ACORNS Community**, which include topic-based workshops and an annual Forum.
- **ACORNS PLUS**, which is an additional roundtable cycle, targeted at ACORNS participants who have completed a cycle and wish to focus on the growth of their business.

From the outset, successive Ministers for Agriculture have demonstrated their support for the initiative and representatives of DAFM have attended all the formal events - Launch Forum, Cycle Celebration and Community Forum. This underlines the deep commitment of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ACORNS.



(Left to right) Olivia Morrissey, Rostellan Farm, Alison Ritchie, Polar Ice & Lead Entrepreneur, Carine Roseingrave, Burren View Farm

4. Programme Design and Learning Approach

4.1 ACORNS PROGRAMME SUMMARY

ACORNS is a six-month part-time development programme for nascent female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland. Its aim is to equip these early-stage entrepreneurs with the appropriate knowledge, confidence and networks to successfully start and develop sustainable businesses in rural areas. ACORNS provides peer support and learning for at least fifty enterprising women each year. There is no charge to those selected to participate. www.acorns.ie



(Left to right) Triona Spellman, Darcybow, Caroline Fry, Caroline Fry Enterprises, Áine Breen, Lu & Mol, Niamh Hogan, Holos Skincare, Mary B Walsh (Lead Entrepreneur), Aine Kinsella, Tara Hill Flowers, Catherine Kinsella, Saltrock Dairy and Regina O'Connor, Regina Skin and Phibrows.

4.2 ACORNS PROGRAMME PHILOSOPHY

Based on a belief that early-stage entrepreneurs learn best from each other, ACORNS is designed and delivered through a model of entrepreneur-led peer-to-peer learning that focusses on goals and actions. The following are core design principles that inform the delivery and development of ACORNS:

Peer-to-peer learning: In ACORNS peer-to-peer learning occurs through roundtables. At these structured monthly roundtables, participants support each other to successfully navigate the early stages of creating and developing a new business.

Entrepreneur-led: Roundtables are led and facilitated by a successful entrepreneur, known as the Lead Entrepreneur, who have successfully started and grown a business in rural Ireland. These are individuals that ACORNS participants can relate to.

Focus on goals and milestones: The ACORNS philosophy is that progress and development occurs through a process of goal setting and of committing to being accountable to a group of peers for progressing these goals.

Motivated participants: ACORNS seeks participants who demonstrate a determination to advance their businesses and who expect to become employers; are prepared to work hard in pursuit of their goals; and are prepared to fully engage with the programme.

A network of 'like-minded' people: ACORNS builds a network of 'like-minded' people who support each other. This includes the women who are starting and developing their businesses, as well as the Lead Entrepreneurs who have faced similar challenges and have created successful businesses in rural locations.

Shared culture: The roundtables operate on the basis of a shared culture of confidentiality, collegiality and respect:

- **Confidentiality**, everything discussed around the table stays around the table.
 - **Collegiality**, all participants seek to support each other in a 'win:win' mentality.
 - **Respect** for the Lead Entrepreneur and the voluntary nature of her involvement, and for each other and their businesses.
-

4.3 TARGET PARTICIPANTS FOR ACORNS

ACORNS is designed for nascent female entrepreneurs, living in rural Ireland. To qualify for consideration for the ACORNS programme, a woman must meet the following criteria:

- Have recently set up a new business which she owns, or part owns, and which has less than two years' sales, or 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.
- 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.

In selecting participants, ACORNS gives favourable consideration to applicants who expect to grow their businesses and to employ others over the following three years.

Unlike some other entrepreneur support programmes in Ireland, in ACORNS there is no restriction on the sector in which the new business is focused. Reflecting this, participants have been involved in a wide range of businesses, including, for example:

- Agricultural related businesses, focussing on vegetables, dairy products, honey and agri-tourism.
- Artisan products such as chocolates, soaps and hand-crafted jewellery.
- Beauty sector businesses, salon and product based.
- Consulting firms specialising in credit, health and safety, recruitment and career guidance.
- Healthcare based businesses in fertility, speech and language therapy, and physiotherapy.
- Tech based businesses, focussing on AI tools, digital marketing and graphic design.
- Tourist and service industry businesses, such as self-catering accommodation, and cafes.

4.4 ACORNS PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The programme has a structured design incorporating the following elements:

- The opening of the call for applicants, which incorporates an active PR campaign designed to get notice of the opportunity offered to as wide a number as possible of eligible enterprising women.
- The selection by the Lead Entrepreneurs of those to be offered the opportunity to participate.⁴
- A two-day Residential Development/Launch Forum at which participants meet each other and the Lead Entrepreneurs for the first time, and learn how the programme works, in terms of the role of the Lead Entrepreneurs and the philosophy underpinning the roundtable meetings. The first roundtable meeting occurs during these two days.
- Six, in-person, roundtable sessions (approximately one per month over six months). Each roundtable group is facilitated by the same Lead Entrepreneur. There are approximately eight participants per roundtable. These sessions last for about three hours and explore challenges and support participants to consider how best to start, develop and position their businesses for sustainability and growth.
- The focus of the roundtables is as follows:
 - **Roundtable 1:** Each participant sets goals and milestones to be achieved
 - **Roundtable 2 to Roundtable 5:** Participants explore the themes of Strategy, Marketing/Sales, Finance, and Implementation.
 - **Roundtable 6:** Participants reflect on the achievements from roundtables 1 to 5 and each participant then sets out a Roadmap for the next 6 months.
- End of cycle Celebration/Development Forum. Participants from the ACORNS cycle come together for a forum focussed on 'SMART Planning - The Roadmap Ahead'. The final roundtable (Roundtable 6) occurs during this forum.
- During the ACORNS programme cycle, the participants have access to additional topic-based workshops /information briefings. Examples include the following:
 - **Development Agency Briefing.** A workshop that provides a briefing from development agencies, such as Local Enterprise Offices, Enterprise Ireland, Credit Review, together with an opportunity for Q and A.
 - **LEADER Application Process** workshop.
 - **Understanding the Numbers** workshop to increase financial literacy among the group.

⁴ All applicants who are not successful receive a personal email signposting them to alternative supports.

- Participants receive an online, up-to-date, booklet of the supports available from the Local Enterprise Offices, through the LEADER initiative, and from Enterprise Ireland among others.

The collection of feedback, to enable evaluation and constant improvement, is incorporated into every stage of the ACORNS cycle.

4.5 RECRUITING TO ACORNS

ACORNS needs to ensure that a wide range of potential applicants are aware of the programme. Initially in building the pool of applicants, the team in Fitzsimons Consulting had to rely on promotion, as the programme was new, and the potential applicants were hard to identify. There was, and continues to be, a particular focus on local and regional media, as stories from local contexts resonate strongly with local communities.

The ACORNS team continue to focus on building awareness of the ACORNS programme, through an annual PR campaign. Since the completion of the pilot, Fitzsimons Consulting has facilitated the telling of the stories of countless ACORNS participants by connecting journalists with women who have participated in ACORNS, profiling their business and their personal success. This has resulted in over 1,100 media mentions across national and regional print, online and broadcast media (Table 4.1). The approach of focussing on the success stories, rather than on the ACORNS programme, has helped spread the word of ACORNS. ACORNS media coverage typically refers to the support of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.⁵

As ACORNS developed, the most important source of applications became word of mouth and referral by ACORNS past participants or ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs. For example, for ACORNS 10, 46% of applicants learnt about the programme through word of mouth or referral by ACORNS past participants or ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs. Both participants who have completed the programme, and the ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs, are important ambassadors for the programme.

The PR initiative continues to provide profile for community members and develop recognition of the initiative and its benefits outside of those previously involved.

Table 4.1. Media mentions

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
National print	7	5	19	20	9	13	11	5	4	1	94	9%
Regional print	36	21	20	38	61	46	50	56	42	59	429	39%
Online	19	15	7	24	34	61	63	89	52	61	425	38%
Broadcast	7	7	4	7	11	20	30	34	11	24	155	14%
Total	69	48	50	89	115	140	154	184	109	145	1,103	100%

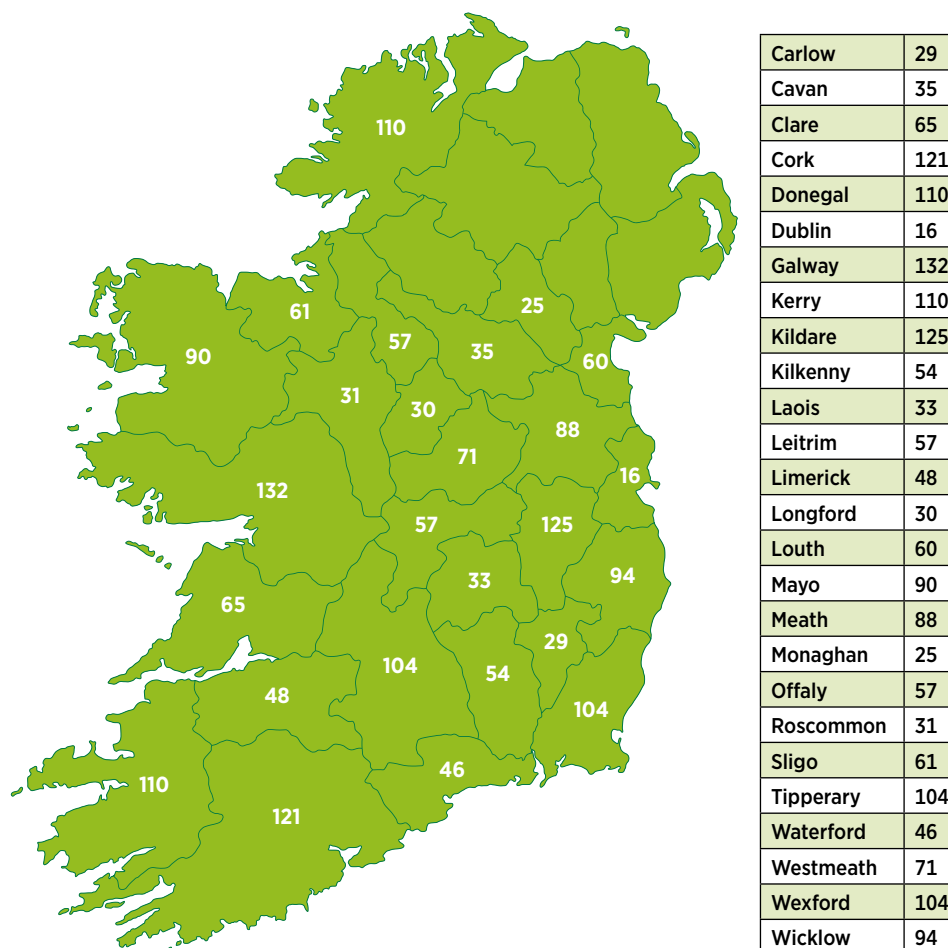
The programme is oversubscribed in each cycle, having now received a total of 1,796 applications. This means that for every participant on ACORNS, there are about 3.3 applications. As noted in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1, there is a good geographical spread across the country.

Table 4.2. Applicants to ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Connacht	42	53	30	23	46	44	38	37	23	35	371	21%
Leinster	67	65	57	79	92	100	79	69	74	79	761	42%
Munster	61	47	30	35	53	62	71	42	46	47	494	28%
Ulster (ROI)	16	9	14	9	36	18	27	16	7	18	170	9%
Total	186	174	131	146	227	224	215	164	150	179	1,796	100%

⁵ The positive association of the DAFM with ACORNS is evident in that the Minister, members of the Government more generally, or the Department were specifically mentioned in 88% of all media mentions over the ACORNS 10 cycle. This level of positive association is demonstrated each year.

Figure 4.1. Applicants to ACORNS by county



4.6 ACORNS COMMUNITY, ACORNS FURTHER DEVELOPMENT, ACORNS PLUS

Over the past ten years, the initiative has evolved to provide additional supports for participants who have completed an initial cycle of ACORNS.

4.6.1 ACORNS Community

Responding to their expressed desire, former participants are offered the opportunity to continue to avail themselves of support through the ACORNS Community. This allows them to attend a variety of topic-based workshops and to take part in the annual ACORNS Forum and networking event.

The community are central to the PR campaigns organised by ACORNS, in particular as part of the call for applicants for each cycle. To facilitate this, those trading are offered the opportunity to have their profiles written, professionally formatted and publicly available by being uploaded on to the ACORNS website. These are reviewed and updated regularly. <https://acorns.ie/participants-stories/>

4.6.2 ACORNS Further Development

Since ACORNS 2 (2016/17), participants have been offered an opportunity to engage in ACORNS Further Development. This provides the opportunity in the year following the completion of the initial cycle of ACORNS, to have two further review meetings with their Lead Entrepreneur and with their original group.

4.6.3 ACORNS Plus and ACORNS Plus Review

Since ACORNS 3, there is also a follow-on programme, ACORNS Plus, for participants who are particularly focused on the growth of their businesses. For ACORNS Plus, any previous ACORNS participant who has completed ACORNS Further Development can apply. Selection for participation is on a competitive basis. Initially, just one ACORNS Plus roundtable was offered, facilitated by a Lead Entrepreneur from the Going for Growth programme.⁶ Given the demand for places, the following year a second Going for Growth Lead Entrepreneur agreed to facilitate an ACORNS Plus round table, so that two of these round tables could be offered. When completed, those who participated on ACORNS Plus were offered an ACORNS Plus Review the following cycle.

⁶ Going for Growth is an award winning peer support initiative, targeted at ambitious female entrepreneurs. It is now in its 17th year. It was also designed and is implemented by Fitzsimons Consulting.

5. Lead Entrepreneurs

Pivotal to the success of the ACORNS model are a small group of Lead Entrepreneurs.

In designing the ACORNS programme, Fitzsimons Consulting drew on the evidence that entrepreneurs best learn from each other and that this process can be best enabled through a process guided by an entrepreneur. Reflecting the ethos and focus of ACORNS, the Lead Entrepreneurs are all female and are all successful entrepreneurs from rural Ireland.

These Lead Entrepreneurs facilitate a roundtable for the duration of the ACORNS cycle. The interactive nature of the roundtables requires that Lead Entrepreneurs enable peer-to-peer learning, with all members contributing to the process and the Lead Entrepreneur contributing her relevant experience. The Lead Entrepreneur is not a consultant or an expert on all business topics. Rather she has first-hand experience of the challenge of starting and growing a business in rural Ireland.

All Lead Entrepreneurs are past participants of the Going for Growth programme, and as such have first-hand experience of the round table peer learning approach and of its benefits.

Located throughout rural Ireland, all the Lead Entrepreneurs contribute their time on a voluntary basis.

ACORNS 10 LEAD ENTREPRENEURS

Alison Ritchie, Polar Ice (Portarlington, Co. Laois)

Alison Ritchie is the Managing Director of Polar Ice Ltd, Ireland's leading manufacturer and distributor of dry ice products. Since its establishment in 1996, Alison has led the company's growth, ensuring it remains at the forefront of innovation in the industry.

A significant milestone in her journey was the 2022 joint venture with the SOL Group, a leading European supplier of technical and medical gases. This partnership has strengthened Polar Ice Ltd.'s market position, expanded its capabilities, and created new opportunities for growth.

Entrepreneurship has always been central to Alison's career. In 2005, she co-founded Polar IceTech Ireland Ltd, a specialist provider of cryogenic cleaning solutions. Under her leadership, the business became a market leader before she successfully sold it in 2016.

With a strong background in business and finance, Alison holds a Business Degree from Dublin City University (DCU) and is a Fellow of Chartered Accountants Ireland (FCA). She was awarded first place in Ireland in the Professional 2 Strategic Corporate Finance exam, a distinction recognised by the Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Ireland (CPA).

Throughout her career, Alison has received numerous accolades, including the Ulster Bank Business Achievers Award, WMB Entrepreneur of the Year, and the All-Star Business Award for Thought Leadership in Enterprise Development. She was also named Accountant of the Year, a particular career highlight.

www.polarice.ie



Caroline Reidy, The HR Suite (Tralee, Co. Kerry)



Caroline Reidy is the Managing Director of the HR Suite and is a HR and Employment Law Expert. With a Master's degree in human resources from the University of Limerick, Caroline is also CIPD accredited, as well as being a trained mediator. She has served as Commissioner for the Low Pay Commission and is also an adjudicator on the Work Place Relations Commission.

Now one of the biggest Irish HR & training companies with offices in Dublin, Kerry and Cork, The HR Suite offers specialist tailored and effective solutions in human resources, employment law, training and e-learning to clients throughout Ireland.

The HR Suite has been recently acquired by NFP, an Aon Company, a leading global insurance broker. This expands the range of services on offer to their clients, such as Health and Safety, Outplacement, Employee Benefits, and Pensions.

Caroline has been appointed to the governing body of the Munster Technology University. She is an independent expert observer to the management board of European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working in Ireland and is also on the board of The Design & Crafts Council of Ireland.

Caroline is also an author, having written "The Art of Asking the Right Question" a tool kit for people managers to ensure they maximise the talent of their people. She has also presented "The Art of Asking the Right Question" as a really popular TEDx talk.

www.thehrsuite.com

Eimer Hannon, Hannon Travel (Navan, Co. 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 on the Amadeus Consumer Advisory Board.

www.hannontravel.com

Geraldine Jones, Skin Formulas (Nenagh, Co. Tipperary)



Geraldine Jones is the founder and Chief Executive of Skin Formulas, a skin and body care award-winning business, based in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. From its initial concept and launch in 2019, Skin Formulas has become one of the leading Irish skincare brands today with over 160 stockists offering their products to customers. For over 20 years Geraldine has been recognised as an experienced and successful business consultant in the beauty industry and has been changing people's lives with her knowledge and understanding of skin. Geraldine has expertly managed the growth of Skin Formulas since its launch and has led the growth of

the company in revenue, staffing, brand and operations. In addition to Skin Formulas, Geraldine had previously launched a highly successful skincare and laser clinic, MEDISKIN in 2014, which is a market leader in delivering innovation for its customers. Its use of the latest technology ensures it is at the forefront of skincare solutions, which brought an array of awards for its services since opening. Geraldine sold the clinic to two of her employees in June 2024 so that she can concentrate on further developing Skin Formulas.

www.skinformulas.ie

Larissa Feeney, Kinore, (Letterkenny, Co. Donegal)



Larissa Feeney is the CEO and founder of Kinore, formerly known as Accountant Online, a multi-award-winning chartered accountancy firm that provides exceptional finance and business services. Specialising in top-tier annual accounting, bookkeeping, tax, and payroll services, Kinore serves companies across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the UK. The company is proudly ISO 9001 accredited, underscoring its commitment to quality management and customer satisfaction.

Larissa's exceptional career is highlighted by her recognition in the industry. She was shortlisted for the Image Businesswoman of the Year Award in both 2017 and 2018, and in 2018, she was awarded 'Accountant of the Year'. Under her leadership, Kinore has garnered several accolades, including 'Medium Practice of the Year' and overall 'Practice of the Year' in 2020, and 'Online Practice of the Year' in 2022 & 2024, and 'Client Service Award' 2024 from the Irish Accountancy Awards.

Beyond her professional achievements, Larissa is deeply committed to empowering female entrepreneurs. She has been a role model for the LEO Donegal's Ambition programme and contributed to the Going for Growth initiative.

Larissa also extends her influence through her roles as Chair of the Donegal County Enterprise Board, as an active member of the Finance Sub Committee of the Atlantic Technological University, and as President of the Donegal Women In Business network.

kinore.com

Mary B. Walsh, Ire Wel Pallets (Gorey, Co. 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 MacGiolla Rí, Aró Digital Strategies (Na Forbacha, Co Galway, Connemara Gaeltacht)



Triona Mac Giolla Rí is the co-founder and director of Aró Digital Strategy, a pioneering hotel-tech agency headquartered in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Aró is celebrated as one of the foremost full-service providers for independent luxury properties, offering state-of-the-art website design, innovative booking technology solutions, and comprehensive marketing strategies to over 200 luxury hotels in Ireland, the UK, and globally.

Aró excels in delivering strategies powered by predictive modelling and intelligent insights across the pivotal areas of customer segmentation, acquisition, engagement, and conversion. By leveraging advanced technologies, Aró empowers luxury hotels to enhance their online presence, optimize their operations, and significantly boost direct bookings.

www.aro.ie

ACORNS LEAD ENTREPRENEURS ON PREVIOUS CYCLES

Anne Cusack, Formerly Critical Healthcare (Co Westmeath)



In 1999 Anne co-founded Critical Healthcare, a leader in the Emergency Services market providing healthcare solutions at the front line. As CEO, Anne brought Critical Healthcare through many milestones, the winning and retaining of multiple public and private contracts including the NHS, and Falck Europe, the largest provider of Emergency Services globally; the design and patenting of innovative new products; the creation of an own brand portfolio of medical consumables & medical devices; and the design & development of their own software procurement platform adopted by multiple Irish & European emergency service providers.

A qualified Non-Executive Director from the Institute of Directors, Anne has served on a number of boards, including the Governing Body of TUS (Technological University Shannon). Anne is a member of the HealthTech Ireland Digital Health Forum. In 2019, Anne was invited by the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, to serve as Chair of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee, 2019-2020 and was subsequently reappointed, 2020-2024.

In 2021 Critical Healthcare was acquired in a management buy-in and Anne is now pursuing her many other interests.

Anne Reilly, Formerly Paycheck Plus (Co. 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 businesses.

Deirdre McGlone, Hospitality & Tourism Advisor (Co. 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 community. She is also an ambassador for Donegal Women in Business Network.

ACORNS PLUS LEAD ENTREPRENEURS

Claire Duignan



Clare Duignan is a non-executive director with extensive board experience across private, public and not-for-profit sectors. She is currently a board member of IMRO Irish Music Rights Organisation, The Irish Times DAC, Ireland SOS and is also a Trustee of The Chester Beatty Library. She chaired the Irish Government's Arts and Culture Recover Task Force 2020, which led to the introduction of Ireland's innovative pilot scheme of Basic Income for the Arts. Her previous board roles include Fáilte Ireland, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Business to Arts, Dublin International Film Festival, and The Arts Council. During her extensive executive career at RTÉ, she spent over 20 years in key leadership roles including Head of Independent Productions, Director of Programmes TV, and Managing Director Radio and Performing Groups. Clare is a qualified Personal, Leadership and Executive Coach, and a Board Performance Evaluator with the Institute of Directors.

Geraldine Kelly



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 Kinore and SnapDragon International Ltd. She previously served on the boards of Bank of Ireland Mortgage Bank, Gaelectric, MicroFinance Ireland and Plan International Ireland Ltd.

ACORNS PLUS LEAD ENTREPRENEURS ON EARLIER CYCLES

Heather Reynolds



Heather Reynolds was the CEO and co-founder of Eishtec DAC, an indigenous company founded in 2010 that grew to 1,700 employees across four locations in Ireland and the UK before being sold to Infosys in 2019. Passionate about helping people reach their full potential, Heather continues to lead, with a focus on development and growth. She is currently working with the innovative Irish company, Social Talent.

Lulu O'Sullivan



Lulu O'Sullivan is the founder of TheIrishStore.com and GiftsDirect.com. She continues to lead these two thriving, ecommerce businesses, supporting Irish producers at home, while successfully promoting them around the world. Lulu was an EY Entrepreneur of the Year Finalist in 2019.

Monica Flood



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, investment and art related interests.

6. Pre-programme Participant Analysis

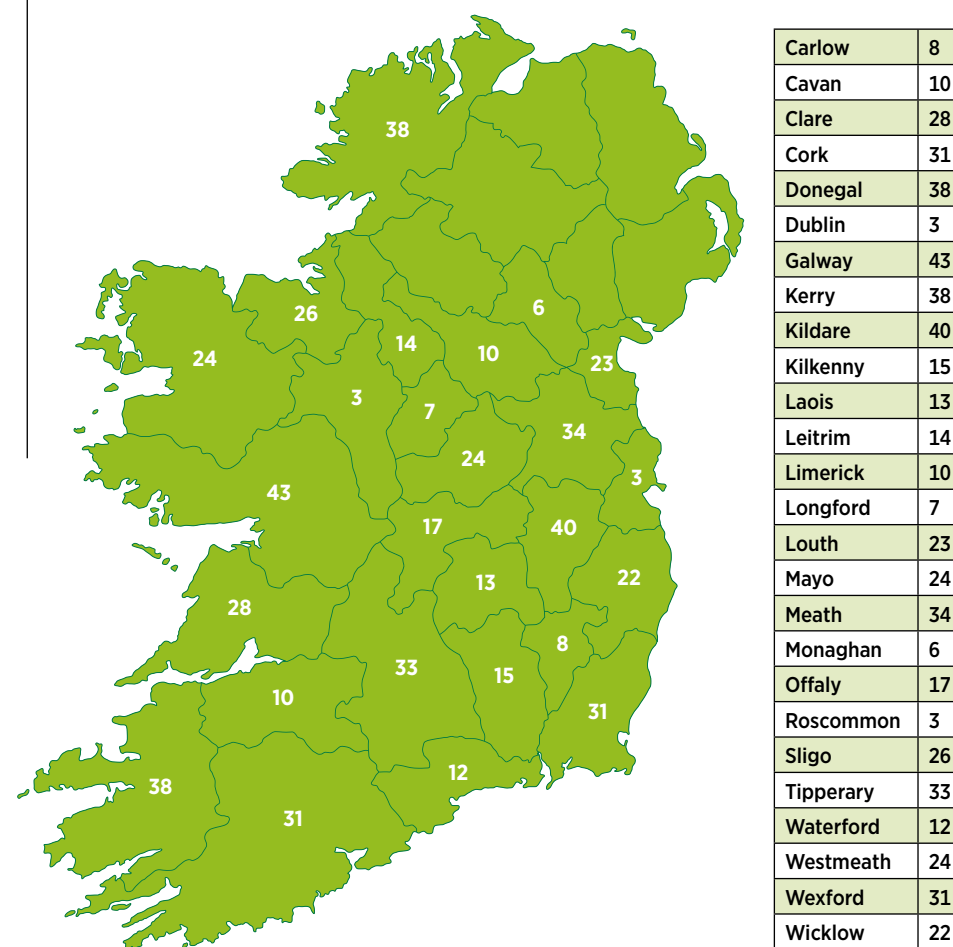
6.1 GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF ACORNS PARTICIPANTS

There is a good geographical spread of participants from across the country. In summary, Leinster is most represented (43%), then Munster (27%), followed by Connacht (20%) and then the 3 counties of Ulster (10%) (Table 6.1). The most represented counties are Galway (43), Kildare (40), Donegal (38) and Kerry (38). Figure 6.1 illustrates participants by county.

Table 6.1. Participants by region

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Connacht	8	16	12	12	5	9	14	11	14	9	110	20%
Leinster	24	21	23	26	23	28	21	23	26	22	237	43%
Munster	11	17	12	11	13	17	20	13	20	18	152	27%
Ulster (ROI)	5	3	9	3	8	3	7	5	4	7	54	10%
Total	48	57	56	52	49	57	62	52	64	56	553	100%

Figure 6.1. ACORNS participants by county



6.2 PARTICIPANT BUSINESS PROFILES - PRIOR TO ACORNS

Reflecting the purpose of the ACORNS Programme, the businesses are at a very early stage of development. This is reflected in current annual revenues, current total employment, and current market focus.

With respect to annual revenues, nearly half (46%) of the participants across the cycles are at the very early stages of business development, with 26% not yet trading, and a further 20% with revenues of less than €10,000. A further third of businesses (34%) have revenues of between €10,000 and €50,000 (Table 6.2). Across all cycles, about 1 in 5 participants (20%) have entered the ACORNS programme already having over €50,000 annual revenues, including a smaller number (10%) with annual revenues of over €100,000.

Table 6.2. Revenue prior to ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Not trading/unknown	19	25	23	11	11	12	8	13	15	5	142	26%
<€10,000	5	10	10	10	9	13	26	13	9	6	111	20%
€10,000 - €50,000	12	16	18	22	16	24	14	15	21	29	187	34%
€50,000 - €100,000	2	4	4	4	8	5	6	8	7	6	54	10%
€100,000 +	10	2	1	5	5	3	8	3	12	10	59	10%
Total number of businesses	48	57	56	52	49	57	62	52	64	56	553	100%

With respect to employment, average numbers of employees reported by participants is 1.7 (Table 6.3)⁷.

Table 6.3. Employment prior to ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Combined employment	103.5	105	86	74	83.5	88	116	82	130	94	962
Average per participant	2.2	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.7	1.5	1.9	1.6	2	1.7	1.7

Reflecting the early stages of these businesses, across all the cycle, participants, prior to their involvement in ACORNS, are primarily focused on the local or domestic market (82%), with less than 1 in 5 (18%) focussed on exporting (Table 6.4).

Table 6.4. Market focus prior to ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Domestic market focus only*	43	43	47	43	40	41	52	43	58	45	455	82%
Exporting	5	14	9	9	9	16	10	9	6	11	98	18%
Total number of businesses	48	57	56	52	49	57	62	52	64	56	553	100%

*Including those not yet trading

⁷ Employment numbers in this report include both full-time and part-time employees.

6.3 BARRIERS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

In their application forms, applicants are invited to indicate three barriers they are currently facing. The barriers identified fall into two broad categories- those related to specific business challenges, such as marketing, finance and funding, and those that relate to themselves as entrepreneurs (Table 6.5).

With respect to specific business challenges, two areas dominate – marketing (23%) and finance and funding (22%). Marketing barriers are issues such as: a lack of expertise, including how to increase brand/product awareness, issues related to entering the target market, including entering export markets, as well as specific issues such as distribution and pricing. Within this category, some participants explicitly call out issues relating to digital, referring to the challenge of developing an online and social media presence, as well as online content development.

The second most cited issue relates to finance and funding. Participants report barriers related to access to finance, including identifying appropriate grants and other supports, as well as issues related to managing finance, such as financial management and cash flow management.

A second set of barriers relate to themselves as entrepreneurs (33%). These group into three areas.

Entrepreneur: Lack of Supports and Expertise. Issues related to self-perceptions of a lack of support and a lack of business expertise (16%). This includes issues such as a lack of a support network, an insufficient industry network, and no mentors, as well as their sense of a lack of business expertise

Entrepreneur: Shortage of Time. Issues related to a lack of time and time management (9%).

Entrepreneur: Lack of Confidence. Issues related to self-confidence (8%), which included items such as ‘my lack of confidence’, that the business is dependent on one person, needing to rely on themselves, and the isolation of starting the business, sometimes reflecting isolated rural locations.

Table 6.5. Barriers to entrepreneurship identified by participants prior to ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Marketing	33	46	36	31	20	27	49	34	39	25	315	23%
Finance and Funding	35	38	32	23	24	24	25	30	38	30	299	22%
Entrepreneur												
- Lack of Supports and Expertise	8	31	17	25	18	28	22	17	27	23	216	16%
- Shortage of Time	6	8	17	18	6	14	9	17	14	18	127	9%
- Lack of Confidence	3	11	17	18	14	12	9	10	13	5	112	8%

6.4 BUSINESS ASPIRATIONS – PRIOR TO ACORNS

The participants of ACORNS are enterprising. This relates to those who are currently pre-trading or currently very small, as well as those who are larger and who expect to grow revenue and employment. A significant number also have ambitions to initiate exporting or to increase exporting.

ACORNS participants are at the early stages of business creation and development. As noted above, nearly half (46%) have no revenues or revenues of less than €10,000. Participants expect to make significant progress in terms of moving to become revenue generating and increasing revenues. Within 3 years, less than one in fifty of participants (2%) expect to still have less than €10,000 revenues (compared to 46% reporting, at the time of starting ACORNS, that they are not trading or that they are trading with revenues less than €10,000). While just one in five (20%) ACORNS participants had revenues greater than €50,000 when they commenced ACORNS, nine in ten expected to have revenues of greater than €50,000 within three years of the programme.

Table 6.6. Projected future revenue (+ 3 years) at time of programme entry

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Not trading/ unknown	-	3	2	-	-	-		1	1	2	9	2%
<€10,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
€10,000 - €50,000	-	6	3	5	2	3	6	6	2	2	35	6%
€50,000 - €100,000	2	10	11	10	11	16	13	10	9	11	103	19%
€100,000 - €500,000	24	22	23	24	24	23	29	22	33	26	250	45%
€500,000 - €1,000,000	11	10	6	6	8	9	5	7	14	5	81	15%
€1,000,000 +	11	6	11	7	4	6	9	6	5	10	75	13%
Total number of businesses	48	57	56	52	49	57	62	52	64	56	553	100%

Participants starting ACORNS expect to grow employment in the next three years. While average employment at the start of ACORNS is 1.7 employees per business, this is projected to increase to 6.6 employees per business within 3 years (Table 6.7). This is close to a four-fold increase. If the entrepreneurs realise these ambitions, this would be an additional 2,700 jobs created.

Table 6.7. Projected future employment (+ 3 years) at time of programme entry

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Projected combined estimated employment provided in 3 years	411	377	283	384	240	337	502	375	386	369	3664	
Projected average estimated employment provided at the individual level in 3 years	8.6	6.6	5	7.4	4.9	5.9	8	7	6	6	6.6	

While 98 (18%) participants are exporting when they start ACORNS, 348 (63%) expect to be exporting within 3 years of starting ACORNS (Table 6.8). If this aspiration were to be realised, there would be 250 new exporters within 3 years of completing ACORNS.

Table 6.8. Projected market focus (+ 3 years) at time of programme entry

	ACORNS Cycle										Total	
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Domestic market focus only*	11	20	16	16	20	20	22	26	29	25	205	37%
Exporting	37	37	40	36	29	37	40	26	35	31	348	63%
Total number of businesses	48	57	56	52	49	57	62	52	64	56	553	100%

*Including those not yet trading

7. Post-programme Outcomes

7.1 SHORT-TERM BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT⁸

For those participants that report revenues pre and post ACORNS, there is a significant short-term increase in revenues – with combined (for all cycles) revenues increasing from €19,230,000 to €28,990,000, a fifty one percent increase (Table 7.1). For all but ACORNS 5, aggregate combined post cycle revenues exceed those of pre-cycle revenues.

Table 7.1. Revenues – pre and post ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total
	Pilot	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9	10	
	€ 000's										
Total combined revenue at start of cycle	2,050	1,760	890	1,630	2,100	1,800	1,500	1,900	2,800	2,800	€19,230,000
Total combined revenue at the end of the cycle	2,400	2,140	1,750	2,300	1,800	3,600	3,100	3,600	4,000	4,300	€28,990,000
Percentage increase over the cycle	17%	22%	97%	41%	-14%	100%	107%	89%	43%	54%	51%

*During Cycle 5, COVID-19 resulted in restrictions to trading for some participants.

For those participants that report employment pre and post ACORNS, there is a significant short-term increase in employment – with combined pre-cycle employment increasing from 822 staff to 1,023 staff, a twenty-four percent increase (Table 7.2).

Table 7.2. Employment – pre and post ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total
	Pilot	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9	10	
Combined Employment at start of cycle	83	102	77	70	82	78	94	80	67	89	822
Combined Employment at end of cycle	94	108	109	89	67	107	116	96	133	104	1,023
Percentage increase over the cycle	13%	6%	42%	27%	-18%	37%	23%	20%	100%	17%	24%

*During Cycle 5, COVID-19 resulted in restrictions to trading for some participants.

For those participants that report export activity, 145 participants (29%) are exporting at the end of the ACORNS cycle (Table 7.3). Based on pre-cycle data, 98 (20%) were exporting, meaning that there are 47 new exporters within the timeframe of the ACORNS cycle.

Table 7.3. Exporting post ACORNS

	ACORNS Cycle										Total
	Pilot	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9	10	
Exporting experience at end of cycle	10	11	17	21	10	23	11	14	10	18	145
Percentage of participants	23%	20%	34%	47%	21%	43%	23%	31%	18%	35%	29%

*During Cycle 5, COVID-19 resulted in restrictions to trading for some participants.

⁸ Not all participants complete the survey after each cycle, but typically nine in every ten participants respond, with an overall response rate of 89%. For some questions response rates differ. This is a very high response rate.

7.3 PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS – BUSINESS IMPACTS

At the end of each cycle, participants are requested to complete a survey and asked a number of questions to capture the impact of the programme on their business. As the focus of ACORNS is on supporting participants to set goals and to be accountable for these goals across the ACORNS six month cycle, these questions focus on action and ambitions rather than on specific knowledge acquisition. While knowledge and skill development occur through the ACORNS model, the focus of the entrepreneur-led roundtables and the peer-to-peer model is that participants take actions towards achieving their goals.

The effectiveness of this model, from the perspective of the participants, is captured with three related questions:

Business Development: Did participation result in practical change in your business?

Specific Action: Did you make a decision for your business?

Achieving Ambitions: Do you feel nearer to achieving your ambitions?

The responses to these action-focussed questions are overwhelmingly positive, with responses of over 90% to each of the three questions in seven of the nine cycles – meaning that nearly all participants have made a business decision and practical changes to their business, as a result of ACORNS participation, and they are closer to achieving their entrepreneurial and business ambitions (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4. Participant goals and actions

	ACORNS Cycle									
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Business Development: - Did participation result in practical change in your business?*	100%	98%	96%	86%	79%	94%	96%	89%	96%	90%
Specific Action: - Did you make a decision for your business?*	95%	98%	98%	97%	88%	94%	94%	84%	96%	96%
Achieving Ambitions: - Do you feel nearer to achieving your ambitions?*	100%	98%	100%	95%	92%	100%	98%	96%	96%	100%

*Percentage of Yes responses

7.4 PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS – PROGRAMME ASSESSMENTS AND SATISFACTION

7.4.1 Participant engagement

ACORNS participants report high levels of satisfaction with the programme, with the vast majority (90%) of ACORNS participants completing the full cycle of the programme (Table 7.5). Of those that complete, three quarters are trading. Overall satisfaction is evident in the fact that a significant number of participants in ACORNS hear of the programme from previous participants.

There is also high continued engagement of ACORNS participants in the ACORNS Community, through workshops, ACORNS Further Developments and ACORNS Plus. As of 2025, over 270 past participants of ACORNS are members of the ACORNS Community. Indeed, all participants (100%) across all cycles of ACORNS indicate their wish to stay connected to the ACORNS Community.

7.4.2 Roundtables and Lead Entrepreneurs

At the end of each cycle, participants are asked to reflect on the quality of the roundtable experience (Table 7.5). Participants respond that the roundtable format worked very well with very high levels of satisfaction with how the groups interacted (close to 100% across all cycles).

Participants also report very high levels of satisfaction with the Lead Entrepreneurs – in terms of an appropriate match between the Lead Entrepreneur and the participants (minimum of 93%, with 100% in four of the cycles). ACORNS participants are very satisfied (100% in seven cycles and never lower than 91%) with how the Lead Entrepreneurs facilitated the roundtable sessions, and they are very satisfied with the content of the roundtable sessions (100% in seven cycles, and never lower than 96%).

Table 7.5. Participant perceptions of entrepreneur-led roundtables

	ACORNS Cycle									
	Pilot	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Roundtable Group Interactions - Do you think your group interacted well?*	100%	96%	96%	93%	98%	100%	100%	98%	98%	100%
Lead Entrepreneurs - Was your Lead Entrepreneur appropriate for you?*	100%	100%	96%	95%	96%	98%	100%	93%	96%	100%
- Were you happy with how the sessions were led?*	100%	100%	100%	100%	94%	98%	100%	91%	100%	100%
- Were you happy with the general content of the agendas?*	100%	100%	100%	98%	96%	100%	100%	100%	98%	100%

*Percentage of Yes responses

8. Why ACORNS Works - Participants' Perspectives

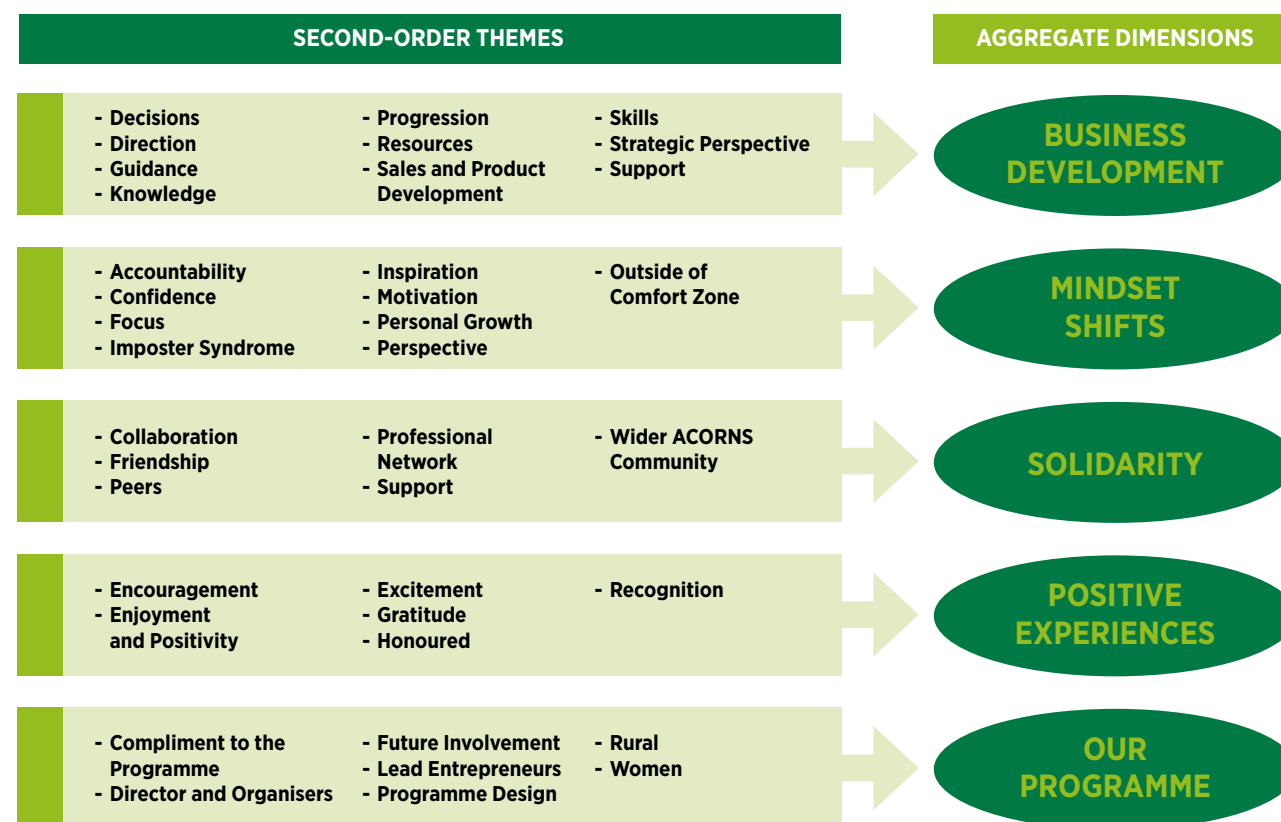
8.1 PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK

ACORNS participants are invited to contribute a testimonial about their experience at the end of each cycle. It is made clear that this request is not mandatory. Those providing testimonials are made aware that it may be used in the public domain and attributed to them. Over 265 past participants have provided testimonials. This analysis is based on an examination of these testimonials.

Using the testimonials from the participants, 1,357 separate data points were identified and coded into 38 second-order themes, which were classified into 5 core aggregate dimensions, namely Business Development, Mindset Shifts, Solidarity, A Programme for Us, and Positive Experiences (Figure 8.1).

Each of the second order themes, throughout this section, is illustrated by an attributed testimonial.

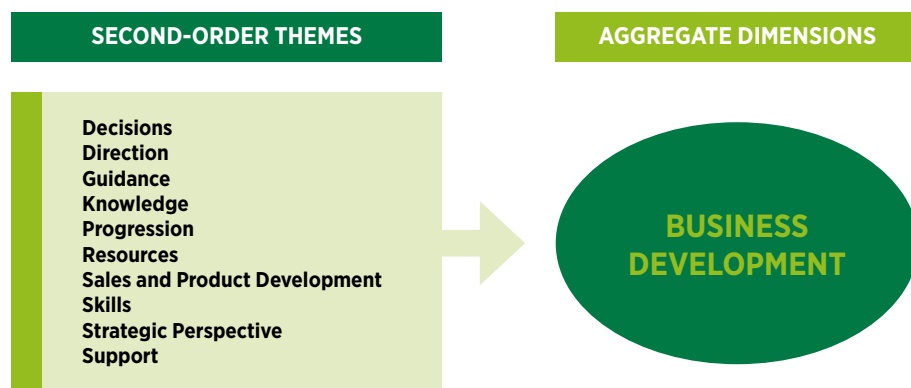
Figure 8.1. Coding of participant testimonials



8.2 BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Through analysing the business development of participants, this analysis seeks to measure the contribution of the programme to the success of the nearly 550 businesses who have benefitted. Participants stated that the programme had greatly supported their businesses, through guidance, knowledge sharing and enhanced decision making, which resulted in increased sales and bringing new products to market (Figure 8.2).

Figure 8.2. Business Development



8.2.1 Decisions

The ACORNS programme was described by the participants as both facilitating problem solving and being solution oriented. The programme, the Lead Entrepreneurs and the fellow ACORNS were complimented as helping the participants to make key decisions for their business. Several participants decided to change ideas or pursue new avenues throughout the programme.

“The ACORNS programme has been instrumental in me making hard decisions for the business, in terms of expansion”.

Aileen Barron, Green Acre Marketing. ACORNS Pilot.

8.2.2 Direction

Participants described the structured, forward-looking format of the programme as very useful to their business development. Confusion and feeling overwhelmed was a noted barrier, with the programme facilitating a sense of clarity. The programme contributed towards participants seeing the potential of their business, and allowed them to focus on the concrete steps they can take to develop it. Participants noted how the programme taught how to set goals and plan in a structured manner.

“I had an idea, but no idea where to begin. ACORNS directed me along a path to reach all my goals”.

Brigid Riley, Fernwood. ACORNS 2.

8.2.3 Guidance

The businesses benefitted from the guidance and expertise of both the Lead Entrepreneurs and the other participants. Feedback, logical discussion, unbiased advice, financial insights and unique perspectives was some of the guidance received. Access to more experienced business professionals was also quoted as a valued component that facilitated access.

“Get feedback from a “board” of smart women with varying experience and perspectives”.

Elaine Crosse, Bánór. ACORNS 9.

8.2.4 Knowledge

A large number of participants stated that they learned a lot from participating in the programme. Knowledge ranging from ‘the fundamentals of business’, ‘learning what help is out there’ and ‘a wealth of expertise in a multitude of disciplines’ was available throughout the programme. ACORNS is focused on applied learning and participants stated that they integrated the knowledge they learned, into the running of their own businesses.

“Participating in ACORNS was a very positive learning journey for my business”.

Suraya Diaz, Dr. Suraya Diaz Ltd. ACORNS 6.

8.2.5 Progression

This component of analysis refers to the actual growth experienced by participants whilst participating. This can be more accurately reflected in the quantitative analysis, but was also emphasised by many participants in their testimonials. The businesses experienced a large amount of progression and growth whilst in the programme. Participants emphasised how the programme has helped them scale their business, facilitate long-term sustainable development and accelerate the rate at which they were previously growing.

“Attending monthly meetings with the support and expertise of the Lead Entrepreneur and my fellow ACORNS resulted in the growth of my business and myself”.

Clare O Connor, Clare O Connor Coaching. ACORNS 6.

8.2.6 Resources

The programme was quoted as being a wonderful resource in and of itself, as well as providing access and information to other tools and resources.

“ACORNS is a fantastic experience and support structure for any nascent business. It is particularly beneficial the younger your business is – the outline of each section, the structure, the topics, the professionalism are a wonderful resource and I would whole-heartedly endorse participating in any ACORNS event”.

Brid Graham, Splash Swim School. ACORNS 2.

8.2.7 Sales and Product Development

Across the 6-month programme, businesses reported they had increased sales, entered new markets and developed new products. It is notable that the participants associated these developments in the business with their participation in the programme.

“I launched a new range of products during the programme and Bó Rua Farm continues to go from strength to strength”.

Norma Dinneen, Bó Rua Farm. ACORNS Pilot.

8.2.8 Skills

Participants learned new skills and shared their skill sets with fellow participants and their own teams and staff throughout the programme. Skills included planning for their businesses, export related skills and individualised skills based on the nature of their business.

“It has given me the skills to aim high with our goals and given the belief that anything is possible. It is an experience I will be forever grateful for, to be surrounded by such inspiring businesswomen is an achievement in itself”.

Georgia Quealy, Bon Chocolatiers. ACORNS 7.

8.2.9 Strategic Perspective

In effect a *helicopter view* refers to being able to see the bigger picture or the business as a whole. This allows the participants to accurately assess their position and make future decisions. Participants cited honesty, constructive criticism and a lack of bias as being key contributions to this element. Both Lead Entrepreneurs and fellow ACORNS were quoted as facilitating this perspective.

“The programme has given me structure and a better ‘helicopter view’ of my business”.

Arantxa Lopez, ID Translation. ACORNS 3.

8.2.10 Support

The participants’ businesses received a great deal of general support over the course of the programme. Participants described the programme as invaluable, beneficial, useful and practical in supporting their businesses. This support is crucial during the tenuous period of nascent and early-stage enterprises.

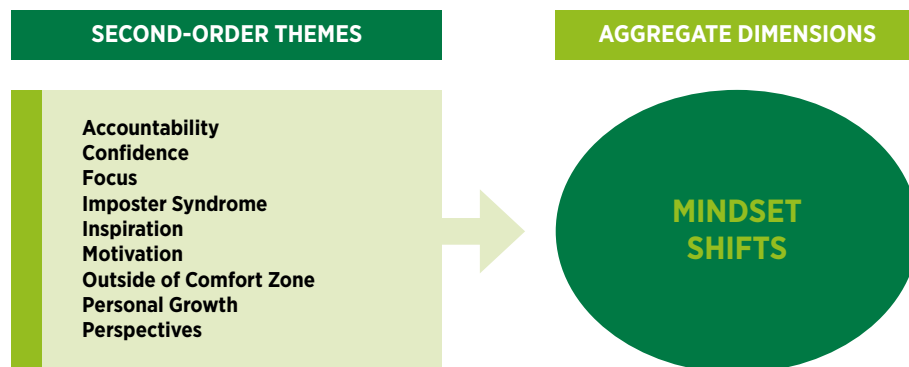
“The support given by the programme, the Lead Entrepreneurs and the other ACORNS is so valuable and there will always be someone in the ACORNS community with a solution to your problem”.

Lynn Shead, Natures Alchemy. ACORNS 8.

8.3 MINDSET SHIFTS

The participants reported significant shifts in their mindset through participating in the ACORNS programme. *Mindset Shift* refers to a change in the way the participants perceived themselves and their businesses. This included increased accountability, confidence and focus, addressing imposter syndrome and adopting new perspectives. The nine second-order themes identified demonstrate the variety of ways in which the participants attitudes and perspectives developed.

Figure 8.3. Mindset Shifts



8.3.1 Accountability

Accountability refers to individuals being more answerable for their responsibilities. Participants stated that the programme helped them adopt more accountability, and that this had a positive impact on their businesses.

“Integral to ACORNS’ appeal is its accountability framework, which kept us focused and progressing towards our goals”.

Gemma Kingston, The Family Edit. ACORNS 9.

8.3.2 Confidence

Participants reported increased levels of confidence in both themselves and their businesses. This boost in confidence led to participants engaging in activities they would not have had otherwise, such as public speaking engagements. Participants developed stronger beliefs in the potential and viability of their businesses. Some participants stated that the increase in confidence that they gained from the programme meant that they approached growing and overcoming challenges within their business differently.

“Feeling seen and validated has really helped in feeling confident in my business”.

Kiara Murtagh, Hawthorn & Willow. ACORNS 10.

8.3.3 Focus

Participants noted that the programme allowed for increased focus and concentration. Some participants stated upon entering the programme, they were feeling lost, directionless or found themselves procrastinating. The programme provided clarity and focus for many participants. The programme as a whole, the Lead Entrepreneurs and the other participants were all cited as sources of the enhanced focus.

“I would recommend it to any female entrepreneur who feels slightly lost and looking for clarity...this is the place you’ll find your voice and get a clear vision”.

Eimear Reynolds, Bakealicious. ACORNS 5.

8.3.4 Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is the “persistent inability to believe that one’s success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one’s own efforts or skills”.⁹ Some participants stated that they were experiencing imposter syndrome upon entering the programme. They stated that participation helped alleviate some of those feelings.

“I came into ACORNS with imposter syndrome and left with a renewed belief in myself”.

Shannan Mulrooney, Maia Purposful Play. ACORNS 10.

8.3.5 Inspiration

Many of the participants stated that they were inspired by the Lead Entrepreneurs and other participants in the programme. They stated that they were inspired by the variety of others’ experiences and that this inspiration motivated them in their own business.

“The programme has inspired and motivated me to grow my business”.

Lyndsay Considine, LC Digital. ACORNS 7.

8.3.6 Motivation

Finding motivation when facing isolation, setbacks and self-doubt were cited as challenges for participants. The programme and the ACORNS Community helped combat these issues, facilitating the participants to find the will to act and accomplish their goals. ACORNS was described as the drive, impetus and fuel behind the participants. Participants found motivation in the Lead Entrepreneurs, each other and in themselves.

“It has given me the confidence and motivation to drive my business forward”.

Joan McCann, The Code Lab. ACORNS 8.

⁹ <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=impostor%20syndrome>

8.3.7 Outside of Comfort Zone

Becoming an entrepreneur requires individuals to explore new possibilities and become accustomed to environments they may be uncomfortable in. According to the participants, ACORNS provided the necessary push to take risks and to adjust and rise to their new challenges in a supportive environment. This mindset shift is essential for individuals breaking into new sectors and embarking on new endeavours.

“When you start on a new journey you will have to step out of your comfort zone very often and, although this can be exciting and stimulating, you can also feel self-conscious and nervous of the unfamiliar. The ACORNS program allows you to “stretch” into these new experiences in a very safe and comfortable environment”.

Helen McArdle, Feed The Pulse. ACORNS Pilot.

8.3.8 Personal Growth

Participants developed throughout the programme, stating that they were stronger and more productive individuals than they were at the start of the programme. Participants described the programme as very worthwhile on a personal level, that they considered the experience pivotal and that they were fundamentally changed by the programme.

“The person I was when I started, compared to the person I am now, are two different people”.

Claire Coughlan, The Rós Café. ACORNS 7.

8.3.9 Perspectives

Many credited new found beliefs and the sharing of ideas as an important component in their personal success in the programme. New perspectives such as ‘there being no such thing as failure’, or ‘working on my business, not in it’ were cited as altering how individuals approached the entrepreneurial journey. The diversity of backgrounds and perspectives was cited by many as an enriching and useful component in the development of their businesses.

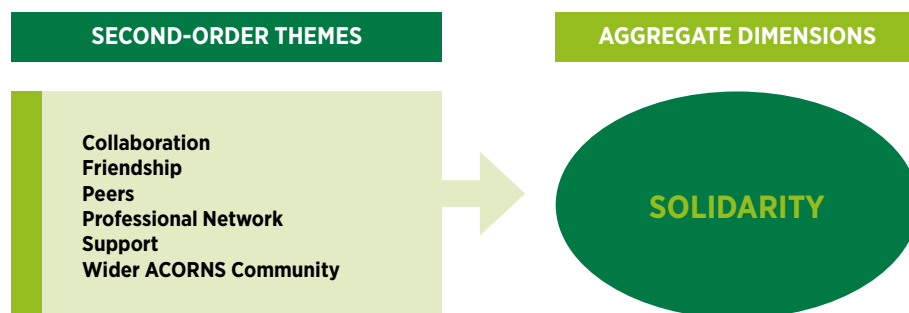
“An invaluable programme which has opened my eyes to several new paths my business can now take”.

Geraldine Byrne, then of MEDISKIN. ACORNS Pilot.

8.4 SOLIDARITY

Community and solidarity were two of the key takeaways of the experience (Figure 8.4). On both a personal and a professional level, participants formed relationships in their groups and beyond into the Wider ACORNS Community. The benefits of the community ranged from product collaborations to personal cheerleaders, to loyalty to the programme. Isolation and a lack of access to professional networks were barriers the programme aimed to address. Participants benefited from the solidarity within the programme and were instrumental in creating that solidarity themselves.

Figure 8.4. Solidarity



8.4.1 Collaboration

Collaboration both within the smaller groups and beyond with the Wider ACORNS Community were exercised throughout the programmes. Collaboration was described as the spirit of the group and that collaboration amplified the collective success of the group. Business collaborations were ongoing and several stated that they expected future business collaborations with other participants.

“I networked beyond and outside my group too and have engaged in wonderful collaborations with some of the women I have met”.

Niamh Hogan, Holos Skincare. ACORNS Pilot.

8.4.2 Friendship

Many participants stated that they had forged genuine friendships throughout the programme. The programme was described as a great forum and means to meet like-minded people, and the positive environment fostered a culture to form friendships. Supporting each other through the ups and downs of running their businesses and having a shared understanding of the often-isolating experience of starting a business were described as benefits of these formed friendships.

“Here you will find lifelong friends, supporters and cheerleaders”.

Rita Maunsell, WAWETS Outdoor Wear. ACORNS 7.

8.4.3 Peers

Participants described increased motivation and less isolation from being surrounded by other entrepreneurs. Having a set of peers, feeling part of a team and a culture of comradery were all described as having a positive impact of both the participants and their businesses. The peer groups were described as ambitious, a place to discuss shared problems and a place where participants could discuss their businesses without having to 'play it down'.

“Being part of a like-minded tribe is a truly powerful place to be”.

Avril McMonagle, Meantóir. ACORNS 6.

8.4.4 Professional Network

The programme placed a large number of rurally based, female entrepreneurs in rooms together giving them a unique opportunity to expand their network of professional contacts. This network included other nascent and early-stage entrepreneurs, in a variety of sectors, but also experienced and established business owners, the Lead Entrepreneurs. A professional network was described as a key feature to facilitate access, opportunities and business growth.

“I was able to build an invaluable network of other female entrepreneurs and learn from them while simultaneously developing my skills, which took my business from strength to strength”.

Anna Sutcliffe, House of Achill. ACORNS 9.

8.4.5 Support

Participants felt personally supported by the programme and the community the programme facilitated. The support received in the safe, constructive environment was described as instrumental to the participants when facing the isolating, daunting and challenging task of building a business. The support received was one of the most universally and most emphasised contributions of the programme throughout the testimonials. Participants stated they were individually cared about and 'cheered along'.

“It’s truly amazing to be surrounded by such positive and supportive women who understand the unique challenges and opportunities of women in business”.

Jan Carroll, Fortify Institute. ACORNS 8.

8.4.6 Wider ACORNS Community

The Wider ACORNS Community refers to the entirety of all participants and Lead Entrepreneurs who participated in the programme at any point. Seventy five participants actively engaged in the programme after the completion of their cycle, through the ACORNS Plus programme. In the testimonials, participants had positive experiences with the Wider ACORNS community, and many stated that they looked forward to being a member in the coming years. Particularly interesting, this theme only developed in the later testimonials as the community grew in size, influence and success.

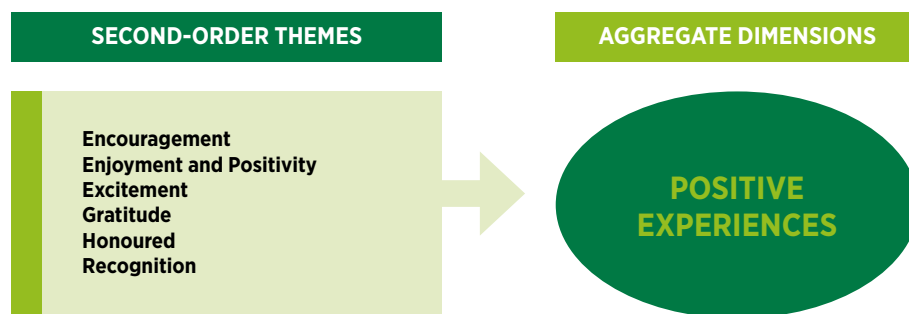
“From the moment you enter the programme, you feel a part of the greater community”.

Magda Seymour, Pure Oskar. ACORNS 8.

8.5 POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

The feedback from the participants highlights that they enjoyed partaking in ACORNS and that they gained a lot of positive attributes from the experience (Figure 8.5). Not one participant reported that the programme to be a negative experience. The *gratitude* code refers to participants' outward feelings towards those responsible for running the programme differs from the *honoured* code, which refers to how participants felt about themselves for having been selected and for participating.

Figure 8.5. Positive Experiences



8.5.1 Encouragement

Participants found that the programme emboldened and supported both themselves and their businesses. Participants found this encouragement mostly from each other, and found the regular monthly meetings to be very useful at keeping morale high. Pushing boundaries, exploring outside comfort zones and achieving milestones were all encouraged in the programme.

“ACORNS provided me with so much motivation and encouraged me to push the boundaries and try different avenues that I never would have without their mentoring and general group advice”.

Brenda Ward, AcuWellness. ACORNS 5.

8.5.2 Enjoyment and Positivity

Rewarding, amazing, a great pleasure, fantastic and incredible were all words used to describe participants' experience in the programme. Additional to all the business support, mindset shifts, and community formed throughout the programme, participants enjoyed their time spent. Participants described the positive energy as infectious.

“There’s such a good feel factor to ACORNS”.

Gerardine Ryan, Allwoman. ACORNS 4.

8.5.3 Excitement

Being an entrepreneur and participating in the programme was described as thrilling and stimulating. Participants were also excited as to what lay ahead for themselves and their businesses.

“I am so thrilled I got a chance to take part”.

Aisling Kelly, WBs Coffee House. ACORNS 2.

8.5.4 Gratitude

Gratitude refers to the participants feeling thankful for the opportunity to be on the programme and for everyone involved in facilitating it. Gratitude for the structure, the resources and the ‘business family’ were all singled out. Participants commended the organisers, the Lead Entrepreneurs and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

“I [...] commend the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for their continuing support”.

Mairead Guinan, Neighbourhood Tullamore. ACORNS 6.

8.5.5 Honoured

Participants expressed both how honoured and privileged they felt to be selected for the programme and pride for having taken part. Selection into the competitive programme gave some participants validation in themselves and their business. Pride in oneself, one’s business and in being part of the wider community was all expressed in the testimonials. It is notable that statements concerning how honoured, privileged and lucky participants felt in being selected for the programme became more common in the later testimonials, as the reputation of the programme grew.

“I felt honoured as soon as I got the acceptance email”.

Rachel Adams, The Little Fox. ACORNS 9.

8.5.6 Recognition

Some participants stated that the programme afforded them recognition within their own community and as a reminder to themselves that they are businesswomen. Participants felt that the programme acknowledged rural, entrepreneurial women, who often do not get their due recognition.

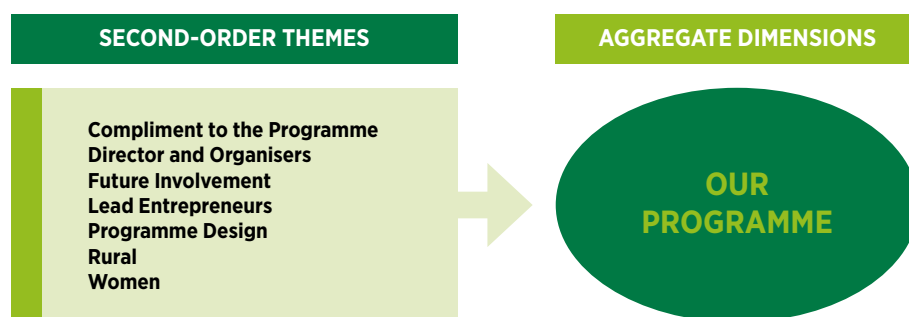
“Being accepted into ACORNS feels like such an endorsement in itself, and your confidence just grows from there”.

Roisin Keown, The Brill Building. ACORNS 6.

8.6 OUR PROGRAMME

This category refers to the nature and design of the programme itself (Figure 8.6). This category seeks to give a clear picture of the aims, layout and actors of the programme. It includes acknowledgements of the decision to target rural, female entrepreneurs. The Lead Entrepreneurs and the organisers are incorporated as the primary actors, excluding the participants themselves. The structure of the programme, and the integral aspect of future collaboration, is fundamental to understanding the nature of the programme. Lastly, a code concerning general compliments to the programme is included.

Figure 8.6. Our Programme



8.6.1 Compliment to the Programme

The feedback was highly complementary of the programme. Participants were very enthusiastic, describing the programme as brilliant, fantastic, amazing and supportive. More detailed feedback included statements that it was focussed, forward-thinking, with great communication.

“Being a part of ACORNS has been an absolute delight, and I’m immensely grateful for the opportunity to be a part of such an empowering community”.

Munaza Gilmore, The Brow Movement. ACORNS 9.

8.6.2 Director and Organisers

Acknowledgement of the Director and her team for their role in creating and facilitating the programme was commended by many of the participants. Her energy, expertise and planning skills were specifically commended.

“Paula Fitzsimons and her team, with their infectious positivity and drive, really pushed us to go out of our comfort zone and reach higher in our goals”.

Barbara O’Flaherty, Let’s Get Digital. ACORNS 7.

8.6.3 Future Involvement

Participants were hopeful that they would get to engage in further participation and continuous learning with the programme. Remaining a part of the community and potentially giving back in some capacity in the future was a hope for several.

“I look forward to remaining part of the ACORNS community”.

Feena McBride, The Arty Fox. ACORNS 7.

8.6.4 Lead Entrepreneurs

The role of the Lead Entrepreneurs is a massive contributing factor to the success of the programme. The Lead Entrepreneurs were described by participants as highly dedicated, inspirational women, who offered an enormous level of support and expertise. As businesswomen further along the road of running a business, the Lead Entrepreneurs offer a unique support to the participants. Many of the participants credited their Lead Entrepreneur by name, expressing gratitude for their contribution.

“It is led by women who have walked the path before you, who share their wisdom with generosity and honesty”.

Louise Lennox, Fussy Eating Kids. ACORNS 10.

8.6.5 Programme Design

The design of the programme was credited with contributing to the success of and the positive experience of those involved. The programme was considered to be well structured and well-paced, with small groups meeting monthly. The success of the format of using roundtable sessions was noted by several participants.

“Each session and round table discussion is conducted in an environment where we felt we were in a safe space to discuss all of our business successes, shortcomings, questions and personal struggles”.

Hollianne Phelan, Cotone Collection. ACORNS 9.

8.6.6 Rural

The decision to target rural entrepreneurs was applauded in several of the testimonials. The programme was designed to specifically target this group, as a section of society with individual issues and concerns, and potentially less access. Participants were enthused as to the recognition, as rurally based entrepreneurs, they were receiving through the programme. The programme also created a specific network within this community, who otherwise may struggle to access each other.

“It also made me realise that there’s a powerful community of like-minded female led businesses in rural Ireland and that not everything needs to be in the cities to succeed”!

Shannon Forrest, Rivesci. ACORNS 6.

8.6.7 Women

The decision to create a programme specifically for women was commended by many participants. A programme that can address the “unique challenges women face” and help women operate in “a man’s world” was considered very beneficial to participants. Several participants acknowledged the welcome change of being in a female-led environment, having previously operated in male-dominant fields. Powerful, unique and necessary were all descriptors of the programme as a female specific initiative.

“A network of wonderful business women, who champion the sisterhood”.

Caitriona Cullen, Cullen Nurseries. ACORNS 6.

9. ACORNS in Action - Participant Profiles

Over 550 women living in rural Ireland have participated in the ACORNS Programme. What they share are the challenges and excitement of starting and developing a business. Through ACORNS they talk of ‘finding their tribe’, sharing the highs and lows of being an entrepreneur and gaining guidance from peers and experienced entrepreneurs alike. What follows are six short profiles to illustrate the diversity of experiences of the 550 ACORNS participants. They are selected from different parts of Ireland and are engaged in different types of businesses.



Bríd Graham

Splash Swim School, Co. Sligo

Working as a primary school teacher for 20 years gave Bríd Graham a valuable insight into building confidence in children. It is something she holds close to her heart as a swimming instructor and Director of Splash Swim School, based nationwide.

While working and travelling with a family as their private tutor, Bríd noticed the many opportunities that can come out of swimming. After her travels, she returned to education and obtained a Master's degree in Management from Smurfit Business School, UCD.

She then moved to Sligo and, in 2013, started her first swimming class in the Clayton Hotel.

Meeting other women who understood the chaos of balancing a business and family life was invaluable to Bríd and she credits ACORNS for keeping her on track with her monthly business goals.

In February of this year, Bríd opened her 8th school at the Connemara Coast Hotel, part of the Windward Group. This followed the

2022 opening of Waterford Splash Swim School at the Crystalline Leisure Centre. They continue to offer lessons at Sligo Splash Swim School at the Dalata Clayton Hotel Sligo, and the Claytons in Galway, Limerick and Cork City Centre, further cementing their strong relationship with the Dalata Hotel Group. This brings staff numbers to 50 across the group and swimmer numbers to almost 2,000.

Research has shown that learning to swim boosts the brain development of children, as well as their physical coordination and posture. It also leads to increased self-confidence and lower levels of anxiety and stress.

The Splash Swim School approach involves parents joining their children in the water until they can swim. This reduces anxiety and boosts children's levels of serotonin and dopamine. Nurturing the parasympathetic nervous system within a child-centred environment is essential to ensuring that children become relaxed and confident in the water, helping them to develop into capable swimmers focused on improving the technical aspects of their stroke.

Bríd has trained as a Swim Ireland and Irish Water Safety Tutor – which has enabled her to train her own swim teaching staff – and, along with their in-house STA Parent and Baby tutor – and is focused on expanding her technical knowledge of swimming and her capabilities as a director of a medium-sized enterprise. Further expansion will be disclosed in the coming weeks!

Bríd feels that ACORNS provides early-stage female entrepreneurs, living in rural Ireland, with the knowledge, support and networking opportunities to meet and even exceed their current aspirations.



CONTACT DETAILS

E: info@splashswim.ie
Facebook: [@splashswim2](https://www.facebook.com/splashswim2)

Caitriona Cullen

Cullen Nurseries, Co. Kildare

Caitriona Cullen started her self-employment journey, while on a career break, in the middle of a pandemic, home schooling 3 young boys. Caitriona considered what work she could do at home without disturbing her children's routines too much.

As her husband Robert has a nursery that he runs for six months of the year, Caitriona realised she had the infrastructure in place to make Cullen Nurseries a full-time, year-round business that worked around family life. Fast forward to 2023 and Caitriona is now an award-winning businesswoman working full time as a director of the also, award winning Cullen Nurseries Ltd.

Cullen Nurseries grows and supplies native trees and hedging plants to a nationwide customer base of farmers, gardeners, homeowners and community groups across Ireland. Offering a Nationwide Delivery service, Caitriona and the team are serving their customers, from the hills and valleys to the islands and the peninsulas.

This rapid expansion of the business has been attributed to Cullen Nurseries' adaption to an online sales model, meaning Caitriona can reach & engage her clients no matter where they are located.

The skills, practices, confidence and self-belief learned and gained from participating in the ACORNS 6 and ACORNS Plus programme is one of the main driving forces behind the success of Cullen Nurseries. Learning to be accountable and focused has helped Caitriona achieve her goals, Cullen Nurseries now employs 7 people full time, with plans for further expansion.

CONTACT DETAILS

E: info@cullennurseries.ie
Instagram: [@cullennurseries](https://www.instagram.com/cullennurseries)
www.cullennurseries.ie



Carina Roseingrave

Burren View, Co. Clare

Carina Roseingrave started her free-range eggs business on the family farm she grew up on at the foothills of the Burren in Crusheen, Co. Clare.

She and her brother Gerry have been running the 350-acre farm – which also has 100 dairy cows, sucklers and pedigree herds registered with the Irish Limousin Cattle Society and Irish Charolais Cattle Society under the Burren View Farm prefix – since their father passed away.

Carina, who also runs an after-school childcare business in nearby Tulla, came up with the idea for Burren View Farm free range eggs when the childcare service was closed during pandemic lockdown in 2020.

She started with 50 hens and a small chicken coop, and she gathered the eggs by hand every day before selling them through an honesty box at the farm gate.

As well as word of mouth, Carina generated sales through TikTok and Instagram – with her videos on the platforms often getting over a million views.

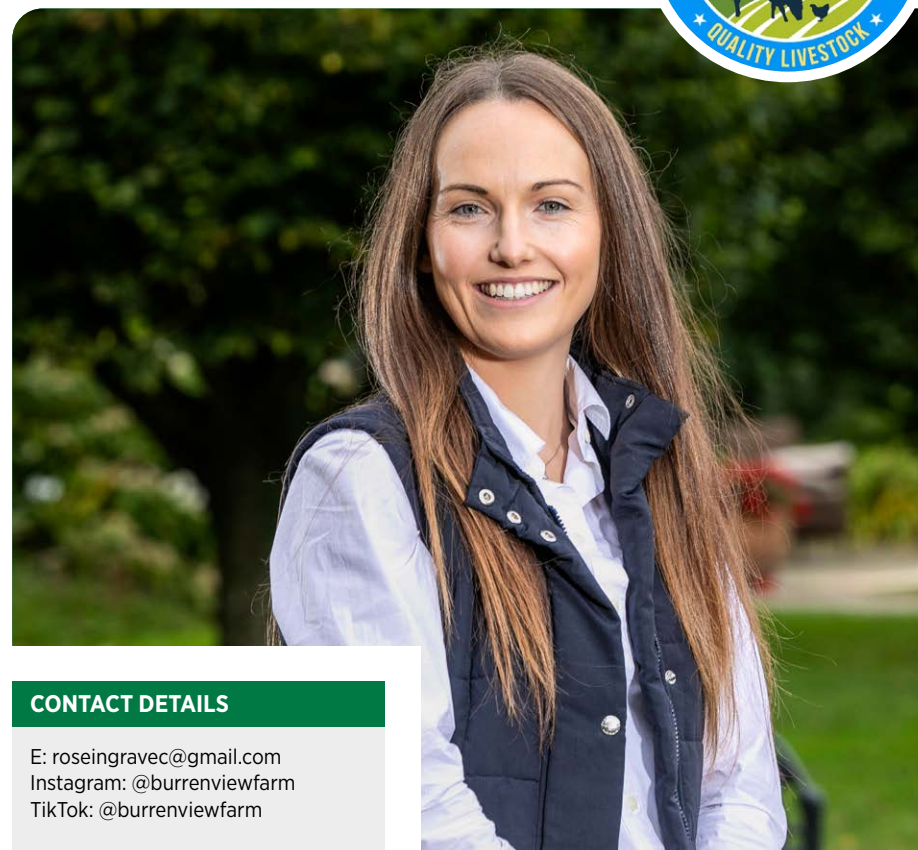
When she joined the ACORNS programme in November 2023, Carina found that it gave her the confidence to expand her operation.

She built a fully functioning hen shed, registered it with the Department of Agriculture and substantially increased her flock, which roam the lush green pastures of Burren View Farm producing a wholesome nutritional free-range egg.

Carina now supplies free range eggs to local shops, cafés and restaurants as well as to her regular loyal customers and passing trade through the honesty box.

Carina found that the ACORNS programme boosted her confidence and really focused her mind on the business. She says it was brilliant to be surrounded by likeminded people going in the one direction and supporting each other.

Her plans include building a larger hen shed, breeding and showing top quality pedigree bulls and growing the dairy herd while ensuring that sustainability is at the heart of their farming process.



CONTACT DETAILS

E: roseingravec@gmail.com
Instagram: [@burrenviewfarm](https://www.instagram.com/burrenviewfarm)
TikTok: [@burrenviewfarm](https://www.tiktok.com/@burrenviewfarm)

Georgia Quealy

Bon Chocolatiers, Co. Offaly / Co. Westmeath

Originally from Roscrea in Co Tipperary, Georgia Quealy and her boyfriend/business partner, Daniel Linehan set up their company, Bon Chocolatiers, in his hometown of Athlone, Co Westmeath, in October 2020.

Both classically trained chefs with Michelin star experience, they had plans to move to Dublin to work as pastry chefs when the pandemic hit. Having always talked about setting up a business together, they began to experiment in the kitchen of Daniel's parents' café in Athlone.

Bon Chocolatiers produces luxury hand-painted, hand-crafted chocolates, and chocolate confections made from the finest ingredients and showcasing many Irish producers. Georgia likes to create a journey of the senses for customers, starting out with the opening of the bespoke packaging to find the edible works of art, full of unique flavours and textures.

Bon Chocolatiers began selling their produce on Instagram in October 2020 after receiving

support and mentorship through LEO Westmeath. They launched their own website in February 2021 and moved into their own production kitchen the following November. They have since expanded into their second production factory in Tullamore, County Offaly giving them opportunities for growth.

Their range of indulgent hand painted chocolate bonbons and handmade bars have been credited with some of the most prestigious food awards in Ireland & the UK. They are available to buy from their website, in Beans and Leaves Athlone and in Fallon & Byrne, Dublin. Since December 2023, they have partnered with Simply Better Dunnes, creating a bespoke range of chocolate products now available in over 70 stores nationwide.

Georgia says that participating in ACORNS, and ACORNS Plus was invaluable to her business. She says that the most beneficial aspect was being given the skills to confidently run a business to its full potential, while benefiting from the expert experience of both

of her Lead Entrepreneurs Eimer Hannon and Monica Flood. She is very grateful to be part of the ACORNS community.

Georgia continues to build Bon Chocolatiers as a brand, with plans to expand their stockists this year, while growing their product range and their team.



CONTACT DETAILS

E: info@bonchocolatiers.ie
Instagram: [bonchocolatiers](https://www.instagram.com/bonchocolatiers)
www.bonchocolatiers.ie



Joan McCann

The Code Lab, Co. Louth

Joan McCann is an innovative coding education provider empowering Ireland's young people with digital skills for the future. Joan had been volunteering with a community coding group when she realised she could marry the skills gleaned from her 15-year career in the IT industry with her passion for teaching kids about technology to create a viable business.

Launched in February 2021, her company, The Code Lab, offers online courses and hands-on workshops in coding, robotics, and electronics. Since its inception, The Code Lab has grown significantly, with Joan now delivering a structured Schools Coding Programme to primary schools across Ireland, helping teachers to seamlessly integrate coding into the curriculum and making coding more accessible for all pupils.

"Our video-based step-by-step lessons allow kids to code along at home or in school. They simply play the video, pause at designated points and complete the tasks themselves. Schools benefit from structured, high-quality

content that makes coding easy to introduce in the classroom, while children gain hands-on experience with technology that builds problem-solving, logical thinking, and creativity," says the mother-of-four, whose CV boasts valuable experience with IT giants IBM and FINEOS.

Joan's work in STEM education for girls has gained international recognition. She played a key role in a *Girls Can Code!* initiative, which was shortlisted in the top three at the 2024 European Meet and Code Awards, highlighting her commitment to inspiring young girls to embrace technology. Joan launched her Schools Coding Programme in an all-girls DEIS school, reinforcing her dedication to inspiring more girls to pursue STEM. Joan has also led innovative coding workshops, including LEGO Spike Essentials and VEX Robotics, and played a key role in large-scale events such as DojoMór, a nationwide coding event introducing young learners to coding.

As The Code Lab continues to grow,

Joan remains focused on expanding her Schools Coding Programme, forging new collaborations, and increasing accessibility to high-quality coding education. With strong demand from schools and parents alike, she aims to make coding an integral part of every child's learning journey.

Thanks to ACORNS, Joan has a strong network of female entrepreneurs supporting her as she scales her business. Now part of ACORNS Plus, she continues to gain the mentorship and confidence needed to take The Code Lab to the next level.



CONTACT DETAILS

E: info@thecodelab.ie
Instagram: [@thecodelab.ie](https://www.instagram.com/thecodelab.ie)
W: www.thecodelab.ie



Laura Stakelum

Stakelum Consultancy, Co. Tipperary

Originally from Holycross, Co Tipperary, Laura Stakelum spent 15 years living and working in Dublin, where she trained as a chartered accountant, specialising in corporate finance, before spending six months in Tipperary working from home during the pandemic. Laura found that working remotely allowed her to do everything that she had done in the office in Dublin. This, together with a goal to set up her own business, prompted her to make the move permanent and to set up Stakelum Consultancy in July 2021.

Stakelum Consultancy provides strategic guidance to clients in the onshore wind, offshore wind, solar, waste to energy and contracting sectors in Ireland. Their team supports clients through every stage of due diligence, bid management, financial modelling, and M&A advisory, helping them navigate the commercial complexities of renewable energy project development.

Laura secured office space in Cashel, Co

Tipperary in 2021 and acquired clients within months of starting the business. She moved the business to a larger office in 2022 to accommodate hiring support staff to scale the business. The first hire came on board in 2023, with further employees joining the business in 2024 and in early 2025. Stakelum Consultancy now has 4 full time employees and 1 part time employee supporting clients all over Ireland. In Q2 2025 Stakelum Consultancy will roll out a CPD course on renewable energy, an initiative that is supported by the EU Just Transition Fund. The focus and passion of Stakelum Consultancy has always been on climate change, and would like to educate a wider audience on the benefits of renewable energy over the coming years.

Laura took part in ACORNS in 2022, and describes it as “as an unbiased and invaluable sounding board, made up of a strong group of female entrepreneurs who understand the challenges of running a business”. The programme helped her to understand the difference between the work a business does

and the business itself – ensuring that the business functions efficiently and smoothly, allowing more time to focus on client needs and demands. She says that she will always be grateful for the support and insight given to her as part of the ACORNS programme.



CONTACT DETAILS

E: laura@stakelumconsultancy.com
www.linkedin.com/in/laurakstakelum/
www.stakelumconsultancy.com



10. Conclusions

Female entrepreneurs in rural areas face challenges in starting and growing new businesses. These challenges relate to the difficulties that women face in starting businesses and difficulties related to starting a business in a rural area. Recognising these challenges the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) called for a programme to support women entrepreneurs in rural Ireland.

ACORNS is the programme that the DAFM have selected on four occasions over the past decade to meet this goal. By April 2025, over 550 women will have participated across the ten cycles of ACORNS. Drawing on data from these participants, this report makes the following observations.



OBSERVATION 1

Business development impacts

Rural entrepreneurs identify business development knowledge gaps in areas such as marketing, sales, market entry, accessing finance, and financial management. Based on the feedback from ACORNS participants after the programme, it is clear that ACORNS helps them develop their business. In the aggregate, the businesses grew revenues and staff numbers during their six-month ACORNS cycle, with aggregate revenues growing by 51% and aggregate employment growing by 24%. And some began exporting. These successes are from businesses from a broad range of sectors, including tech-based businesses, healthcare business, tourism and service-related businesses, consulting businesses, agricultural-based businesses, and artisan businesses.

OBSERVATION 2

Transformative impacts – mindset shifts

Gender stereotypes mean that many female entrepreneurs, compared to their male counterparts, have a higher level of 'fear of failure', lower self-confidence, and less appetite for risk. According to those that have completed the ACORNS programme, it has a transformative impact for them and for their businesses. Focussing on the personal transformation, participants report that ACORNS results in higher levels of confidence and that they feel more motivated. They speak of being challenged and inspired to move 'outside of their comfort zone' in seeking to develop their businesses. These outcomes are a consequence of how ACORNS is designed and of those that facilitate the roundtables.

OBSERVATION 3

The power of the community – reducing isolation

A challenge that many rural entrepreneurs face is isolation. Prior to their involvement in the ACORNS programme, many of the participants identify isolation and a lack of access to support networks and mentors as a significant barrier they face. However, the feedback following completion of the programme is that ACORNS reduces psychological isolation. The participants talk of a sense of solidarity that develops through the roundtable interactions, through sharing business challenges, successes and setbacks, and through participation with the broader ACORNS community. The roundtables are a safe space for the participants to discuss their challenges. They also speak of the programme as '*A Programme for Us*' – in that it focussed on other women from rural Ireland at the same stage of business development. They speak of the excitement, pride and honour of participating in ACORNS.

OBSERVATION 4

A programme design that works for entrepreneurs

Support programmes for entrepreneurs need to focus on both 'what' entrepreneurs need to learn and 'how' they want to learn. This makes designing programmes difficult. Underlying the ACORNS model is the shared sense across those developing and delivering ACORNS that entrepreneurs learn best from each other. The ACORNS model of support is designed around six key principles that inform the delivery and development of ACORNS: a model of peer-to-peer learning; that it is entrepreneur-led; that participants focus on goals and actions; that participants are enterprising and motivated; that creates a network of 'like-minded' people; and a shared culture among all of confidentiality, collegiality and respect.

This approach works for participants. Participants express high levels of satisfaction with the programme. Nearly all participants report that participation in ACORNS resulted in them making practical changes to their business, taking actions, and getting closer to achieving their business ambitions. The programme works to raise start-up intentions and growth ambitions, and to close the gap between intentions and actions, by supporting the entrepreneur through a process of goal setting and accountability to peers for these goals.

OBSERVATION 5

The power of the entrepreneurial community – Lead Entrepreneurs

A challenge in many rural areas is the absence of developed entrepreneurial eco-systems. A key element of most entrepreneurial eco-systems are successful entrepreneurs, who serve as role models, as sources of business and entrepreneurial knowledge and networks, and sometimes, as a source of capital. An element of the success of the ACORNS initiative is that it has created for participants, access to successful entrepreneurs, the Lead Entrepreneurs who facilitate the roundtables. It is noteworthy that the Lead Entrepreneurs have all faced the challenge of starting and growing a business in rural Ireland. They have also experienced, first-hand, as a participant, the power of a peer-to-peer roundtable model of business development.

The feedback from the participants is that the model of Lead Entrepreneurs facilitating roundtables works and that the success of the ACORNS programme reflects the skill and commitment of the Lead Entrepreneurs. It should also be noted that these Lead Entrepreneurs participate as volunteers – which might give them additional ‘soft power’ to positively impact the dynamics of the roundtables.

OBSERVATION 6

Finding ambitious women entrepreneurs in rural Ireland

An initial challenge facing the ACORNS initiative was would there be enough women interested in the programme and if so, how to let these women in rural Ireland know about the new programme. Through an annual PR plan, that focusses on telling the stories of women entrepreneurs and their businesses, the ACORNS programme is now widely recognised. From the beginning, there has been excess demand, with 3.3 applications for each participant accepted. And these have come from every county in Ireland.

The women selected to participate in ACORNS are highly enterprising, though as required are at the very early stage of development. Most are pre-trading or very small, with few employees, and mostly focussed on local or domestic market. However, ACORNS has managed to identify and attract enterprising women – most expect to start and to significant grow their business, expect to employ more, and some expect to enter export markets within 3 years of the ACORNS programme.

OBSERVATION 7

Addressing a policy gap

Internationally, policymakers have identified the challenges of supporting rural economic and social development that are common to many rural areas. The ACORNS programme was designed to address a specific gap identified by Irish policy makers – the knowledge, confidence and networks gaps and barriers facing women entrepreneurs in rural areas. As a response to this policy challenge, the ACORNS initiative was designed to equip early-stage entrepreneurs in rural Ireland with the appropriate knowledge, confidence, and networks to successfully start and develop sustainable businesses. In doing so, it sought to unleash the potential of female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland. The evidence provided by participants suggests that the ACORNS programme and its wider range of supports, continues to achieve the objectives set by policy makers. External reviews of the programme recognise the strength of the model, and the impacts that ACORNS has on participants and their businesses. ACORNS has been cited as a model of best practice in several policy documents.

Policymakers have continued to support the ACORNS initiative, allowing the initiative to develop over the last ten years. This has also allowed a strong network of 'like-minded' entrepreneurs to evolve. During this time ACORNS has developed its reputation, with participants now reporting how there is a sense of pride in being selected on to the ACORNS programme. After their initial round table cycle, many ACORNS participants are more than happy to stay involved in the Community, investing their time in supporting each other to develop their businesses.



Maura Sheehy, Maura's Cottage Flowers

Voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs,
Mary B. Walsh, Ire Wel Pallets Ltd.,
Alison Ritchie, Polar Ice Ltd., and
Deirdre McGlone, then of Harvey's Point at
the ACORNS Pilot announcement in 2015



ACORNS

Fitzsimons Consulting,
6 James Terrace,
Malahide,
Co. Dublin,
K36 Y972
Ireland

Phone: (+353) 1 845 0770

Email: info@acorns.ie

www.acorns.ie

MAY 2025