

ACORNS

Accelerating the Creation Of
Rural Nascent Start-ups



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



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



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

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

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ACORNS

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

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

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

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

WHO QUALIFIES FOR THE PROGRAMME?

ACORNS is designed for nascent female rural entrepreneurs. To qualify for consideration, a woman (i) must have recently set up a new business which she owns or part owns, and which has generated sales no earlier than end June 2023 or (ii) must be at an advanced stage of planning a new venture and have a clear idea of what she wants to achieve. If she is not already trading, activities such as organising the start-up team, looking for equipment/facilities, saving money for the start-up, or writing a business plan would all be considered as active commitments to starting a business.

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

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

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

HOW TO APPLY

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

SELECTION PROCESS

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

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

WHAT TIME COMMITMENT IS INVOLVED?

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

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

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

Selected candidates are expected to attend all events.

WHAT'S THE APPROACH?

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

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

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

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

NIAMH DOOLEY, *BiaSol*



LEAD ENTREPRENEURS

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

ALISON RITCHIE - Polar Ice, Laois

Alison Ritchie is the Managing Director of Polar Ice Ltd, Ireland's leading manufacturer and distributor of dry ice products. A significant milestone in her journey was the 2022 joint venture with the SOL Group, a leading European supplier of technical and medical gases. In 2005, Alison 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. Alison holds a Business Degree from Dublin City University (DCU) and is a Fellow of Chartered Accountants Ireland (FCA). 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, Kerry

Caroline Reidy is the Managing Director of the HR Suite and is a HR and Employment Law Expert. With a master's 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. 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 acquired by NFP, an Aon Company, a leading global insurance broker. 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 DCCI. www.thehrrsuite.com



EIMER HANNON - Hannon Travel, Meath

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



GERALDINE JONES - Skin Formulas, Tipperary

Geraldine Jones is the founder and Chief Executive of Skin Formulas, a Skin and BodyCare award-winning business, based in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. 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, what it needs and how best to treat it irrespective of the challenges that people face. In addition to Skin Formulas, she had previously launched a highly successful skincare and laser clinic, MEDISKIN in 2014 and was a market leader in delivering innovation for its customers. Geraldine sold the clinic to two of her existing employees in June of this year. www.skinformulas.ie



KAREN KERRIGAN - Kerrigan's Mushrooms, Meath

Karen Kerrigan is Director, National Account Manager, and New Business Development Manager at Kerrigan's Mushrooms, a leading Irish grower and packer of mushrooms. The company has received Gold in the Origin Green awards for the past three years, recognising its progress in cutting carbon emissions, improving energy efficiency, and embedding sustainability across its operations. Today, with 90 full-time staff, the business continues to focus on continuous training, quality assurance, and innovation. She serves on the main board of Bord Bia and chairs its Horticultural Board, contributing her expertise to the future of Ireland's agri-food sector. Guided by a strong work ethic and a passion for excellence, Karen's vision is to "do the ordinary extraordinarily well" — maintaining Kerrigan's reputation as a top-quality producer while growing its customer base and investing in people, innovation, and sustainability. www.kerrigansmushrooms.ie



MARY B WALSH - Ire Wel Pallets, Wexford

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



TRIONA MAC GIOLLA RÍ - Aró Digital Strategy, Galway

Triona Mac Giolla Rí is the co-founder and director of Aró Digital Strategy, a 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



CLARE DUIGNAN - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

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. 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 - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

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



ACORNS ADVISORY PANEL



**ANNE
REILLY**



**DEIRDRE
MCGLONE**



**LARISSA
FEENEY**



**MONICA
FLOOD**

PREVIOUS PARTICIPANTS

ACORNS has recently completed its 10th year. Over 550 female entrepreneurs have successfully completed a cycle of ACORNS to date and progress made by previous participants demonstrates encouraging outcomes.

There is a clear desire on the part of those who previously completed an ACORNS cycle to stay connected with the initiative. To facilitate this expressed wish, an ACORNS Community has been formed, thanks to the funding being provided through the Rural Innovation and Development Fund by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

There are a range of supports available to members of the ACORNS Community:

- Those who have just completed the most recent cycle are offered a Further Development phase with a review round table with their previous group and with their Lead Entrepreneur.
- An opportunity to attend a series of topic based workshops relevant to their development.
- For those trading, an opportunity is presented to have an individual participant profile professionally written and formatted. When the Community member is happy with the profile, it is uploaded on the ACORNS website.
- Members of the Community are invited to become ambassadors for ACORNS and are included in PR opportunities, as these arise from time to time.



(l-r) Magda Seymour, Pure Oskar, Liz Gavin, NuaFund and Mary B. Walsh, Ire Wel Pallets & Lead Entrepreneur



Back row (l-r) Ciara Stanley, Coppenagh House Farm, Emma Hanrahan, Soha Dress Rental, Anna McGrath, Shine Through Supports and Connected Childhood, Una Ryan, REMind Ed*, Caroline Fry, Caroline Fry Enterprises, Front row (l-r) Marie Bourke, Gowran Medical Centre, Mary B. Walsh, Ire Wel Pallets and Lead Entrepreneur, Elaine Crosse, Bánór

- All are invited to an Annual ACORNS Community Forum, which takes place in April.
- Associated with the Community Forum is a showcase. Members can apply to exhibit in the showcase.
- Those who wish to strongly drive growth in their business, can also apply to participate in ACORNS Plus, a growth-focused round table initiative. There is a competitive selection process for those who wish to participate.
- Members are encouraged to support and do business with each other. For example, in November, a gift guide is produced, in which those members with products and services, which are suitable as gifts, are highlighted, with links to their websites, and widely circulated.

Members of the ACORNS Community, are delighted to avail themselves of the supports offered and are excellent ambassadors of the benefits associated with continued participation and ongoing support.

ACORNS has provided me with access to a network of wonderful business women, who champion the sisterhood, encourage and support start-ups, share their experience and knowledge, and provide a safe, confidential space to express concerns and fears. This network of women has been a powerful tool in my inventory.

CAITRIONA CULLEN, *CULLEN NURSERIES*



ACORNS has made a huge difference to me as a businesswoman and to the growth of our business. It has given the network and support that is essential for growing a start-up business and getting to the next stages. The educational workshops and interactive roundtable sessions have helped me make structured action plans for the future. It has given me the skills to aim high with our goals and given me 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*



WHO WE ARE

FITZSIMONS CONSULTING

Fitzsimons Consulting specialises in areas related to entrepreneurship and growth. Paula Fitzsimons, founder and managing director of Fitzsimons Consulting, is a recognised expert on entrepreneurship. Paula was the national coordinator for GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) for Ireland from 2000 to May 2023, is a former President of the consortium of GEM national teams, and a former member of the governing body of GERA, the governing body for the Global Entrepreneurship Research Association.

Recognising that fewer women start new businesses and, of those that start, fewer have significant growth ambitions than do men, Paula Fitzsimons designed and developed the Going for Growth initiative, which is focused on peer support as a means of assisting established women entrepreneurs who wish to grow their businesses (www.goingforgrowth.com). Going for Growth, which is funded by Enterprise Ireland and KPMG, has completed 17 cycles and has supported over 1000 women entrepreneurs to achieve their growth ambitions. Going for Growth was awarded the European Enterprise Promotion Award 2015, Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills, and featured extensively in a book *Inclusive Business Creation – Good Practice Compendium*, published in May 2016 by the OECD and European Commission. Successful past participants of Going for Growth have become voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs on ACORNS.

ACORNS, an initiative for early stage female entrepreneurs, is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (www.acorns.ie). ACORNS was selected to represent Ireland in the European Enterprise Promotion Awards 2025, Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills. ACORNS also featured prominently in the Manifesto for an Innovative Europe, which was developed by the participants of the 2018 SME Assembly.

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

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO CONTACT US

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SPONSORS

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

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



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Food and the Marine

MARTIN HEYDON TD, MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

“Following a decade of support from my Department for female rural entrepreneurs under the Rural Innovation Development Fund, I am delighted to launch the latest cycle. The programme continues to go from strength to strength and has supported over 550 women in rural Ireland over the last ten years. ACORNS is a hugely successful programme, designed to support early-stage female entrepreneurs in rural Ireland. It aims to address the skills, enterprise and capability gaps that female entrepreneurs can face and in doing so provides support to help overcome the barriers which often limit entrepreneurial activity in rural areas. Encouraging female entrepreneurs in rural Ireland to apply for support under the ACORNS programme will help them realise their dreams of starting and growing successful businesses.”



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