

ACORNS

Accelerating the Creation Of
Rural Nascent Start-ups



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

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



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



‘Early stage female entrepreneurs, living in rural Ireland, are invited to apply for a place on ACORNS 12.

Those who successfully completed a previous cycle of ACORNS are being offered the opportunity for further support.’

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ACORNS

Early stage female entrepreneurs, living in rural Ireland, are invited to apply for a place on the ACORNS programme, now in its twelfth year.

The intention is to provide up to 50 entrepreneurs with the knowledge, support and networking opportunities to meet and even exceed their current aspirations.

The programme will run from October 2026 to April 2027. Selected participants will be 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 will be no charge for those selected to participate in ACORNS and their accommodation costs, associated with any residential elements of the initiative, will be 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 will be given to those who expect to grow their business and to employ others over the next three years.

If selected, applicants must be available to attend the launch and first round table session on 19th and 20th October 2026 in Mullingar Park Hotel, Co. Westmeath. Costs associated with the launch forum will be covered.

HOW TO APPLY

Please register your interest on the website www.acorns.ie in the first instance and you will be sent an application link by email.

If you would like a printed application form sent to you, or if you have any difficulties in registering online, please contact us by phone on 01-8450770.

Closing date for receipt of completed applications is the 18th September 2026. No applications received after this date can be considered.

SELECTION PROCESS

As was the case previously, it is expected that there will be many more applicants than there are places available. Accordingly, it will be a competitive selection process. The ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs will be central to the selection of successful candidates. They will be seeking 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. The ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs will meet in early October to assess the applications received and successful candidates will be notified shortly after.

WHAT TIME COMMITMENT IS INVOLVED?

The launch event and first round table session will take place on **19th and 20th October 2026**. At this first session, the participants will meet their round table group and their ACORNS Lead Entrepreneurs for the first time. Attendance at this event is obligatory for selected participants.

Participants will subsequently meet with their ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur and their group of eight peers in separate locations on four occasions between November and March. These sessions will last for about three hours and will explore the themes of Strategy, Marketing/Sales, Finance, Sustainability and Implementation. These sessions will be held in person at a location close to the assigned ACORNS Lead Entrepreneur. Some travel may be involved on the part of the participants. Only in exceptional circumstances will they be held remotely by Zoom.

There will be a residential development forum in **April 2027**. The theme of this Forum will be *SMART Planning - The Roadmap Ahead*.

Selected candidates are expected to attend all round table sessions.

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 will facilitate the interactive round table meetings 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 will 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.

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



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



LARISSA FEENEY - Kinore, Donegal

Larissa Feeney FCA is the CEO and founder of Kinore, an award-winning, remote-first chartered accountancy firm serving ambitious SMEs across Ireland and the UK. Originally from Sligo, she qualified as a Chartered Accountant in 2005 and launched the business online from rural Donegal in 2015, growing it into a team of almost 80 with offices in Letterkenny, Dublin, and Cork. In 2026, Larissa was named CEO of the Year at the IMAGE PwC Businesswoman of the Year Awards, adding to a track record that includes the Best Operational Impact Award (Digital Transformation & AI Awards 2025) and five consecutive years as Xero Partner of the Year. Alongside building Kinore, she is a committed advocate for female entrepreneurship, having supported programmes including ACORNS, Going for Growth, and Back for Business, and served as President of the Donegal Women In Business Network from 2023 to 2025. www.kinore.com



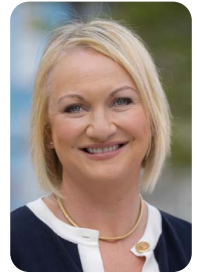
MARY B WALSH - Ire Wel Pallets, Wexford

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



ORLA LEAHY - Ireland Chauffeur Travel, Tipperary

Orla Leahy is the Co-Founder and Director of Ireland Chauffeur Travel. With a background in hospitality, event management, and destination marketing, she has spent her career creating exceptional travel experiences and building strong partnerships across the tourism industry. Her expertise in business development, operations, product innovation, and relationship management has been instrumental in establishing Ireland Chauffeur Travel as one of Ireland's leading luxury Destination Management Companies. Ireland Chauffeur Travel is a long-established, family-owned company specialising in bespoke luxury travel across Ireland and Scotland. For over 20 years, the company has been creating tailor-made itineraries featuring handpicked accommodation, exclusive experiences, private chauffeur-driven touring, and seamless on-the-ground support for discerning travellers from around the world. Passionate about innovation, collaboration, and sustainable business growth, Orla is committed to continually evolving the business while delivering exceptional client experiences. www.irelandchauffeurtravel.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



ANNE CUSACK - Lead Entrepreneur ACORNS Plus

From lab to boardroom, Dr Anne Cusack's journey has spanned medical research, international pharma, and most notably, a bold leap into entrepreneurship. As co-founder and CEO of Critical Healthcare, Anne led the company's transformation from a distribution business into a technology-driven international player in emergency medical services. Following the successful acquisition of Critical Healthcare in 2021, Anne has focused on sharing her experience in scaling businesses, navigating change, and governing for sustainable growth. Anne serves on multiple boards including Bord na Móna, TUS, and Enterprise Ireland, and is a qualified non-executive director. She also contributes nationally as a member of the SME Taskforce and as Chair of the Midlands Regional Skills Forum.



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



**CAROLINE
REIDY**



**CLAIRE
DUIGNAN**



**DEIRDRE
MCGLONE**



**EIMER
HANNON**

PREVIOUS PARTICIPANTS

ACORNS is now in its twelfth year. Over 600 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.



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



Back row (l-r) : Sinead Brady ,The Career Psychologist, Nicola Flanagan , Wellness At The Coach House, Edel Walsh, Edel Walsh Coaching and Consulting, Catherine Good, The Good Dairy Company.
Front row (l-r): Carina Roseingrave, Burren View Farm, Kel Galavan, Mrs Smart Money, Ruth Gallagher, Wild Beans Café

- Members of the Community are invited to become ambassadors for ACORNS and are included in PR opportunities, as these arise from time to time.
- 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 is a truly inspiring programme that brings together ambitious women who genuinely want to support and elevate one another. It creates a space where everyone understands the realities of the entrepreneurial journey, while also encouraging you to pause, reflect, and plan your next steps with clarity and confidence. Our Lead Entrepreneur was incredibly generous with her time, insight, and experience. Her guidance was both practical and empowering, and it's clear she is deeply invested in helping each participant grow and succeed. Being part of ACORNS has been a valuable and motivating experience, and I would highly recommend it to any woman looking to grow her business alongside a supportive and driven community.

CLARA MULLIGAN, HOMEBOT IRELAND



Starting a business can be lonely and you can regularly question yourself. It is great to meet like-minded women who inspire and encourage you. The ACORNS programme is an amazing way to forge friendships, get feedback from a "board" of smart women with varying experience and perspectives, and get some practical frameworks in place.

ELAINE CROSSE, BÁNOR



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 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 than men 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 18 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. ACORNS was selected to represent Ireland in the European Enterprise Promotion Awards 2025, Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills, having previously been awarded runner up in this category in 2018. ACORNS also featured prominently in the Manifesto for an Innovative Europe, which was developed by the participants of the 2018 SME Assembly (www.acorns.ie).

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

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO CONTACT US

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SPONSORS

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

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



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

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

“My Department has supported Female Rural Entrepreneurs under the Rural Innovation Development Fund for over a decade. To date over 600 women in rural Ireland have completed a cycle of the ACORNS programme. ACORNS has consistently provided the skills, and capability needs that female entrepreneurs require when embarking on their business journey. I am acutely aware of the difficulties that entrepreneurial women can come up against when attempting to start new businesses, especially in rural areas, and the ACORNS programme is a real, tangible, mechanism to mitigate and overcome these challenges. It brings me great pleasure to be launching, once again, this innovative and progressive programme that aims to bring about real change in our rural economy, breathes life into our country towns and villages and assists women across rural Ireland to begin and grow their budding businesses.”



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