
50 women entrepreneurs from rural areas sought for ACORNS 6

A total of 50 women entrepreneurs from rural locations across Ireland are to be selected for the sixth year of the Government-backed ACORNS programme.

Women with new businesses or at least with well-developed ideas are being invited to join [ACORNS 6](#), which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, under its Rural Innovation and Development Fund.

ACORNS stands for Accelerating the Creation Of Rural Nascent Start-ups. This is the 6th year of the Government-backed ACORNS programme. New business owners need the support being offered now more than ever in the current challenging times.

High-profile female business leaders are volunteering their time, skills and expertise to support female entrepreneurs in rural locations to start and develop their early stage businesses.

There is no charge to those selected to participate. The initiative will be run on a part time basis over six months from October 2020 to April 2021. The deadline for applications is September 21, 2020.

Peer-to-peer learning

The highly-successful development initiative is based around the concept of peer-to-peer learning where successful business owners – called ‘Lead Entrepreneurs’ — give their time free of charge to meet with a group of about eight early stage business owners once a month for six months.

Acting in a voluntary capacity, these Lead Entrepreneurs will share their insights and experience with the group and help the participants to address the issues and challenges they face in starting and progressing their businesses.

As they are all based in rural Ireland, the Lead Entrepreneurs also act as role models, illustrating by their actions that it is possible to start and grow a successful business in a rural location.

Story of a lead entrepreneur

One of the voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs is Mary B. Walsh, the co-founder and Managing Director of Ire Wel Pallets (IWP), which is a packaging and pallets company based in Wexford, celebrating

30 years in business this year.

Over the past three years almost €5m has been invested into IWP to bring new technology and automation on site and give the company more control of its production, quality and stock.

IWP take their corporate social responsibility very seriously as 'giving back' has always been part and parcel of this company's culture. Being based in rural Ireland, IWP views supporting the ACORNS Program as a vital element of the development, growth and sustainability of the existing Rural Development Plans in all regions across Ireland.

"It has been an honour and privilege to work alongside my fellow Leads and all the past participants of the programme since 2015," said Walsh. "By participating on ACORNS, participants can connect regularly with their peers to brainstorm, network, support one another and share ideas. This rural based ACORNS programme and community has never been as necessary as it is right now in this pandemic. I have seen the participants in all of my previous groups grow both personally and in terms of their businesses and I am certain it will be no different this year. It is very satisfying to see the ACORNS community grow from strength to strength with the participants supporting, collaborating, and doing business with each other across every corner of rural Ireland."

The other voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs this year are Anne Reilly of Paycheck Plus, Co Louth; Caroline McEnery of The HR Suite, Co. Kerry; Eimer Hannon of Hannon Travel, Co. Meath; Larissa Feeney of Accountant Online, Co Donegal; and Triona MacGiolla Rí of Aró Digital Strategies, Co Galway.

Pivoting in the face of the pandemic

The latter part of the previous cycle of the programme – ACORNS 5 —coincided with the nationwide restrictions to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. This had a severely negative impact on businesses across Ireland and the participants were not immune to their effects. ACORNS immediately moved online, and the final round table sessions and workshops were held remotely.

However, supported by their Lead Entrepreneurs, 75pc of ACORNS 5 participants pivoted their business to take account of the changed circumstances and 27pc reported a positive impact on their business.

The latest programme ACORNS 6 was launched last week by Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Dara Calleary, TD.

"ACORNS provides valuable peer support to early-stage female entrepreneurs in rural Ireland, who have recently started or are about to start a business. In the challenging circumstances that we find ourselves, this support is needed now more than ever," Calleary said.

“I encourage early stage female entrepreneurs in rural Ireland to apply without delay.”

Fitzsimons Consulting, specialising in entrepreneurship and growth, developed the initiative.

Founder Paula Fitzsimons says:

“ACORNS is a real grassroots movement, illustrating the strength of peer support, with entrepreneurs supporting one another,” said Paula Fitzsimons, founder. “Psychological isolation is reduced, confidence is increased, and new networks are formed. This initiative has never been more vital than in the current climate and I am delighted the programme continues to be offered thanks to the support of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the contribution of the voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs.”

How to join ACORNS

Any woman with a new business based in rural Ireland, or an idea for a new venture they want to get off the ground, can register their interest at www.acorns.ie and they will be sent a link to the application. There is no charge for participation.

To be considered for ACORNS, applicants must:

- Have set up a new business which has generated sales no earlier than the 1st January 2018; or be actively planning a new venture and have made good progress towards getting the new venture off the ground. Indicators of actively planning a business would include organising the start-up team, sourcing equipment / facilities, money saved for the start-up, writing the business plan, etc.
- They must own or part-own the business which must be located in a rural area, that is in an area outside the administrative city boundaries of Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford.
- If selected, applicants must be available to attend the virtual launch on the morning of 22 October and the first round table session the following morning. This will take place either in person or remotely, depending on prevailing circumstances and government guidelines.

They must expect to become an employer within three years.

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