Stelios North–South Business Cooperation Awards 2025

November 23-24, 2025 • businesspost.ie
Edited by Penny Gray

Back Row (l-r): Ryan & Conor Brogan (Arcus Cleaning Systems), Jack & Nick Cotter (Cotter Agritech), Sam Shephard (JuiceJar), Barry Sherry & Declan McDonald (ACEL Energy), Tracy Ghori (Stelios Philanthropic Foundation), Sammy Leslie (Custodian, Castle Leslie); Front Row (l-r): Ian Jeffers (Co-operation Ireland), Peter Barton (Trustee, Stelios Philanthropic Foundation), Louise Doyle (Needi), Daniel Mulhall (former Irish-US Ambassador), Gráinne Mullins (Grá Chocolates), Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Katrina 'Tina' McCarthy (New Beginnings Scan), Patricia Cullen (Ovascan), Shauna Herron (Environmental Techniques), Harry Hutton (Good Friday Robotics), Tony Anderson (easyGroup), William Haire (advisor to Stelios Philanthropic Foundation)

Building bridges through business

The North–South Business Cooperation Awards celebrates entrepreneurs who are creating connections and shared prosperity trading across the border

Penny Gray

When Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, founder of the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and the creator and owner of the easy family of brands (www.easyHistory.info and www.easy.com), launched the inaugural North–South Business Cooperation Awards, his ambition was simple yet profound: to harness the power of enterprise to build lasting bridges between communities across Ireland.

Backed by the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and run in partnership with Co-operation Ireland, the €500,000 programme set out to recognise and reward entrepreneurs trading across the border – and in doing so, to strengthen the economic and social fabric of the entire island.

Vision to reality

The concept for the awards was inspired by similar bi-communal initiatives established by Haji-Ioannou in Cyprus – his parents' birthplace – where, for over 16 years, joint business awards have helped Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot entrepreneurs work together in the spirit of peace and shared prosperity.

Retired Irish ambassador Daniel Mulhall, who acted as adviser to Haji-Ioannou during the Irish project's development, recalls their first meeting in Monaco:

"Stelios told me he was keen to do some philanthropic work in Ireland," Mulhall explained. "The idea of using business as a way of creating connections between people and spreading prosperity across the island felt immediately relevant. He believes business has a wider social relevance – that it can build prosperity which, in turn, strengthens peace and reconciliation."

That belief found practical expression in early 2025 when the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation announced the awards, inviting applications from entrepreneurs who had started businesses in Northern Ireland or the Republic within the past five years and were now trading cross-border. The total prize fund – an impressive €500,000 – would be divided among nine winning partnerships, culminating in an awards ceremony at the Castle Leslie Estate in Co Monaghan on October 30, 2025.

For Ian Jeffers, chief executive of Co-operation Ireland, the awards embody the organisation's founding mission. "Cross-border business partnerships can play a powerful role in promoting peace, prosperity and shared understanding," he says.

"These awards recognise that cooperation is not just a shared ideal – it's a powerful driver of real economic progress. By supporting ventures that operate beyond traditional boundaries, we're helping to embed lasting economic ties that benefit communities north and south."

Co-operation Ireland's origins go back to 1979, when Brendan O'Regan established the charity to strengthen links between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Jeffers sees the new awards as a natural continuation of that legacy:

"The idea was that if we worked together, we'd understand each other better and create a better situation for everyone. It's a very different world in 2025, but we still believe that by bringing people together, with the right drivers, we can improve things for everyone."

Castle Leslie – chosen for its location near the border – provided a fitting stage for the inaugural ceremony. As guests arrived, the atmosphere reflected both celebration and purpose: a tangible reminder that while political progress has been achieved since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, economic cooperation remains an evolving frontier.

Collaboration

In his keynote address, Haji-Ioannou – the entrepreneur behind the easy family of brands, including easyJet and easyHotel – spoke passionately about the transformative potential of collaboration.

"This is a proud day for entrepreneurship on the island of Ireland," he told attendees. "The winners we honour today show that when determination, innovation and creativity meet, borders become bridges. These entrepreneurs are not only building successful businesses – they are proving that collaboration across communities leads to prosperity for all."

Haji-Ioannou personally presented the awards to each of the nine winning enterprises, commending their drive to turn shared ambition into shared success.

The awards, he said, were "about more than a financial prize – they are about recognising and amplifying the success stories that can inspire others to follow".

> These awards recognise that cooperation is not just a shared ideal – it's a powerful driver of real economic progress

The competition drew a large and diverse field of entries, with applicants representing sectors from technology and renewable energy to agritech, healthcare, food, and consumer goods. To qualify, businesses needed to demonstrate genuine cross-border collaboration, a meaningful presence in both jurisdictions, and minimum thresholds for turnover and employment – tangible proof of their contribution to the island's economic life.

In total, nine winners shared the €500,000 prize fund: one Gold Award of €150,000, two Silver Awards of €100,000 each, and six Bronze Awards of €25,000.

Gold award

Taking home the top honour, the Gold Award, was Juice Jar, a fast-growing juice and healthy-food brand born in Belfast. Founded by Sam Shephard, a former Royal Marines officer and recipient of the UK's highest medal for gallantry, the George Cross, Juice Jar has become known for its acai bowls, smoothies, matcha and coffee – all delivered with vibrant energy and entrepreneurial flair.

Shephard's inspiration came while living in Australia, where he saw first-hand the power of healthy food to transform lifestyles. "It was clear I needed to bring acai home to Ireland," he said.

Silver awards

The Silver Awards recognised two outstanding enterprises:

- Grá Chocolates/Needi, an innovative collaboration between an artisan chocolatier crafting hand-painted luxury confections and a technology platform specialising in corporate gifting; and
- Acel Energy, a renewable-energy solutions company designing solar PV, battery storage and demand-management systems for commercial and industrial clients.

Bronze awards

Six Bronze Awards, worth €25,000 each, were presented to enterprises demonstrating ingenuity, resilience and social impact:

- OvaScan Fertility Ultrasound & New Beginnings Scan – specialist fertility clinics operating across Dublin and Strabane;
- Arcus Cleaning Systems – an industrial hygiene innovator improving efficiency and sustainability;
- Cotter Agritech – a data-driven agri-tech venture focused on animal health and welfare;
- Subterranean Software and Good Friday Robotics – two tech companies developing advanced drone and robotic systems for challenging environments;
- Park Life – a premium pet treat and wellness brand blending science and creativity; and
- Súil Pharma and Medinect Ophtho – a cross-border med-tech partnership advancing new therapies for vision diseases.

For Jeffers, the calibre of winners illustrates the island's untapped potential. "Cross-border businesses play a vital role in building confidence and shared prosperity," he said.

"Today's winners reflect a spirit of resilience and innovation that transcends borders. They are showing us what the future of the island can look like – one where partnership and enterprise go hand in hand."

Mulhall agrees. Reflecting on his four-decade diplomatic career, he sees economic collaboration as central to maintaining peace.

"The potential for North-South business cooperation has been stunted for far too long. It has blossomed over the last 20 years, but there's still enormous potential. These awards can help unlock it," Mulhall said.

Lasting value

In May 2017, Sir Stelios signed The Giving Pledge, committing to endow his Foundation with half his estate in order to become the perpetual vehicle for his legacy. The Foundation now intends the North-South Business Cooperation Awards to become an annual fixture.

The foundation's ongoing work spans entrepreneurship, education, disability rights, food security and peace-building – causes united by the conviction that collaboration generates lasting value.

As the applause echoed through Castle Leslie's halls, the event's message was unmistakable: peace and prosperity are not abstract ideals but practical outcomes of people working together. The inaugural awards demonstrated that when entrepreneurs from Belfast to Cork, Derry to Dublin, pool their skills and vision, they do more than grow businesses – they help weave a shared future for an island still discovering the full promise of cooperation.

Or, as Haji-Ioannou put it in his closing remarks: "These entrepreneurs are turning the idea of cooperation into something real and enduring. They are proving that when we trade together, we thrive together."

The Stelios Philanthropic Foundation

Founder: Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, creator of the easy family of brands including easyJet and easyHotel (www.easyHistory.info and www.easy.com).

Established: UK registered charity founded 2011.

Mission: To support a diverse range of good causes in our local communities that we call close to home: the UK & Ireland, Monaco & France, Greece & Cyprus, where the Founder and his family have lived and worked.

Global Reach: Activities include 7 entrepreneurial awards in 4 countries including Bi-communal Business Awards in Cyprus (running for 16 years), the Irish North South Business Cooperation Awards (its first year), a Food from the Heart programme giving food donations in Greece, Cyprus and in the UK & Ireland via food banks, supports scholarships at several universities in the UK, Greece & Cyprus. Environment support working with WWF, Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation and The Earthshot Prize.

Business Model: Sir Stelios owns the easy brand including easyJet and easyHotel in his own company easyGroup Ltd which collects royalties from the revenues of the easy businesses. Sir Stelios uses this steady income stream to give back to society via his Foundation.

Funding: Since 2010 Sir Stelios and easyGroup have made over €122 million in charitable donations to the Stelios Foundation.

Philanthropic Pledge: In 2017, Haji-Ioannou signed the Giving Pledge committing to give 50% of his estate as an endowment to his UK Foundation as the perpetual vehicle of his legacy to continue the giving back to society in perpetuity.

Websites: stelios.foundation and stelios.ie

Gold Winner

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou presents Sam Shephard (Juice Jar) with his cheque


Louise Doyle (Needi), Gráinne Mullins (Grá Chocolates), Sam Shephard (Juice Jar), Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Barry Sherry & Declan McDonald (ACEL Energy)

Blending borders: The Belfast juice brand stirring up north–south cooperation

After tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Sam Shephard found a new mission closer to home – fuelling unity and wellness with Juice Jar, the vibrant brand bringing acai, matcha and momentum to Ireland's business landscape, writes **Penny Gray**

When Sam Shephard left the Royal Marines after seven years of service, he might have expected life to slow down. But that wasn't in his nature. "No real background in business whatsoever," he laughed, recalling how he swapped combat boots for coffee cups, "but I was into health and wellness. And off we went."

Today, Shephard's company, Juice Jar, is a thriving cross-border business – a fast-growing health food and juice brand born in Belfast, known for its vibrant energy, acai bowls, smoothies, matcha and coffee. What began as a single shop in 2019 has grown to eight stores across Ireland and the UK, including two new locations in Dublin and one in Bristol. This year, that bold expansion was recognised with a major accolade: the Gold Award at the inaugural North–South Business Cooperation Awards, a €500,000 programme launched by the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation to celebrate entrepreneurship across the island of Ireland.

"It's unbelievable, I'll tell you that," Shephard said, still processing the win. The award recognises not only his success in business, but his mission – bridging borders in a divided economy, and proving that health, passion, and a good idea can transcend politics.

Sam Shephard addresses the crowd

From battlefields to bowls

Before smoothies and superfoods, Shephard's life followed a very different path. A native of Armagh, he grew up in the shadow of the border, shaped by the lingering tensions of the Troubles. "We grew up in that," he said. "That's close to home."

After joining the Royal Marines, Shephard served in Afghanistan and Iraq, earning the UK's highest medal for gallantry, the George Cross. He later moved into finance, working as chief of staff at a London hedge fund, with oversight of Australia's largest art collection and a sprawling 77,000-hectare farming operation. It was during his time in Australia that inspiration struck. "I saw first-hand the power of acai and healthy food," he said. "Combined with my passion for fitness, it was clear I needed to bring acai home to Ireland."

In 2019, he did exactly that. Juice Jar opened its first location in Belfast's city centre – a bright, bustling hub serving smoothies, juices, and nutritious food to locals craving something different. "Five years later, we're still here," he said. "And we're growing."


Talking business with Sir Stelios

Crossing the border – literally

When Shephard opened his first stores, expanding north to south seemed like a natural step. After all, Ireland is one island. But he quickly discovered that the business landscape wasn't so seamless.

"We went to England as our third store," he explained. "That seemed easy. It's over the Irish Sea, but supply lines are the same, company taxes are the same, Vat's the same. Everything's the same. But to jump down to Dublin, that blindsided me a little bit – the bureaucracy and the difference that's there with two sovereign countries."

> **"For anyone to take an interest in Ireland, full stop, is a good thing**

The differences are more than red tape. They touch every aspect of trade – taxes, regulations, even logistics. "That's what awards like this are here to highlight," he said. "If we can help streamline those processes and make things easier for business, then everything else should follow – in terms of relations, outlook, future prosperity."

It's clear that for Shephard, the border is more than a line on a map. It's part of his identity. "I'm from Armagh, a border county," he said. "This north-south thing – it's close to my heart."

The economics of expansion

If navigating two jurisdictions sounds complicated, Shephard approaches it with a soldier's pragmatism. He's quick to rattle off figures that illustrate the challenge – and opportunity – of doing business in both parts of Ireland.

"In hospitality, Vat's 9 per cent in the south, compared to 20 per cent in the North," he explains. "Corporation tax is 12 per cent versus 25 per cent. Cost of labour is now about the same. National insurance is 15 per cent in the North compared to 8 per cent in the south.

"So across the board, it makes total sense to do business in the south. Which, if you ask an Irish person from the south, is funny – they think it's awful. But I tell them, 'It is bad – but it's worse up there!'"

It's the kind of grounded humour that's helped Shephard connect with customers and colleagues on both sides of the border. Behind it, though, lies a sharp business mind. "Every time we open a new shop, it gets a little easier," he said. "Your costs consolidate. That's the trick of this business – scale. You grow, you survive."

The cost of growth

That growth hasn't come without sacrifice. Shephard has poured everything into Juice Jar – time, money and energy. "People don't realise," he admitted. "Five years working in a juice bar, I've literally taken next to nothing out of this business. It has always been grow, grow, grow – at all costs."

So when he talks about the award's €150,000 prize for the Gold Award, he does so with equal parts gratitude and responsibility. "It's a life-changing amount of money," he said. "And we'll continue to expand and open more shops. That's how we'll really get buying power and see the upside."

The journey has been long and uncertain. "Some days you feel like it's all for nothing," Shephard said. "Nobody pats you on the back. You never know when there's going to be light at the end of the tunnel. And something like this happens – and suddenly, you're reinvigorated."

At its heart, Juice Jar is about connection – between health and happiness, between north and south, between communities that once looked away from each other. Shephard's story mirrors a broader one about the island's evolving business landscape: one where opportunity flows more freely than politics, and where a generation of entrepreneurs are redefining what Irish cooperation can look like. This is embodied by the establishment of the North-South Business Cooperation Awards.

"For anyone to take an interest in Ireland, full stop, is a good thing," Shephard said. "Particularly in the business world, where for years you've worked every hour of every day, and nobody says, 'Well done.' Awards like this – they matter. They bring people together. They make you want to keep going."

The road ahead

As Shephard looks to the future, his vision is both ambitious and grounded. He wants Juice Jar to keep expanding – but also to serve as an example of how businesses can bridge divides. "If we can make it easier for businesses to work across the border," he said, "then everything else – relations, understanding, prosperity – follows."

In a world that often dwells on division, Shephard's story is one of unity through action. From battlefields to Belfast cafés, his journey has been defined by courage and conviction.

For now, Juice Jar continues to thrive, blending bananas and berries while blending communities in a new Ireland of opportunity for all.

Juice Jar

Founder: Sam Shephard

Founded: 2019

Headquarters: Belfast, Northern Ireland

Locations: Eight stores across Ireland and the UK (including Dublin and Bristol)

Speciality: Acai bowls, smoothies, juices, matcha, and coffee

Employees: 60 (approx, across all sites)

Recent Award: Gold Award, North-South Business Cooperation Awards (2025)

Prize: €150,000 from the €500,000 Stelios Philanthropic Foundation programme

Mission: To bridge north-south business and cultural divides through healthy living and shared enterprise

Founder's Background: Former Royal Marine and George Cross recipient; later chief of staff at a London hedge fund before founding Juice Jar

Next Steps: Expansion of new outlets across Ireland and the UK, strengthening supply chains and buying power

Website: juicejar.com/

Silver Winners

Sweet synergy: chocolates, connection and collaboration

When Gráinne Mullins and Louise Doyle met by chance, a cross-border partnership was born – one that blends artistry, technology, and a shared vision for Irish enterprise, writes **Penny Gray**

Louise Doyle (Needi) and Gráinne Mullins (Grá Chocolates)

When two creative entrepreneurs met by chance at a Women in Business conference three years ago, neither could have predicted their shared passion for local enterprise and meaningful gifting would lead to a collaboration celebrated across the island. Today, Grá Chocolates and Needi stand out not only as innovative Irish brands but also as symbols of cross-border cooperation, taking home a Silver Award at this year's North-South Business Cooperation Awards.

Founded by Gráinne Mullins in Co Galway, Grá Chocolates has become known for its luxurious, hand-painted creations. "We really specialise in hand-painted chocolates," said Mullins. "Using the finest-quality ingredients to create something truly unique." From a kitchen table idea to over 60 retailers across Ireland, the company's growth reflects both the appetite for premium Irish confections and Gráinne's flair for turning artistry into enterprise. Corporate gifting now forms a key part of her business, with clients including Google and LinkedIn ordering bespoke boxes that fuse craftsmanship with brand prestige.

While Grá Chocolates is rooted in the west of Ireland, its reach has always stretched north. "Even from day one, we've had a lot of customers from Northern Ireland ordering from us," Mullins said. Her early career as a pastry chef in Belfast built lasting relationships that evolved into cross-border retail and corporate partnerships. "We've worked with Avoca, Indie Food and PR agencies up north. There are challenges – currency differences, Vat issues – but the chance to showcase an all-island Irish product is worth it."

For Louise Doyle, founder of Needi, corporate gifting is not about volume but connection. "Needi is a corporate gifting concierge service that uses psychology and AI to match the perfect gifts to recipients," she explained. "We source exclusively from small, local and independent businesses." From whiskey distillers to soap makers, Needi curates gifts that carry the stories of their makers – and Grá Chocolates quickly became one of its stars. "As soon as we met, I thought, 'That's it – we need to sell her chocolates'," Doyle recalled. "They're incredible, and I knew we could get them in front of big corporates."

Now Needi partners with over 200 independent makers, including Grá Chocolates, connecting them with major brands like Microsoft, Spotify, Virgin and DPD. Based in Middletown, Co Armagh, Doyle is used to working across borders. "Our merchants are spread across the North, the south and even the UK," she said. "A single order might include chocolates from Galway, whiskey from Antrim and a handmade frame from Dublin – all packaged together." Managing the Vat across jurisdictions is notoriously complex. "Different codes apply depending on whether it's food, alcohol or art – and which side of the border it's being delivered to. We've been handling it manually so far, which is a lot of work."

Both founders share the same can-do optimism in the face of cross-border challenges. "It's about working with people who want to work with you," said Mullins. Doyle agreed: "We act calm on the surface – like swans – but behind the scenes we're dealing with complex paperwork. That's why this support means so much. It's not just a financial boost; it's validation for what we're doing."

Their partnership reflects the spirit of collaboration over competition. Both are women founders driven by community and creativity, and together they amplify each other's strengths. "Grá's chocolates are beautiful, premium products – exactly what our clients want," said Doyle. "We make sure her work reaches those audiences, whether it's a tech company in Dublin or a finance firm in Belfast." For Mullins, the partnership has expanded her reach beyond what a small team could achieve alone. "It's a great example of how small businesses can scale together."

That synergy embodies the ethos of the North-South Business Cooperation Awards, which celebrate business cooperation across Ireland as a pathway to peace and prosperity. "It's through business, sport and education that we really bring people together," said Doyle. "Nobody's asking which side of the border you're on – they're asking how they can help your business grow."

For Grá Chocolates, the award funding will help realise a dream – a new chocolate factory. "It'll let us reduce costs, improve margins and take the next big step," said Mullins. For Needi, the focus is on technology – and the Vat headache: "The automated Vat system will let us sell seamlessly across borders," said Doyle. "That'll make life easier for our clients – and for us."

The partnership between Grá and Needi is more than a business arrangement; it's a story of mutual empowerment and entrepreneurship. "It's not about where you're from," said Doyle. "It's about what you're building." Or as Mullins puts it: "It's about growing something Irish, beautiful, and shared by everyone." Collaboration, it turns out, really is the sweetest recipe of all.

For more information see needi.co.uk and grachocolates.com

Louise Doyle (Needi) and Gráinne Mullins (Grá Chocolates) address the crowd

Powering a greener future across borders

When Barry Sherry and Declan McDonald founded Acel Energy in 2022, they knew they were entering a crowded market – but one facing an urgent challenge. Energy demand was rising, grid capacity was under strain, and businesses across Ireland were scrambling to reduce both their costs and carbon footprints. Their response was simple yet ambitious: help companies take control of their own energy production, one rooftop and battery at a time.

"Essentially, we provide renewable energy solutions on-site to help businesses reduce their grid dependency and become more self-sufficient," explained Sherry, the company's CEO and co-founder. Acel Energy's core offering – solar installations combined with battery storage – allows clients to generate and store power locally.

"It's all about resilience," added McDonald, COO and co-founder. "Grid security is becoming a real issue. The demand is there, but supply isn't always reliable. We're helping companies take control of their energy future."

From factories to farms, their behind-the-meter systems give clients both autonomy and predictability – something increasingly valuable in today's volatile energy landscape.

The company faces challenges, however. Headquartered in Monaghan, with an office in Fermanagh, Acel Energy straddles two jurisdictions – and two very different regulatory systems.

"It's one industry, but two sets of rules," said Sherry. "In Northern Ireland, we work with NIE Networks, and in the Republic, it's ESB Networks. They're broadly the same, but with different parameters and planning processes."

McDonald notes that even the basics – like electrical certification – can be tricky. "Electricians trained in the North are registered as UK electricians, but they have to do extra training to work in the south. You just have to be prepared for that."

Rather than see the dual system as a barrier, the pair treat it as an opportunity. "We've built good relationships with both network providers," said Sherry. "They know us, and we understand their requirements. It's about doing things right."

Still, he acknowledges the need for more joined-up thinking. "There's definitely an appetite to simplify things across the border. If both networks could work more closely on an all-island system, it would benefit everyone."

Sherry points to the long-discussed North-South Interconnector – a critical piece of infrastructure designed to link the electricity grids of the Republic and Northern Ireland – as a key step in that direction. "It's been a challenge politically, but technically it's the right move," he said. "We're an island; we need to support each other as an island."

That cross-border spirit runs through everything Acel Energy does. The company's workforce is evenly split between Monaghan and Fermanagh, something Sherry believes is symbolic as well as practical. "Half our team is from the North, half from the south – and we're stronger for it."

That unity was recognised at the North-South Business Cooperation Awards, where Acel Energy took home the Silver Award – a testament to its innovative approach and community ethos. For both founders, the honour carried deeper meaning.

Barry Sherry & Declan McDonald (ACEL Energy) with Ian Jeffers (Co-operation Ireland) and Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou

ACEL Energy founders Barry Sherry & Declan McDonald

"We grew up during the tail end of the Troubles," said Sherry. "We remember the Good Friday Agreement and what it represented. So an award like this, that celebrates cross-border collaboration, means a lot."

McDonald agreed: "It's about awareness – helping people in the south understand more about Ulster and Northern Ireland, and vice versa. There's still that perception gap, and initiatives like this help bridge it."

The awards, he adds, are more than just recognition. "They bring together people from all backgrounds – business, community groups, education. It's about conversation as much as competition."

Winning silver came with a cheque for €100,000, and Acel Energy plans to put it to good use. "We were fortunate to receive such a generous prize," said Sherry. "Half will go straight back into the company – more resources, new hires, things that will help us grow sustainably."

The other half will be split between research and development and a new training academy for staff. "We're developing programmes not just in construction, but in mental health, computer software and AI," McDonald explained. "We want our team to have opportunities to grow with us."

Community remains at the heart of their plans. "Both our kids are in local primary schools," said Sherry. "We're giving donations to their schools to help create a better future for everyone. It's important to give back where we can."

It's clear that for Sherry and McDonald, Acel Energy is about more than solar panels and spreadsheets. Their work sits at the intersection of sustainability, community and cooperation – values that transcend borders.

"We're proud to be part of something that's not just about business," said Sherry. "It's about building a stronger, cleaner, more connected island."

As Ireland continues its transition toward renewable energy, Acel Energy stands as proof that progress doesn't have to stop at the border – and that when people work together, the future can be bright on both sides.

For more, see Acelenergy.ie

Bronze Winners

Jack and Nick Cotter (Cotter Agritech) addresses the crowd

Jack and Nick Cotter (Cotter Agritech) with Peter Barton (Trustee, Stelios Philanthropic Foundation), and Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou

Cross-border work drives agtech success story as far as New Zealand

A partnership between Cotter Agritech and Queen's University Belfast has produced a breakthrough in sustainable livestock management, one now spreading to New Zealand

In the rolling fields of west Limerick, innovation is blooming where tradition once reigned. From humble beginnings selling firewood after school, brothers Jack and Nick Cotter have built not one, but three thriving enterprises – each grounded in sustainability, entrepreneurship, and a deep respect for the land. Their latest venture, a pioneering agtech company tackling medicine overuse in livestock, has just earned them the attention of farmers across the globe – and a bronze prize in the North-South Business Cooperation Awards for their research work with Queen's University.

The problem they're solving is as old as modern agriculture itself. For decades, livestock have been routinely treated with antiparasitic drugs, whether they need them or not. This blanket approach – treating 100 per cent of a flock "just in case" – has led to growing drug resistance, mirroring the antibiotic crisis in human medicine.

"What we've developed," Nick said, "is a piece of technology built in collaboration with researchers from Queen's University Belfast and the department of agriculture in Northern Ireland. It uses algorithms to identify which individual animals actually need treatment, rather than dosing the entire flock."

The impact is remarkable. Trials across Ireland, the UK and New Zealand show farmers can cut medicine use by 40 to 60 per cent without any drop in productivity. "It's doing more with less," Nick said. "That means lower costs for farmers, less drug resistance, and far less environmental contamination. These chemicals can seep into soil and groundwater, harming beneficial organisms. Reducing their use is a win all around."

The Cotters are based in Abbeyfeale, Co Limerick, a place not typically associated with cutting-edge technology. Yet their upbringing on a sheep farm provided fertile ground for innovation. Their first business, Cotter Bros Firewood, was born when Jack was 13 and Nick just 11. "We'd sell firewood in the evenings after school," Nick recalled. "It grew and grew – now it's one of the largest firewood producers in Ireland, helping decarbonise home heating with renewable biomass."

Their second venture, Cotter Organic Lamb, was born from frustration with the low prices offered by processors. "As farmers, we realised we were producing something special," Nick explained. "Our lambs are 100 per cent grass-fed, from breeds with higher intramuscular fat, which makes the meat juicier and more tender. We wanted to create our own brand and capture the premium we knew the product deserved."

The brothers started small, selling to local hotels and restaurants in 2019. Then came 2020 – and Covid-19. "Suddenly everything shut down," Nick said. "We thought we were finished before we'd even begun." But a stroke of luck changed everything. The pair were featured on a Late Late Show special highlighting Irish businesses affected by the pandemic. "Within three hours, we'd sold out of everything we had," Nick said. "Those customers – and their families – are still buying from us every year."

Through every stage of their entrepreneurial journey, the Cotters have followed one principle: "Go slow to go fast later."

"If you don't get the basics right," Nick said, "you'll pay for it when you scale up. Every business we've built started from what was right in front of us – the opportunities on the farm – and step by step we've grown from there."

> We're trying to solve a global problem, and we're doing it with the experience we've gained right here

That steady, deliberate approach has served them well. Their agtech innovation is now gaining traction far beyond Ireland. Northern Ireland, Nick says, has become their biggest market – a reflection of the cross-border research roots of their technology. "The farmers we worked with there have been huge advocates," he said. "They were involved from the start, and without them this product wouldn't exist."

Partnerships with Queen's University Belfast have been pivotal. "Advice on treating animals as individuals rather than groups has been around for 25 years," Nick explained. "But no one had figured out how to make it practical for farmers. They're busy people, often slow to adopt new tech, so it has to be simple and quick."

The brothers' ambitions don't stop at home. They've recently spent two years working with Beef + Lamb New Zealand, a farmer-funded research body leading agricultural innovation across the southern hemisphere. "We've done the foundational research," said Nick, "and now we're moving towards commercialisation. The prize money we've just received will go towards hiring new staff and launching a marketing effort to get more farmers on board in New Zealand."

It's a bold move for two young men from rural Ireland – but it's in keeping with their track record of blending traditional know-how with modern innovation. "We're trying to solve a global problem," Nick said. "And we're doing it with the experience we've gained right here on the farm."

At its heart, the Cotters' story is about resourcefulness – spotting problems close to home and finding inventive, sustainable solutions. From selling bundles of wood to creating an organic meat brand, to developing cutting-edge livestock technology, their journey is a testament to rural entrepreneurship at its best.

They've proven that with patience, purpose, and a willingness to learn, even the smallest beginnings can lead to global impact. And from the look of things, the Cotter brothers are just getting started.

For more information, see cotteragritech.com

Pioneering compassionate women's health

Two women-led clinics, OvaScan in Dublin and New Beginnings in Strabane, Co Tyrone, are redefining women's healthcare through empathy, expertise, and cross-border collaboration – and their award-winning partnership is just getting started.

When Tina McCarthy, based in Strabane, opened a midwife-led ultrasound clinic three years ago, she had a clear mission in mind: to bring time, compassion and understanding back into maternity and fertility care.

"I was overwhelmed in the hospital system," she recalled. "I just wasn't giving women enough time. I wanted to offer them a more relaxed, family-centred environment – somewhere they felt truly cared for."

That simple conviction has grown into New Beginnings, a private pregnancy ultrasound service providing everything from early pregnancy scans to fertility support. Her practice offers 3D and 4D imaging, gender scans and personalised services such as pelvic fertility monitoring scans. "Sometimes it's just about helping them avoid long journeys for basic checks," she explained. "It's those small things that make a big difference."

> I realised women couldn't just walk in and get an assessment about their own bodies

McCarthy's journey recently intertwined with that of Patricia Cullen, founder of OvaScan, an independent ultrasound and diagnostic service based in Dublin. Cullen, who trained and worked in several fertility clinics, saw first-hand how difficult it was for women to access reproductive assessments without being part of an ongoing fertility programme.

"I realised women couldn't just walk in and get an assessment or learn about their own bodies," she said. "That didn't sit right with me. So I decided to open OvaScan to give women access, education and knowledge about their health."

OvaScan offers fertility and early pregnancy scans, blood testing and diagnostic procedures such as HyCoSy scans – tests to check if fallopian tubes are open. "In fertility, time is against you. Waiting six months for a hospital test isn't acceptable. I wanted to provide faster access to those vital checks."

As demand for specialist care has grown, Cullen has continued to expand her expertise. "Endometriosis has become such a huge issue. I was seeing so many women where I suspected endo, so I went to King's College for specialist training. Now I offer an endometriosis assessment service – something that's still very rare here."

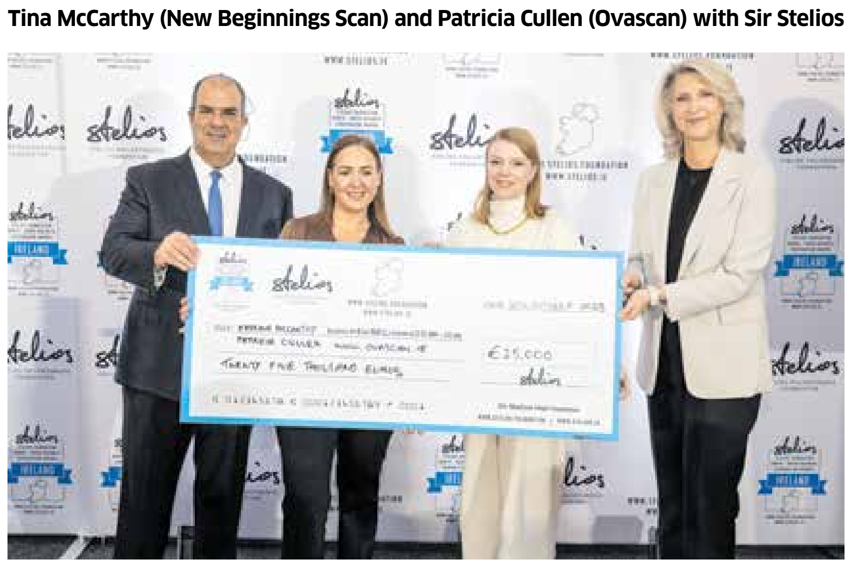
Both women are proud of their niche focus on women's health, and their partnership has allowed them to provide a truly comprehensive service.

"Our work fits together naturally," McCarthy said.

"Patricia handles fertility assessments and early investigations, and I take over in the later stages of pregnancy. Between us, we can support women from start to finish – the whole journey."

For both founders, what sets their work apart is not technology, but empathy.

Tina McCarthy (New Beginnings Scan) and Patricia Cullen (Ovascan) with Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou



Tina McCarthy (New Beginnings Scan) and Patricia Cullen (Ovascan) with Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Tracy Ghori (Stelios Philanthropic Foundation)

"One woman told me, 'You're the first person who's ever asked how I'm feeling during IVF'," Cullen recalled. "That really stayed with me. Compassion is at the heart of everything we do."

While many clinics operate on 15-minute slots, both women refuse to rush care. "I could never do that," McCarthy said. "When you're doing a vaginal ultrasound, you owe it to that woman to check everything – not just tick boxes. Women's health should be holistic."

It's this approach that has earned them the trust of patients across Ireland and beyond. "We have women travelling from Donegal, Sligo, Monaghan – even the UK," McCarthy said. "They're willing to travel because they trust us. They know we'll listen."

Cullen agrees. "I've had women fly in from Glasgow and London because they can't get these scans at home. That says a lot about the demand – and the lack of access elsewhere."

Winning a Bronze Award – and €25,000 – for their collaborative work has only strengthened their resolve to grow. For Cullen, the next step is education.

"I'd love to invest some of that award money into free educational content – videos, social media, online resources – so women can understand what to expect from fertility treatment, especially if they're travelling abroad. No one talks openly about it. It's all hidden on forums. It should be open and honest."

She also plans to expand her technology, adding 3D transvaginal ultrasound for more detailed fertility imaging. McCarthy, too, hopes to enhance her facilities and social media presence. "Reputation is everything. Google reviews and word of mouth have built our businesses – now it's time to share what we do more widely."

The award is even more special as neither woman's success came easily. McCarthy launched her business during the Covid pandemic – while caring for a 10-month-old baby.

"Everyone told me I was mad. I was breastfeeding in business meetings, thinking, 'What have I done?' But I knew I had to do it. Women's health needed this."

"We're both mothers, business owners, and clinicians," said Cullen. "It's not easy, but if you love what you do, it keeps you going. We've helped so many women through tough times – that's what drives us."

Both women see their recognition in the North-South Business Cooperation Awards not as a finish line, but as a sign they're on the right path. "It's a pinch-me moment," Cullen said. "When you're running your business on your own and suddenly you're being recognised – it's surreal."

As OvaScan and New Beginnings continue to grow, both founders remain focused on the same mission that started it all: empowering women through compassionate, accessible healthcare.

"We're paving the way for women's health," McCarthy said. "It's time we talk about it openly and make sure every woman feels supported."

Cullen agreed: "We want to create a system where knowledge is shared, compassion is standard, and care isn't rushed. That's what women deserve."

For more, see newbeginningsscan.com and ovascan.ie

The all-Ireland brand making life a treat for pets

Selfie time for Richard Marles (Park Life Pet Limited)

By blending playfulness with purpose, Park Life is building a cross-border business that's as joyful as the pets it serves

In the heart of Ireland, a cheerful brand is on a mission to make natural, grain-free dog treats fun, accessible, and loved on both sides of the border. Park Life Pet Limited, founded by Richard Marles, has carved a niche in the pet food market by blending playfulness with purpose – and in doing so, it's become a quiet symbol of north-south collaboration in post-Brexit Ireland.

Unlike many of the premium, artisanal brands that dominate the sector, Park Life's philosophy is rooted in accessibility – both in price and personality. "Historically, natural and grain-free treats have been really premium, quite dull and boring," Marles said. "We're trying to make them fun and playful, something that can sit proudly on supermarket shelves."

Marles, originally from Sheffield, now calls Athlone home. His family – an Irish wife and three "little Irish children" – helped root him in the island's heart. From there, he's built a business that bridges communities, economies and even political borders.

While Park Life is headquartered in the midlands, much of its infrastructure is based in Northern Ireland. The decision, Marles says, was shaped by both opportunity and necessity.


Richard Marles (Park Life Pet Limited) with Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Sammy Leslie (Custodian, Castle Leslie)

"Brexit had a big impact. When I first wrote the business plan, the idea was to build the brand in Ireland and then expand into the UK. But quite early on, we gained a listing with a major UK retailer called Jollyes. That made me rethink how we could serve both Ireland and the UK effectively."

With the complexities of post-Brexit trade, Northern Ireland offered a strategic middle ground. "It turned out Northern Ireland is really good at third-party logistics and warehousing," Marles said. "That sector's only growing because of its unique position between the UK and EU."

Today, Park Life's main warehouse and head of operations are based there, allowing the company to ship seamlessly to customers across Ireland, north and south, and into the wider UK and European markets. The brand now sells in around 15 countries, but Ireland remains its core.

Northern Ireland's dog owners, Marles says, have been especially welcoming. "People in Northern Ireland love their dogs – they treat them like human babies. It's a small market, but one where we can do a really good job building distribution and awareness."

Park Life has forged a unique partnership with Wild River Dog Park, a doggy playground that hosts themed events throughout the year. "When they do events for Easter, Halloween or Christmas, we supply them with our themed treats to give out to guests. It's a brilliant, grassroots way to connect with the pet community."

For him, it's not just about selling treats – it's about creating moments of joy for pets and their owners. "Those partnerships help us build a brand that feels local, friendly and part of the community," he says.

This year, Park Life received recognition for its cross-border impact by winning a Bronze Prize at the North-South Business Cooperation Awards. For Marles, the significance goes beyond business.

"Those partnerships help us build a brand that feels local, friendly and part of the community

"I think initiatives like this are fantastic," he says. "There's still a lot of work to do to encourage collaboration between North and south, but it can only help. Encouraging businesses to work together strengthens both communities."

Coming from the UK, Marles says he sees Ireland as one connected marketplace. "I just look at it as the island of Ireland," he explains. "Dog owners don't differentiate between north and south. A bark is a bark!"

Still, Brexit has presented challenges. "Phase three of the Windsor Agreement has made moving stock between the UK and Northern Ireland more complicated. But that's more a UK-Northern Ireland issue than north-south. For us, trading across Ireland is straightforward."

Despite the bureaucratic headaches, Marles remains optimistic. "We've built a system that works. Our warehouse in the North allows us to service both markets efficiently, and from there, we can expand even further."

Winning the Bronze Award has given Park Life not just recognition, but also €25,000 to fuel its next phase. "That money is going to make a huge difference," Marles said. "It'll help us build our team and expand, both north and south of the border."

The company plans to increase both its physical distribution and online presence. "We've got a fantastic product that people love – it's just not in enough places. We'll continue building awareness so more pet owners know who we are."

At its heart, Park Life's story is one of modern Ireland – connected, cooperative, and quietly bridging divides. A company born from family and shaped by the complexities of Brexit, it's proving that commerce, community and even canines can unite an island.

As Marles puts it with a grin: "We're all just trying to make dogs happy. And that's something everyone can agree on."

For more information, see parklife.dog

Beyond the border: How Arcus is cleaning up

Born in lockdown and built on cooperation, Arcus Cleaning Systems is one of the brightest examples of the new all-island economy – where innovation, peace, and sustainability meet.

When Conor and Ryan Brogan founded Arcus Cleaning Systems in early 2020, they had no idea a global pandemic was about to shut down the world.

"We started trading about three weeks before the first lockdown," recalled Conor. "Two of our three routes to market disappeared overnight."

The brothers, based just outside Lisburn, could easily have folded. Instead, they adapted and built one of the island's most promising young engineering firms. Arcus designs and manufactures automated cleaning systems for hygiene-critical industries such as food and beverage, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and chemical production.

Their machines do more than wash and sanitise – they help clients cut water, power and labour use while improving safety and consistency. "From the start, we've cared about sustainability," said Conor. "Helping our customers reduce their environmental impact is at the heart of what we do. That's an all-island mission – a river doesn't know a border."

The early months of the pandemic forced a rapid rethink, however. With no site visits, installations or demos possible, the brothers pivoted online. Ryan took charge of the company's digital outreach and marketing.

"At one point during lockdown, we suddenly became very visible," he said. "Everyone was online – and so were we."

That digital-first approach gave Arcus an unexpected edge. Because its systems could be shipped and installed with minimal contact, the firm continued to trade while others paused. "It was a blessing and a curse," Conor said. "But it taught us to be agile – and that's stuck with us."

One of Arcus's proudest projects came in 2021 with a Wicklow-based company that reconditions plastic containers for reuse in the food, pharma and chemical industries.

"Their whole business is about reducing plastic waste," Conor explains. "We built an automated system that helped them do that even better."

The results speak for themselves: a 70 per cent reduction in water use, a 90 per cent cut in power consumption, and a 250 per cent increase in production capacity. The partnership has continued, with Arcus now designing a larger automated line for the company's new factory.

"That project is the epitome of what we're trying to do," said Conor. "It's proof that sustainability and productivity can go hand in hand."

Ryan & Conor Brogan (Arcus Cleaning Systems) address the crowd

Cross-border trade has been central to Arcus since day one. Around 30 to 40 per cent of the company's turnover still comes from clients in the Republic.

"For us, the north-south relationship isn't just about sales," said Conor. "There's a real connection between companies on the island – we're all striving for the same thing and facing the same challenges."

That collaboration earned the firm a Bronze Award in the North-South Business Cooperation Awards. "It's brilliant recognition," said Ryan. "It's not just peace we're celebrating anymore – it's the prosperity that peace has enabled."

The firm has already earmarked its bronze prize of €25,000 for investment in new technology. The next phase of development will focus on smart monitoring systems that capture real-time data on water, power and labour savings.

"We can talk all day about what our systems save," said Conor, "but we want to quantify it. These new systems will feed data back to us and to our clients, so we can keep improving efficiency and safety."


Ryan & Conor Brogan (Arcus Cleaning Systems) with William Haire (advisor to Stelios Philanthropic Foundation) and Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou

"We've come through a pandemic, we've built something we're proud of, and we're just getting started

That focus on measurable impact, he says, will help drive further innovation. "The future is in smart cleaning. Machines that don't just clean – they think."

For the Brogan brothers, Arcus's story is also part of a larger one – about a generation that has grown up with opportunity rather than conflict.

"We're products of the Good Friday Agreement," said Conor. "We grew up knowing there was nothing to stop us doing whatever we wanted."

Their parents' generation, he notes, didn't have the same freedom. "They just didn't have those opportunities. For us, it's completely different – and that's only one generation apart."

Both men grew up near Omagh and remember the bombing in 1998. "We lost neighbours and friends," Conor said. "For many of us, that was the moment when people realised – that's not the way forward. People wanted to look ahead."

That mindset now defines their peers. "So many of our friends have started their own businesses," said Ryan. "Our parents couldn't have imagined that. People are putting down roots and investing in the future here."

The brothers are clear about what comes next. With their systems already in use across Ireland, Arcus plans to deepen its presence in export markets while continuing to innovate.

"We've come through a pandemic, we've built something we're proud of, and we're just getting started," said Conor.

For them, the mission remains simple. "The border doesn't matter," he said. "It's about making things cleaner, smarter, better – and doing it together."

For more information, see arcuscleaningsystems.com

Innovation beneath the surface

Subterranean and Good Friday Robotics are delving into the unseen world of Ireland's Victorian sewers, unearthing forgotten infrastructure

It takes a special kind of innovation to look beneath the surface – quite literally. In the murky world of Victorian sewers and century-old drainage systems, two companies on opposite sides of the border are using cutting-edge robotics to map what lies unseen. Subterranean, a Donegal-based software company, and Good Friday Robotics, headquartered in Northern Ireland, have teamed up to send drones into drains – and in doing so, they've unearthed both hidden infrastructure and a new model for cross-border collaboration.

Subterranean's founder Anthony Hutton explains the unusual nature of their work.

"We make software for drones that fly in drains," he said. "Flying a drone in a sewer is not easy. There are all sorts of software problems – the systems on the drone itself, the pilot's viewer and the data presentation afterwards. It keeps us very busy."

The technology may be complex, but the problem it solves is deceptively simple: understanding what's underground. Across Ireland, North and South, civil engineers face the same issue – ageing and undocumented sewer networks that are vital to the water industry's functioning.

"We have a spectacular amount of old infrastructure," explained Jack Hutton, Anthony's son and the head of Good Friday Robotics, the company that produces the drones. "The first step in maintenance is knowing exactly what you have. But many of these structures were never designed to be inspected."

Traditional surveys often require workers to physically enter sewers – a dangerous and time-consuming job.

"We wanted to stop people going in and surveying Victorian sewers with Victorian methods," Jack said. Instead, the companies' robotic solution sends drones into pipes and tunnels that humans can't safely reach, creating a full digital twin of the structures below ground.

Using advanced laser scanning, the drones capture every bend, blockage and anomaly. The data is then transformed into detailed 3D models – virtual replicas of the underground world. For utilities companies, this means faster, safer and far cheaper maintenance work.

The partner companies' flagship project in Belfast saved about £16 million in costs, as well as being far safer than sending people underground

Their flagship project was in Belfast, 15 metres below the river Lagan, where twin siphon pipes – more than a century old – carry wastewater across the city.

"We discovered one of the pipes had been repaired with bricks," said Jack. "Somebody had gone down there, maybe 80 years ago, and patched it up by hand."

Anthony added: "We think it was hit by a bomb during the war. But none of that was documented, because the plans were also destroyed by bombing."

It's discoveries like this that make their work part archaeology, part engineering. "A lot of what we're uncovering hasn't been seen in decades – sometimes in centuries," said Anthony. "These are parts of the city that are older than the city itself."

The Belfast project also demonstrated the financial logic of innovation. Using drone data, engineers could accurately size a resin liner to repair the pipe without digging up the riverbed. The result: a job that might have cost £20 million was completed for £4 million.

"That's the value of knowing exactly what's down there," said Jack.

The partnership itself is a symbol of what can happen when borders blur. Subterranean, in Donegal, and Good Friday Robotics, in Belfast, have worked together for three years – developing not just technology, but trust.

Their clients mirror this North-South cooperation: Northern Ireland Water and Uisce Éireann (formerly Irish Water) have both embraced the cross-border approach. Even the companies' names carry resonance. Good Friday Robotics takes inspiration from the peace agreement that reshaped the island's politics.

"The border's only a hundred years old," said Jack. "Some of the sewers are far older than that. So it's possible we're flying drones through pipes that literally cross the border underground."

The collaboration between the companies earned them a Bronze Award and €25,000 at the North-South Business Cooperation Awards, recognition they plan to invest back into the business. "The idea is to make the process as simple as possible – easy for clients, easy for operators."

Currently, each project involves on-site assessments to see whether the robotic system can navigate a particular network. "Sometimes we can, sometimes we can't," said Jack. "But every time we can't, we learn and engineer a new solution."

Now, with more experience and data behind them, they're planning to scale operations. "We want clients to be able to click a button, and someone arrives on site and surveys their asset. The aim is to make wastewater inspection faster, safer and more efficient – North and South."

The story of Subterranean and Good Friday Robotics is, at its core, about seeing what others can't – whether that's the unseen architecture of our cities or the potential for cooperation in unlikely places.

Their work offers a glimpse into the future of infrastructure management: cleaner, safer and more intelligent.

But it also reflects something deeper about Irish innovation: grounded, collaborative and quietly transformative.

"It's nice to be recognised," said Anthony, "because you don't often get recognition for North-South cooperation. But in our case, it's been there all along – underground."

> The story is at its core, about seeing what others can't

Jack Hutton (Good Friday Robotics) and Anthony Hutton (Subterranean Software) with Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Tony Anderson (easyGroup)

For more information, see subterranean.ie and goodfridayrobotics.com

Restoring sight and building bridges

Galway startup Súil Pharma's partnership with Belfast-based MediNect Ophtho highlights how collaboration and compassion can drive life-changing innovation

When Galway-based biotech startup Súil Pharma began developing a treatment to restore sight lost to major eye diseases, the team faced what seemed like an impossible obstacle. Despite a global search, they couldn't find a lab capable of testing their therapy's safety and efficacy under the right conditions. Then, a chance connection north of the border changed everything.

"I was reaching out to suppliers across North America, Europe and Asia," recalls Cormac Flynn, co-founder of Súil Pharma. "But nobody could replicate the proper symptoms of the disease. Then someone mentioned a group in Belfast – and that's where everything clicked."

The Belfast connection turned out to be transformative. Flynn sent what he describes as a "last-ditch e-mail", assuming it would go nowhere. Instead, he received a message that would set Súil Pharma on a new course.

"I told him, 'You probably can't do it, but can you help me out with this?'" Flynn says. "And he replied, 'Cormac, I can hear the exasperation in your voice. Let's have a call – I think we can help.'"

That call led to a partnership between Súil Pharma and MediNect Ophtho, a Belfast-based service provider offering high-quality pre-clinical and laboratory services to accelerate medical innovation. MediNect Ophtho had precisely the facilities and testing capabilities Súil Pharma needed – resources that had eluded the company even after searching internationally. What began as a hopeful inquiry soon became a cornerstone collaboration, strengthening scientific ties between Galway and Belfast.

Súil Pharma's mission is as ambitious as it is humanitarian. The company is developing a drug designed to restore vision lost due to diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration, and retinal vein occlusion – three leading causes of blindness that together affect an estimated 4.5 million people across Europe and the United States.

"Our goal is to give people back something they've lost – their sight," said Flynn. "We're not just slowing disease progression, we're aiming to reverse it."

The company's roots trace back to 2019, when Flynn and his team began exploring how to regenerate retinal cells damaged by these conditions. By 2022, Súil Pharma was officially founded, and today it operates with a close-knit team of nine scientists and entrepreneurs.

"We're still small, but we're growing fast. We're in the process of raising investment, and collaborations like the one in Belfast have been key to proving our potential."

That potential was recognised with a Bronze Award at the North-South Business Cooperation Awards. For Flynn, the recognition carries significance beyond the trophy.

"This is invaluable to startups like ours because we're cash-strapped," he explained. "The prize funding lets us carry out extra testing to de-risk our product, which in turn makes us more attractive to investors. It's a real boost to help us reach the next stage."

The award also validates the company's commitment to collaboration – a model Flynn believes is essential for innovation in small markets like Ireland's.

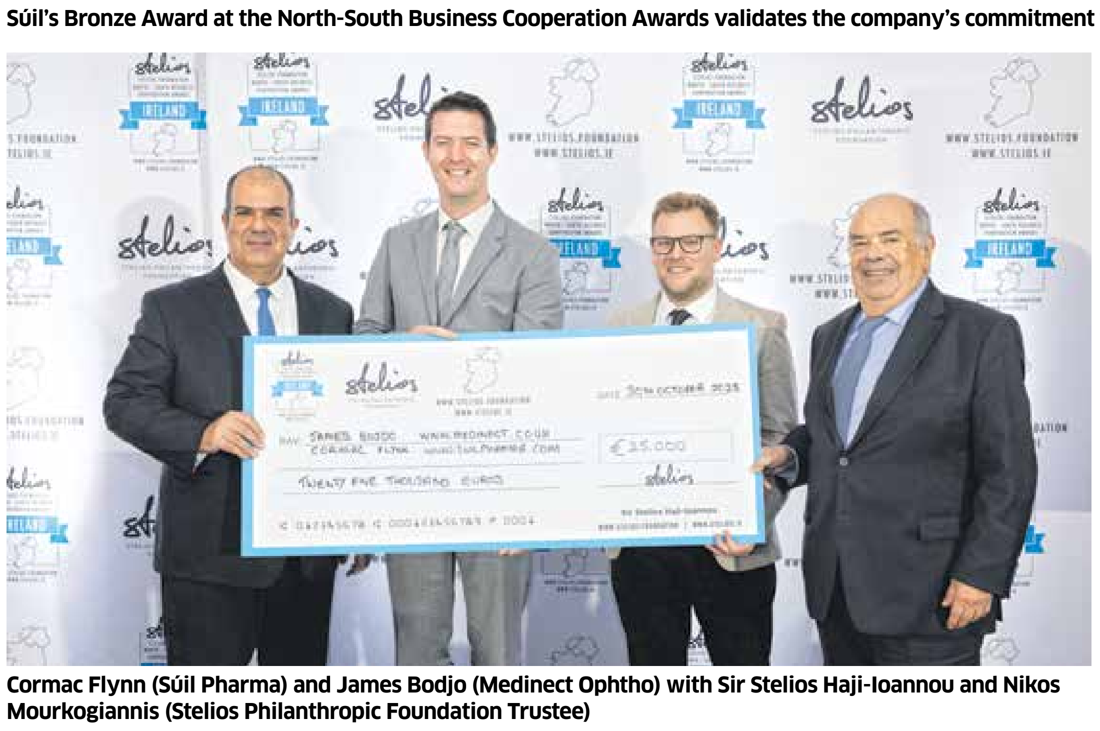
In addition, Súil Pharma's partnership with researchers in Belfast exemplifies how North-South cooperation can foster cutting-edge scientific breakthroughs. Flynn, who studied for four years in Belfast, knows first-hand the value of an open, seamless border for both personal and professional growth.

"I used to commute between Galway and Belfast while studying – having that freedom of movement was amazing," he says. "But beyond that, having access to Queen's University Belfast, which is a global leader in ophthalmology, is a huge advantage for us. To have that kind of expertise just up the road is incredible."

Flynn believes such collaborations are not just convenient – they're vital. By pooling resources and research strengths, companies like Súil Pharma can accelerate innovation that benefits patients far beyond Ireland.

"Improving collaboration between North and South is so important for us," he adds. "It's great that initiatives the North-South Business Cooperation Awards are encouraging more collaboration. It shows what's possible when we work together."

Súil's Bronze Award at the North-South Business Cooperation Awards validates the company's commitment to collaboration Naoise Culhane



Cormac Flynn (Súil Pharma) and James Bodjo (Medinect Ophtho) with Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Nikos Mourkogiannis (Stelios Philanthropic Foundation Trustee)

As Súil Pharma prepares for its next phase of testing and fundraising, the company's focus remains clear: restore sight and transform lives. The journey from a Galway startup to an award-winning biotech bridging two jurisdictions is only beginning, but Flynn's optimism is palpable.

"We're just getting started," he says. "With the right support, our work could help millions of people see again – and that's what drives us every day."

In a landscape often divided by politics and geography, Súil Pharma's story is a reminder that science knows no borders. From Galway to Belfast and beyond, the company is proving that when collaboration meets compassion, innovation truly has a vision.

For more information, see suilpharma.com

Daniel Mulhall

A new chapter for collaboration across the entire island of Ireland

The US market will always be an attractive prospect, but bountiful opportunities are right on our doorstep

Even as global trade tightens under the impact of tariffs and a rising tide of economic nationalism, its contribution to national prosperity is not in doubt. Ireland has been a particular beneficiary of the opening up of global trade and is exposed more than most to any contractions. We are an exporting nation with a major stake in a properly functioning system of international trade.

Shifting global currents have made countries search for new opportunities. While the US will always be a key global economy and a hugely attractive market for Ireland, in the North and Republic, there is a need, too, to look to opportunities nearer at hand. For both parts of Ireland, there are attractive export openings in Britain, the EU, and further afield, but north-south trade in Ireland also has considerable untapped potential. The North-South Business Cooperation Awards Ireland were established with a view to nurturing cross-border entrepreneurship to the benefit of communities across the island of Ireland.

The awards originated in a conversation I had late last year in Monaco with Stelios Haji-Ioannou, founder of easyJet, when he expressed a desire to expand his philanthropic effort in Ireland and, in particular, to replicate here what his foundation has been doing in Cyprus for the past 15 years in encouraging and supporting bi-communal business co-operation there. Stelios recognised, of course, the very different circumstances that prevail in Cyprus and Ireland, but was convinced that the principles that he had applied in Cyprus could operate in Ireland too. Stelios believes in the value of business collaboration in promoting community cohesion and prosperity. Sir Stelios deserves great credit for making this ambition a reality and for putting such significant funding from the Stelios Foundation behind these awards. The foundation has partnered with Co-operation Ireland, an all-island peace-building organisation with a distinguished track record in facilitating contact and collaboration between people from different backgrounds in Ireland.

The awards were launched in June and attracted a strong and varied entry from businesses across the island. Entrants were required to have been set up since 2019 and to have had a meaningful presence in both jurisdictions. They were also required to have reached minimum employment and turnover thresholds.

At the recent ceremony at Castle Leslie in Co Monaghan, awards valued at a total of €500,000 were presented by Stelios Haji-Ioannou to nine successful entries. The top prize went to Juice Bar, a juice and healthy food brand that originated in Belfast and has spread its wings to Dublin with scope for further business growth on both sides of the border. Its founder, Sam Shepard, was presented with a prize of €150,000, which it is hoped will help fuel the company's further expansion. Runner-up prizes of €100,000 went to a collaboration between Grá Chocolates and a corporate gifting platform, Needi, and to Acel Energy, a renewable energy solutions company. The remaining six awards were given to companies in medical technology, cleaning systems, agricultural technology, robotics software and pet food. The variety of sectors represented by the prizewinners is a welcome sign of entrepreneurial vigour across the island of Ireland.

As someone who was involved in the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, I have always taken a keen interest in the economic dividend from the peace process. Since 1998, trade and investment flows across the Irish border have increased substantially, but there is much that can still be done to deepen cross-border links. The aim of the North-South Business Cooperation Awards Ireland is to support and encourage that deepening of business ties to the benefit of communities on both sides of the border.

I hope that the effect of this year's awards will be to encourage entrepreneurs to look for opportunities to expand their cross-border business and to look for collaborations with counterparts, north and south. The intention is for these awards to be an annual affair and those with ideas for business collaborations ought now to begin thinking about competing for next year's awards, which are likely to be launched in early summer and to be awarded around this next year.

These are uncertain times for the global economy. The best strategy available for Ireland is to build our own economic strengths so that we can continue to compete internationally. I hope that these awards can be part of our recipe for economic success on both sides of the border.

Daniel Mulhall with William Haire (advisor to the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation) and Ian Jeffers (Co-operation Ireland)

Daniel Mulhall
is a retired Irish diplomat who served as ambassador in Kuala Lumpur, Berlin, London and Washington and a consultant with the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Jack Hutton (Good Friday Robotics), Harry Hutton (Good Friday Robotics)

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Roger Sweeney (Water Safety Ireland)

Leon Diop (Black and Irish NPO), Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Tammy Darcy (The Shona Project)

The ACEL Energy team

Sam Shephard and his team at Juice Jar

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou begins the ceremony

Sammy Leslie (Castle Leslie Custodian)

Gráinne Mullins (Grá Chocolates)

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou

Congratulations to the winners of the Stelios North–South Business Cooperation Awards 2025!

Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou has awarded €500,000 in prizes to support entrepreneurs and celebrate cross-border entrepreneurship on the island of Ireland

Top Prize went to Sam Shephard founder of Juice Jar

receiving a €150,000 cash grant to support the growth of his company

Further congratulations to the silver winners (€100,000 prize):

- **Barry Sherry and Declan McDonald** of ACEL Energy.
- **Gráinne Mullins** founder of Grá Chocolates and **Louise Doyle** co-founder of Needi, a joint application.

And to our bronze winners, receiving €25,000 cash prize:

- **Nick Cotter and Jack Cotter**, two brothers who founded Cotter Agritech.
- **Jack Hutton** of Good Friday Robotics Ltd and **Anthony Hutton** of Subterranean.ie, a joint application.
- **Conor Brogan and Ryan Brogan** another brother duo of Arcus Cleaning Systems.
- **Richard Marles** founder of PARK LiFE PET LIMITED.
- **Patricia Cullen** of Ovascan | Fertility Ultrasound and **Katrina McCarthy** of New Beginnings, joint application.
- **James Bojdo** founder of MediNect Ophtho and **Cormac Flynn** of Suil Pharmaceuticals.

stelios

Stelios Foundation
North - South
Business Cooperation Awards

IRELAND
2025

www.stelios.foundation
www.stelios.ie