

# **Annual Report 2017**

## **Chairman's report ISSA 2017 AGM.**

2017 has been a year of consolidation for Irish Seed Savers Association, with rebuilding of confidence and reinstating solid Management and HR procedures and also making progress in ensuring adequate resources, both human and equipment and also in infrastructure and site maintenance are in place to carry out our work.

We have continued the work of preserving the unique range of heritage seeds and trees that we have gathered and accumulated over the last 27 years. This has successfully been sustained due to the hard work and commitment of our staff who however have continued to work on the reduced salaries first implemented in 2014.

Our new General Manager has worked very hard to get to know the organisation and all the roles carried out by staff as well as all the interfaces we have with both public and private organisations and the general public. She has brought great enthusiasm and energy to her role and successfully raised significant grant aid and other sources of finance.

The attached reports from the Orchard, Seed bank/garden, and Education and Marketing teams detail the work undertaken last year and some of the plans for 2018. As ever there are significant achievements during the year as well as new challenges. Of particular note are the increased movement of staff with 4 long term staff departing and 5 new staff being recruited. This has highlighted the need for all knowledge to be documented so that ISSA can sustain its progress and not lose skills when staff choose to leave.

In addition, the main milestones were the completion of the DNA testing of the entire apple tree stock so that duplicates could be removed and the more unique varieties identified. We also took the strategic decision to stop production of potatoes at Capparoo due to the ongoing issues with potato viruses on our site, high labour and land usage and the fact that all varieties are being managed elsewhere in Ireland with funding from government to do

so. The addition of a funded Seed Outreach Coordinator should allow considerable spreading of our reach across new sectors countrywide.

Financially it has been another successful year with income levels being increased with improved grant aid and donations being achieved through the focused work of the general manager. Unfortunately, product sales and supporters' memberships have not significantly increased and this must be a focus for future years. We must focus our marketing effort on increasing income streams and develop a strong fundraising strategy.

However, even with our costs increasing, mainly due to higher wages, we managed to generate more cash and a profit of €74,675 in the year and increase cash at bank to over €100,000 at year end. We therefore were delighted at year end to be able to reinstate salaries back to the level they were prior to the 10% pay cut for all affected staff. This is good but does not yet bring them to market rates of pay in certain cases and will need to be further addressed when finances allow.

We commenced the process with staff of building a vision for the future in the form of a three-year strategic plan and had hoped to be presenting that at the AGM. However, these processes are not easy on top of busy schedules and we are not yet in a position to table what we want in this regard. Having said that we did do enough to get our Pobal funding secured for a further three-year cycle which is good news. Our biggest long-term concern is what will happen to our DAFM funding arrangement when the current EU funding expires at the end of 2020.

At the end of our financial year our Auditor Martin Lynch tendered his resignation as a result of his practice no longer carrying out audits and we therefore recruited JW Williams and Co as their replacement. We have also embarked on the long process of achieving full corporate governance compliance and have almost finished that.

At the end of 2017 Jason Horner advised of his wish to retire from the board and we reluctantly accepted his request. We wish to acknowledge his contribution to the organisation and know that he continues to be available to assist us in future. Since then we have welcomed Lynn O'Keefe Lascar and Christine Costelloe to the board and thank them for volunteering their

time to ISSA. We also wish a special word of thanks to our team for their continued work, volunteers and supporters without whom none of this would be possible.

Ted Brooks,  
September 2018.

## Introduction

2017 was a turnaround year of sorts for the organisation. With the need for a new manager; better supports for the existing team; funding to enable us do our work; and an opportunity to review our current practices and determine how best to move forward, Irish Seed Savers was faced with opportunity for positive change.

By the end of the year we introduced a General Manager, experienced the departure of 4 staff (with a further 2 departing early 2018), and welcomed 5 new staff in 2017 (with an additional 4 joining early 2018) which has brought much needed new enthusiasm for our work, a fresh perspective, a greater team spirit and a better energy throughout the organisation.

## **Key Focus**

There has been a lot of effort made by all the team to sort out clutter of buildings, backlog of files, data, audits of equipment, machinery, etc. Where necessary, new tools and materials have been purchased to assist the land teams with their work. There is also an ongoing focus on better practices within the land work which will help create greater efficiencies and better practice methods going forward.

We used this year to both catch up on work to be done as well as try to reduce the ongoing backlog of workload to be carried forward to 2018. It is also important that we can improve our current practice before taking on new projects.

From an expenditure standpoint we have spent more monies in 2017 than previous years to purchase necessary tools, materials and stock where needed. The aim for this increase in expenditure is to provide better supports for teams and hopefully reduce any strain on expenditure in future years. We are working on getting all necessary equipment maintenance carried out and various health and safety checks which have been

outstanding for several years, to ensure that we are both compliant in ensuring necessary maintenance and also health and safety checks take place.

The focus now is to get funding to fix our buildings (seed bank, barn) and to overhaul our online systems. Where we can reduce the administrative load we shall try to get this in place by mid 2019.

Several infrastructural issues have arisen. The seed bank solarium had leaks in the roof which were fixed in 2018, and the refrigerated rooms appear not to have been properly insulated which is being addressed Autumn 2018. We also require storage for new machinery as well as upgrade our barn for insurance of our tools. This also is being addressed Autumn 2018. There is need to rethink our infrastructural needs. We had secured funding for a new compost toilet in 2017 but this has proven problematic in funding costs and also as part of a bigger picture to accommodate visitors we need to consider whether we are better off building an education space (the blue building needs to be replaced) or considering sourcing better land in the long-term that can be a better accessed land for visitors and also to showcase our national collections.

The culture of the organisation is one that will take a lot longer to shift, from one of each team member giving 150% while feeling unsupported due to scraping by on low wages, scrambling for funding, as well as an inherent mistrust of the team towards management. We aim to become a strong team, both engaged with the Board and Members, greater take up by the public through supportership, sales, donations and participating at our events and workshops. A lot of steps have been taken in 2017 to address our needs, and even more is being done in 2018. Our focus must be on supporting the team, improve the quality of our conservation work, promoting that to the wider public, engaging with local growers and food producers, as well as educating on why we are doing what we do. And ultimately our goal is to be sustainable for the long-term.

We as an organisation need to focus on the coming 100 years, and not just the one to follow.

Jennifer McConnell  
September 2018

## Who we are:

The Irish Seed Savers Association exists as a living testimony of the richness and wealth of the agricultural legacy of our ancestors.

Our aim is to:

- To protect, conserve, research and utilise non-commercial seed, grain, vegetable and fruit varieties.
- To promote the benefits of agricultural biodiversity.
- To provide information and to educate the public on agricultural biodiversity locally and globally.
- To be a working example of successful organic seed and crop production, through growing and distributing Irish grown seed, grain, vegetable and fruit varieties.

We are passionate about conservation, food sovereignty and protecting Ireland's biodiversity for future generations. With the support of our community and continued contributions from you, our loyal supporters, we are not only able to maintain but grow our conservation efforts.

Thank you.

## Achievements

### **Conservation Work - Gardens**

Every year we grow out 'new' old heirloom varieties of vegetable seed from our collection of over 600 varieties. In 2017 we sold over 200 varieties of heirloom vegetable seeds, these are varieties that have a long history of cultivation but you will not find the seed anywhere else. We grow these crops organically of course and by keeping these rare varieties in the public domain we reduce their risk of extinction. Below are a few examples of rare varieties that contributed to our conservation work in 2017.

- The Irish Green Pea, which was actually repatriated from the Russian Seed Bank.
- Fill the Bucket Pea, a variety passed from generation to generation by one family in Tipperary.
- The Bedford Monarch and Viceroy parsnips, which are no longer available on any other seed list, have to be grown every year to keep the seed viable.
- Dunbar Standard Spring Greens, a 'cut and come' green that keeps going all winter and well into late spring was one of the most prolific of 2017.
- Painted Lady Runner Bean, first catalogued in the R.H.S dictionary of plants in 1633.
- Giant Prague Celeriac, a variety that goes back to 1871.
- Buan Onion, an utterly unique Irish bred variety we keep.

When people join Irish Seed Savers they are able to avail of these incredibly rare varieties from our 'Supporters Only' seed catalogue. As well as being able to select from this exclusive list they can also chose five free packets as part of their supporter package. In 2017 Irish Seed Savers gave away 3,333 free packets of rare heirloom seeds and 919 free sets of tubers to our supporters.

These crops and hundreds more like them, each with their own unique story, are entirely in our hands to be preserved for the gardeners of the futures.

### **Conservation Work - Orchards**

2017 saw an extension to the Traditional Orchards section of the GLÁS scheme. Introduced in 2015 by the department of Agriculture the scheme was to help ensure the survival of old Irish Heritage apple varieties. By

working with the Department of Agriculture, Irish Seed Savers have helped to establish over 60 Heritage Orchards, consisting of hundreds of apple trees, to further enrich the biodiversity of the Irish countryside.

The KPI work this year has helped us achieve some goals

- Descriptor work for the less common but promising heritage Irish varieties. This has greatly advanced our understanding of their characteristics and we now have much better photos of their fruit than before.
- Propagation of less common varieties for sale as 'Limited Edition' specials – to make a bigger fuss about rarer varieties and get them out into people's gardens & farms for long-term conservation.
- DNA report finalised which marks a milestone in our research and understanding of the varieties we conserve. Surprisingly less duplicates with UK and European collections than we had anticipated and therefore more 'unique' varieties now considered 'Heritage Irish'.

## **Education Mission**

Our educational mission is to teach and inspire people about all aspects of biodiversity, to give them the practical skills to grow their own food. To empower them to feel that they can be part of the solution for environmental problems and to instil in them a lifelong love and respect for nature

- Through our Energy, Heritage, Gardening and Outreach projects ISSA reached nearly 3,511 primary and secondary school children between school visits, tours, camps, workshops and events.
- We host Big Workshop Weekends four times a year at Seed Savers. These workshops focus on issues of ecology, sustainability and best organic practices. From Bee Keeping to Cider Making, Wild Food Foraging to Creating an Orchard our workshops always receive positive feedback and in 2017 we had 305 people attend which was a 22% on 2016.

## Other key achievements

- Our big open day event 'The Great Irish Garden' was awarded the overall winner for 'Hidden Heritage' as part of the Heritage Awards 2017.

*'These awards showcase the best of National Heritage Week and recognising the fantastic work of all the heritage enthusiasts who take part. The Hidden Heritage Award shines a light on Ireland's hidden heritage and was open to event organisers who successfully explored lesser known aspects of Ireland's heritage during Heritage Week.'*  
Helene O'Keeffe – Head of Education & Communications for the Heritage Council.

The Great Irish Garden organised by Irish Seed Savers in Co. Clare highlighted the amazing diversity and heritage of Ireland's food crops. With guest speakers RTE presenter and environmentalist Duncan Stewart, Brown Envelope Seeds founder Madeline McKeever and renowned Organic Gardening guru Jim Cronin, a series of talks, tours and demonstrations took place on the day to showcase the vital conservation work Irish Seed Savers undertake.

- Record numbers have attended our big event days in 2017, our *Annual Seed Share* in March, *Annual Plant Share* in May and *The Great Irish Garden* in August continue to be an overwhelming success with the wider public.

These days are a vital way for us to engage with our loyal supporters and the wider public alike. Tours, talks and demonstrations are held during our events days to inform everyone about our vital conservation work and why it's needed.

- During 2017 we had a total of 5,400 visitors to our Gardens and Orchards. Many of our visitors are from Co Clare, Galway, Limerick and Tipperary but we are seeing an increase from overseas tourists. America (California, Rhode Island, Virginia, and New Jersey), UK, Germany Australia, and Japan are all regularly signed addresses in our visitor's book.
- The knowledge and skills that we possess is of immense value and it is important that (as an organisation) we pass on these skills. We run an



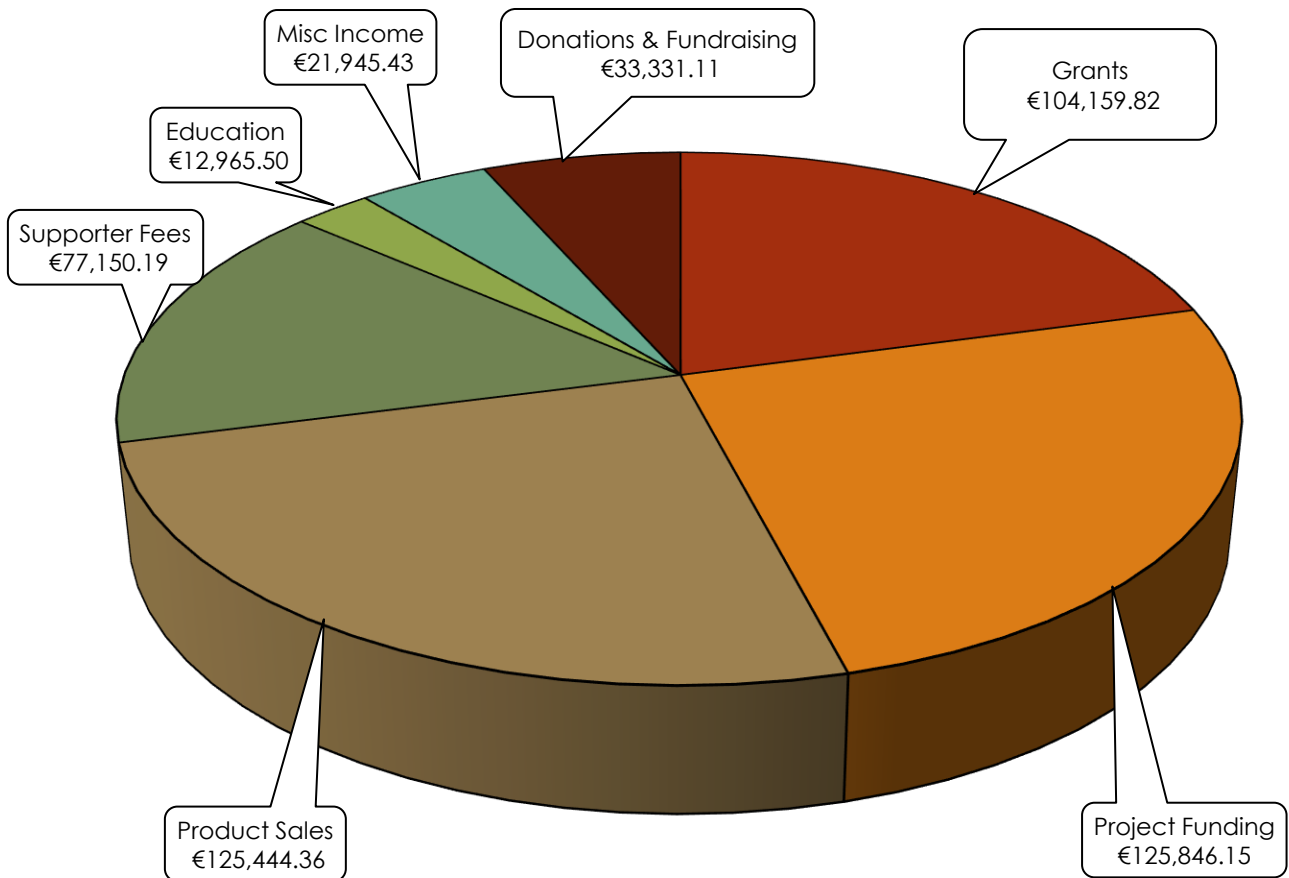
extensive Volunteer programme and in 2017 we had a total of 813 volunteer hours from over 38 different people.

- We've dealt with countless telephone queries 3,492 and emails over 1,635 just by our reception / shop staff. These numbers show us that Irish Seed Savers is valued as a national resource by the general public throughout Ireland.
- We attended a number of outside events in 2017 including, Electric Picnic, Clare Garden Festival, Mountshannon Arts Festival, to name but a few. We gave countless talks to the public all over the country about our main aims and took the opportunity to get new supporters and sell seeds.
- Social media continues to be our main outlet for communications and our impact continues to grow with over 25,000 people engaging with us on various platforms. In 2017 our posts on Facebook reached over one million people and directly engaged with over 40,000 people.
- We had 49 published press releases in 2017, this was a combination of local and national newspapers as well as radio interviews and articles in horticultural publications.

## Income

Irish Seed Savers' projected income for year ending 2017 was €500,842.56\*. Our income comes from a multitude of sources consisting of Grants, Sales, Donations, Education, Supporter fees and other revenue generating activities.

Below is the breakdown of our income streams (% of income)

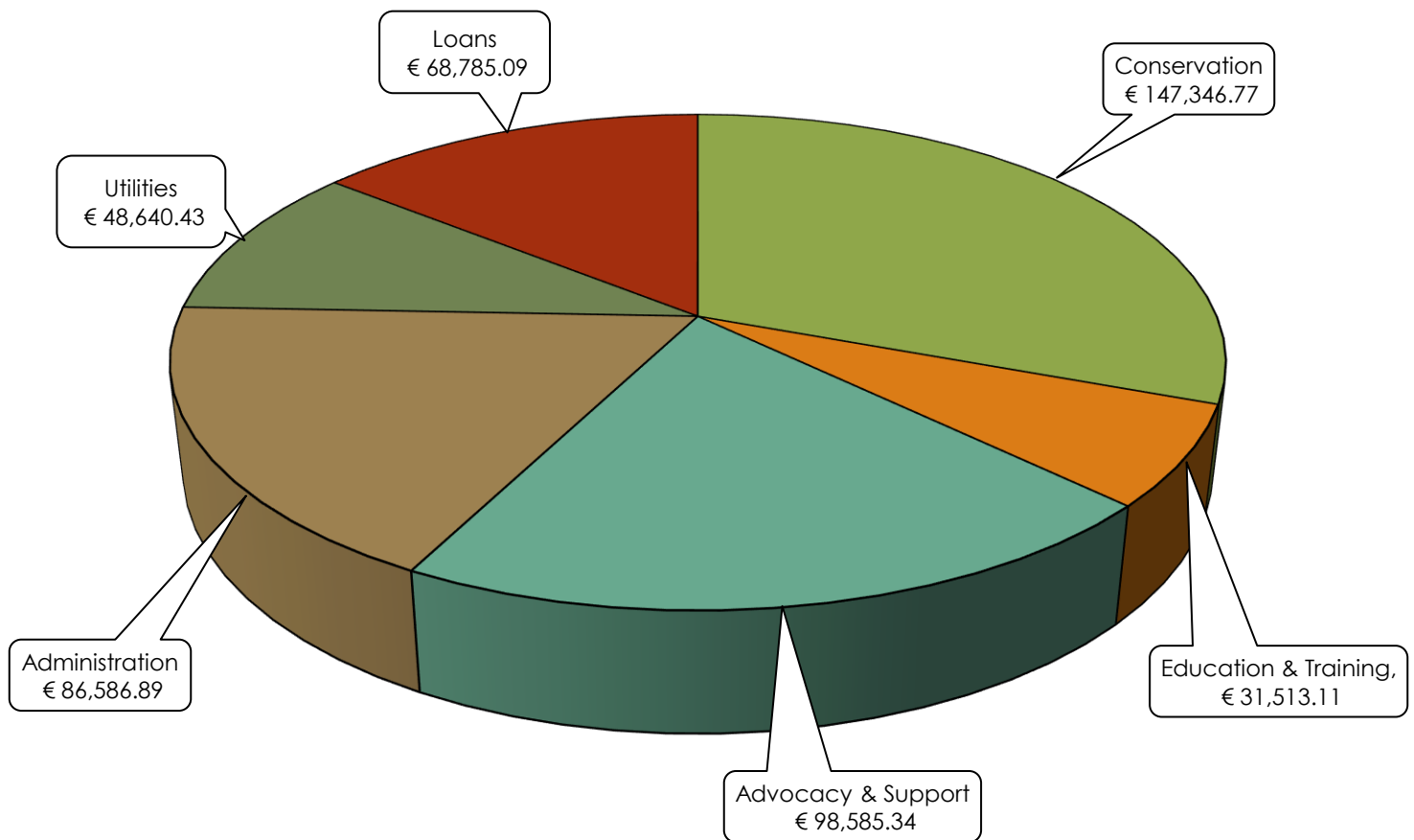


\*For further breakdowns of income and expenditure our audited accounts will be available on our website.

## Expenditure

Our projected total expenditure for 2017 was €481,457.63\*. Our Expenditure is divided between our following work programmes, Conservation, Education and Training, Advocacy and Support, Administration, Utilities and Operating Costs.

The expenditure within these areas are broken down into, wages, marketing and events, revenue, rent, utilities, stationery and postage, equipment maintenance, merchandise, insurance and bank charges.



\*For further breakdowns of income and expenditure our audited accounts will be available on our website

## Directors

The Board of Directors had nine meetings in 2017, meeting with each department coordinator to finalise the overall strategic plan for 2017.

Ted Brooks - Company Chairman  
Patrick Killeen - Company Secretary  
Tony Kay  
Christine Costello  
Lynn O’Keeffe-Lascar

## Our Team

Jennifer McConnell – General Manager  
Eoin Keane - Orchard Coordinator  
Pat O’Mara - Orchard Curator  
Jason McCormack - Nursery and Orchard Assistant  
Joanne Newton - Seed Coordinator  
Deirdre Morrissey - Seed to Seed Assistant  
Felice Rae - Garden Assistant  
Joe McGrath - Garden Assistant  
Wayne Frankham - Regional Coordinator & Seed Outreach  
Áine Ni Fhlatharta - Education Coordinator  
Jeanne Mérer - Education Assistant  
Barry Foley - Marketing and Development  
Tansy Watson - Marketing and Development  
Jamie Durrant - Supporter & Community Engagement Officer  
Marrianna Cronin - Administrator  
Romie Cullen - Sales Assistant  
Andrea Casey - Book-keeper