



National Women's Council of Ireland  
Comhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn

**CELEBRATING THE  
ROLE OF WOMEN  
OVER 120 YEARS OF  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

# NOTICE

Name of Local Authority—LEICESTER CITY COUNCIL

Name of Electoral Area—LEICESTER CITY

ELECTION

# COUNTY COUNCIL

For the above ELECTORAL AREA

# 120 YEARS

## About the Women and 120 Years of Local Government Project

The elections held on April 6, 1899 followed the passing of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898, which introduced democratic local government for the first time. It set up county councils, rural district councils and urban district councils. One of the most revolutionary aspects of the elections of 1899 was that women had the right to vote for the first time and to stand for rural district councils. Thirty-one women were elected to rural district councils in 1899. Four women were elected to urban district councils. Women could not vote in National Elections until 1918.

Women in many constituencies have contributed to local policy and decision making and played their part in the communities we live in now. It is timely to reflect on what remains to be achieved to ensure voices of women are heard in decision making and their participation supported and resourced at local level.

This project is supported by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. A new visual exhibition about the history of Irish local government has been prepared by the members of the Local Government Archivists' and Records Managers' group. This will be touring around the country and has been recently been exhibited in Longford Library.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the archival material that has been so generously shared with us from the Archivists in County and City Councils. Martin Morris, the archivist from Longford County Council has been particularly generous with his time and knowledge. The following are only a sample of the female councillors that were active over the past 120 years of Local Government.

## About the National Women's Council of Ireland

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) is the leading national women's membership organisation seeking equality between women and men, founded in 1973. We represent our membership which includes over 180 member groups as well as a growing number of individual members from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations. Our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality between women and men. We articulate the views and experiences of our members and make sure their voices are heard wherever decisions are made which affect the lives of women.

Our vision is of an Ireland, and of a world, where there is full equality between women and men.

# FOREWORD

## Minister John Paul Phelan

Local government provides a system that is the main vehicle for public service delivery at local level, leads economic, social, and community development, and represents local communities effectively and accountably. It ensures democratic representation for every resident in the country and provides a bridge to central government. Local government is perhaps undervalued. However, booklets such as this outline its importance and relevance, especially to women and to the representation of women in this country.

The Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 allowed women to stand for election and vote for the first time. The anniversary of 120 years of local government provides us with a timely opportunity to look back on the role women have played in local government. The content of this booklet serves as a reminder of the importance of the participation of women in local government and provides awareness of how they can influence society. It highlights the need for more women in local government and reminds us also of the need to foster and support balanced

representation that is reflective of our society. I firmly believe that the balanced representation of women and men in politics is symbolic of better government.

On International Women's Day this year, the Government approved measures to support and encourage women to enter a career in politics, which, I believe, are the first steps towards a more balanced local government structure. However, there are many further steps to be taken. It is my intention to deliver on my Department's commitments in the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017–2020 to increase the number of women participating in local government and to make local government in Ireland more reflective of our diverse society. I look forward to future engagement with the National Women's Council of Ireland as we continue to work towards our shared vision of a more balanced gender representation at local government level.



*Minister John Paul Phelan, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government with special responsibility for Local Government and Electoral Reform*

# SETTING THE CONTEXT

## Professor Mary E Daly

In 2018 we celebrated the centenary of the first election when Irish women could vote and stand for parliamentary seats, and during that year we learned much about women in parliamentary politics. The role of women in Irish local government has been largely unexplored. Most people do not realise that women ratepayers could vote and stand for election to local authorities from 1899 – and even earlier in the case of the Dublin suburban townships. This booklet is extremely welcome, because it highlights a critical aspect of the history of women in Irish public life.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, publicly-funded health services, housing, sanitary services, welfare, housing, and often post-primary education – vocational schools were provided by local authorities. These services had the potential to transform the quality of life, and the potential to save lives. The major improvements in Irish life expectancy and especially infant and child mortality came in the late 1940s and 1950s, and these dramatic advances were achieved through immunisation (done by the local health service), and better housing, clean water and sanitation – all locally provided. Some councils were

ahead of others, some were behind in terms of rolling out childhood immunisation; building houses promoting rural water schemes. And some were much more active than others in child-care services – monitoring foster children, and in the provision of community services for the elderly and those with special needs. These were issues that were of especial interest to women.

Many women were active and interested in politics before 1899, but standing for election demanded considerable courage and cultural capital. Perhaps it is not surprising that the first generation of women councillors – Lady Sophia Grattan Bellew and Lady Augusta Clonbrock elected to Mountbellew Rural District Council in 1899, and Françoise Edgeworth (Granard Rural District Council) – all representative of the Irish landed gentry. Their success is interesting given that the landlord class won less than ten percent of the seats filled in that election. Women from landed families continued to play an important role in local government until the 1920s – they were particularly active on TB committees – implementing measures to prevent the spread of the fearful disease – and other health and welfare issues.

The political awakening of the early twentieth century saw women engaging in a variety of overlapping movements: Sinn Féin/Cumann na mBan, suffrage and labour campaigns and a number of women featured reflect this. Family connections also mattered – they gave important women support/ recognition and raised their political consciousness. The artist Sarah Cecelia Harrison, the first woman elected to Dublin Corporation was the sister of an Irish party MP, and a strong supporter of labour causes. Alice Cashel, vice chair of Galway County Council in 1920, played a crucial role in the process of reforming local government in that county and bringing it under the authority of Dáil Éireann. Kathleen Clarke, the first woman to serve as Lord Mayor of Dublin was a member of a formidable political dynasty – widow of the 1916 leader Tom Clarke; her brother Edward Daly was also executed in 1916; her career displays a capacity for independence that is characteristic of many of the pioneering women politicians. Ellen Ryan of Tomcoole, the first woman elected to Wexford county council, belonged to one of Ireland’s most remarkable political families; her sisters are the stars of Roy Foster’s book *Vivid Faces*. It is timely to add Ellen’s

achievements to their stories. The Irish Countrywomen’s Association has been a nursery for talented women in rural and provincial Ireland, exemplified in Josephine Carroll and many other public figures.

There are many similar stories that have not yet been told. The involvement of women in local government is well-documented in the records of local authorities and in local newspapers. This brochure should be seen as the beginning of a major project to document the careers and achievements of Irish women in local politics; celebrate their contributions and encourage others to follow.



*Professor Daly is Emeritus  
Professor of History at University  
College Dublin (UCD)*

# WOMEN & POLITICS

Although unable to vote in local elections until 1898 or in national elections until 1918 women were interested in, and did participate in, political life in Ireland. In particular, local branches of the Women's Land League were established throughout Ireland in the 1880s and the Women's Land League was very important to the success of the Land League Movement, especially in keeping the Land League functioning following the arrests of the leaders of the Irish Land League in 1881. Although not eligible for election in County or City Councils, in 1899 women were eligible to stand for their Rural District Council and were able to contribute to local political life through this means as a result. In 1899, thirty-one women were elected as rural district councillors, some of whom are mentioned in the following list.

<b>Mrs. Brannigan Drogheda</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Mrs. Leonard Dunshauglin</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Francoise Edgeworth Granard</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Ms. Gertrude McNamara</b>	<i>Loughrea Rural District Council</i>
<b>Lady Sophia Grattan</b>	<i>Bellew Mountbellew Rural District Council</i>
<b>Lady Augusta Clonbrock</b>	<i>Mountbellew Rural District Council</i>
<b>Mary Burke Mountbellew</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Mrs. Everard Navan</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Mrs. Dargan Rathdrum</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Miss O'Brien Rathdrum</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>
<b>Miss Welpy South Dublin</b>	<i>Rural District Council</i>

*The Irish Archives Resource: The Present Duty of Women* <https://www.iar.ie/Docs/The%20Present%20Duty%20of%20Irishwomen.pdf>

# LONGFORD

## Françoise Edgeworth & Moya Bligh

Longford's first women councillors were Françoise Edgeworth and Moya Bligh. In Longford, apart from the county council, there were three rural district councils created: Longford, Granard and Ballymahon. The first woman to serve as a councillor in Longford was Françoise Edgeworth of Edgeworthstown House, who was returned to Granard Rural District Council in 1899. Moya Bligh (née Killane), who served as a member of Granard Rural District Council, Co. Longford, 190–06. This picture was taken in the 1890s. Moya later moved to Kilkenny where she was active in the campaign for female suffrage. Moya was the second woman to be serve as a councillor in the county.

20 women have served as local councillors in Longford since 1898.



*Moya Bligh (Image 'Courtesy of John Bligh and Longford County Archives')*

# KILKENNY

## Cllr. Mary Hilda Cavanagh

Cllr. Mary Hilda Cavanagh was first elected to Kilkenny County Council while still a college student in 1974 and has held a seat for Fine Gael in North Kilkenny in nine successive Local Elections. She was elected in the first count in the 2019 Local Election and is the longest serving, continuously elected woman councillor in Ireland.

Mary Hilda has served three terms as Chairperson of Kilkenny County Council (1983–1984; 2004–2005 and 2015–2016) and was twice elected Vice-Chairperson.



*Mary Hilda Cavanagh*

# GALWAY

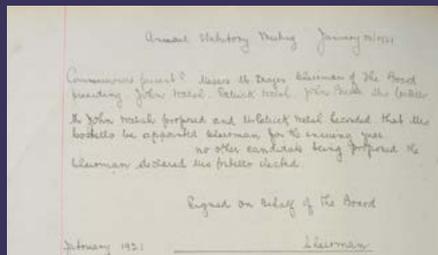
## Alice Cashel

Alice Cashel (1878–1958), born in Birr, Co. Offaly, was appointed a full-time organiser of Cumann na mBan in February 1918. Based in Cashel, County Galway, she was Vice Chairman of Galway County Council between 1920 and 1921. She was arrested in mid-1921 and jailed for possession of seditious documents, headed Dáil Éireann and issued to all public bodies. She opposed the Treaty.



## Eileen Costello

Eibhlín Bean Mhic Choisdealbha / Eileen Costello (1870–1962). In 1921 she was elected the first female member of Tuam Town Commissioners and also served as first female chairman (1921–22). She was one of four women elected or appointed to the first Seanad in 1922. She was re-elected for 3 years in 1931 but lost her seat in the 1934 Seanad election.



Left: Alice Cashel. Courtesy of Dr Humphrys. (<http://humphrysfamilytree.com/Cashel/al.html>)

Above: Tuam Town Council Minutes showing election of Mrs Costello. Courtesy of Galway County Council Archives

Right: Connie Ni Fhatharta, first woman Cathaoirleach of Galway County Council

## Connie Ní Fhatharta

Connie Ní Fhatharta, a native of Carraroe, was first elected to the local authority in 1991. She made history on the 10th July 2000 becoming the first woman cathaoirleach of the local authority, 2000–2001. She received 1,055 first preferences in the 1999 local elections.



## KERRY

### Mrs Maud Walsh

Mrs Maud Walsh was the first woman to be elected to an urban district council when she was elected to Tralee Urban District Council on 15th January 1914.

## CORK

### Jane C Dowdall

Jane C Dowdall (29 September 1899–10 December 1974) was the first female Lord Mayor of Cork serving from 1959–1960.



*Jane C Dowdall Image courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service*

## CLARE

### Mary McGrath

Mary McGrath co-opted to Kilrush Urban District Council from 1908–1911. She became the first women councillor in the county. Mrs O Dwyer was co-opted on the death of her father in 1914.

A suggestion was made at the Kilrush District Council 1908–1911 session by Michael Brew that three women should be co-opted and was greeted by loud laughter. Nine male candidates were proposed. (Note taken from *The Clare Elections / Kieran Sheedy, Bauroe Publications 1993*).

# TYRONE

## Patricia McCluskey

Patricia McCluskey and her husband Conn McCluskey, a medical doctor in Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, joined the Homeless Citizens League (HCL), founded in 1963 to protest against the denial of decent public housing to young Catholic families in Dungannon. They collected systematic evidence, so thoroughly researched that it proved without doubt the existence of discrimination. Pressure was put on Dungannon Council to make better provisions and the McCluskeys and others formed the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ) in 1964. They collected data about gerrymandering and perceived discrimination in employment, housing, and public appointments in Northern Ireland and published their findings in *The plain truth* in 1964. Patricia McCluskey and three other CSJ members were elected

to Dungannon Council in 1964. She presented her data to prominent politicians in Westminster where a Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) was set up but the British and Northern Ireland governments took no effective action at this time. Patricia McCluskey became a member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) founded in 1967. (Conn McCluskey, *Up off their knees: a commentary on the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, 1989.)

# WICKLOW

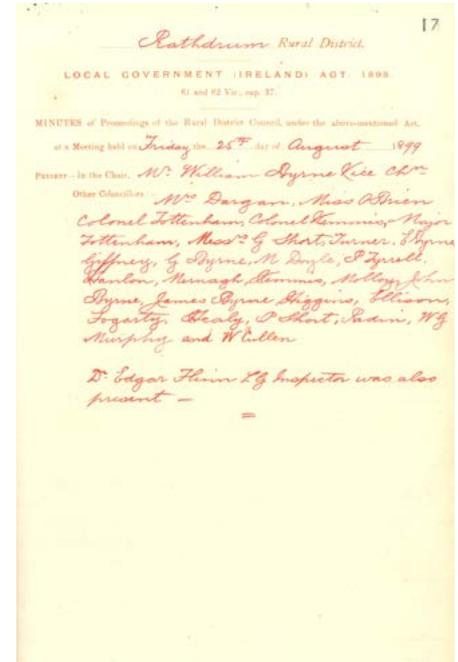


Image of first minutes of Rathdrum Rural District listing successful female candidates, courtesy of Wicklow County Archives

# MONAGHAN

## Pádraigín Uí Mhurchadha

Pádraigín Uí Mhurchadha held a Monaghan Town Council seat for Sinn Féin since 1985. She was the longest serving councillor in the town council and did not seek re-election after 30 years, when the town councils were abolished.

***“I love my work. I feel I’m there for the people – on the ground. You don’t get everything for them but you do all you possibly can for people. I really enjoy my work.”***

Páidrigín Uí Mhurchadha, former Sinn Féin Town Councillor, Monaghan

## Josephine Carroll

Josephine Carroll was the First Woman to sit on and Chair of Monaghan Urban District Council in 1974 representing Fine Gael. She was a founder member of Monaghan Town Guild and National President of the Irish Country Women’s Association. She was a leading member of the Monaghan Hospital Committee. She worked hard for the economic and social standing of women.



*Josephine Carroll Image courtesy of Monaghan County Museum*

## DONEGAL

### Kate McCarry

Kate McCarry was the first female Councillor elected to serve on Letterkenny Urban District Council. From 1899, until its dissolution in 2014, 96 different councillors served on either the Urban or Town Council. However, female representation in local government in the town was very poor in the 115 years of its existence as, from those 96 councillors, only five were women – Kate McCarry, Sally Blake,

May McClintock, Jean Crossan and Lisa Culbert (although as the latter two were co-opted onto the Council, technically the people of Letterkenny only elected 3 women in the entire history of the Council). Kate McCarry served on the council for 3 years, from 1925, serving as Vice-Chairman in her time, but it would take another 42 years for a female to be elected again, with Sally Blake being elected in 1967. Kate McCarry died in 1970.



*Image courtesy of Letterkenny Historical Society*

## WEXFORD

### Ellen Ryan

Ellen (Nell) Ryan from Tomcoole, Taghmon was one of the longest serving female prisoners of the 1916 period and was the first woman elected to Wexford County Council in 1928 and served until 1954.



*Image Credit – From the Martin Ryan (Taghmon) collection at Wexford County Archive.*

# DUBLIN

## Sarah Cecilia Harrison

Sarah Cecilia Harrison was an artist and political activist and in 1912 was the first woman elected to Dublin City Council.



*Sarah Cecilia Harrison (Image courtesy of Dublin City Gallery: the Hugh Lane)*



*Kathleen Clarke*

## Kathleen Clarke

Kathleen Clarke was the widow of Thomas J. Clarke, signatory to the 1916 Proclamation, and was the first woman elected as Lord Mayor of Dublin, in 1939. She was elected to Dublin Corporation in 1919. A confirmed nationalist, she was a founder member of Cumann na mBan. As a member of the Second Dáil she voted against the Treaty. She joined Fianna Fáil and was again elected to the Dáil in 1927. As a senator from 1928 to 1936, she was committed to equality for women. She supported the right of unmarried mothers to seek maintenance from the fathers of their children and to raising the age of consent in the case of indecent and sexual assault.

# UNEMPLOYED.

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WETTRIM COUNTY COUNCIL.

Lea-Manorhamilton

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LIST OF

# COUNCILLORS

of the LEA AREA, in the Year 1920.



**National Women's Council of Ireland**  
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