

## COUNCIL SEAT TO BE FILLED

Eoghan Dalton Reports



Councillor Claire Cullen-Delsol

Waterford's Sinn Féin Councillors have announced they are supporting a prominent abortion rights campaigner for the vacant seat on the local authority. Claire Cullen-Delsol announced her intention to stand for the casual vacancy last month, which arose after the resignation of Mary Roche (Ind). However, Ms Roche has put forward cardiac campaigner Matt Shanahan for her Council seat. The contest is to take place this coming Thursday evening at this month's plenary meeting of the City and County Council. Ms Cullen-Delsol and Mr Shanahan are both standing as Independents.

It's understood Mary Roche's former Independent colleagues, Cllrs Davy Daniels and Cha O'Neill, will propose and second Mr Shanahan, while Ms Cullen-Delsol will be put forward by Cllrs Breda Brennan and Siobhán Whelan (both SF). Both nominees have been involved at an activist level in recent years on different health campaigns. Mr Shanahan has been a spokesperson and leading organiser with Healthcare Equality for the South East (HEFSE) and has been regularly critical of many of Waterford's Oireachtas members during the ongoing struggle for a 24/7 cardiology service at University Hospital Waterford (UHW).

Ms Cullen-Delsol, meanwhile, is a director with Terminations for Medical Reasons (TFMR), a group she joined following the loss of her daughter Alex to a fatal foetal abnormality. During the campaign to repeal the eight amendment of the Constitution, which saw Waterford return the second highest Yes vote outside of Dublin, she addressed the Joint Oireachtas Committee that was formed to deliberate on the issue.

Speaking to this newspaper, Portlaoise-based Cllr Declan Clune (SF) said his party had decided to nominate Ms Cullen-Delsol partly due to the poor level of female representation on the Council. Out of 32 members, just four are women.

"Both candidates are very admirable," he continued. "But we feel Claire is a progressive female option that the Council needs and that would be most in line with Sinn Féin's policies. "She wouldn't be a single issue candidate, but is interested in a multiple of issues. We hope other Councillors would consider getting behind her." Ms Cullen-Delsol said yesterday she was pleased to receive Sinn Féin's backing, but urged people to contact their local Councillors ahead of Thursday's vote. She said: "The Council will get to vote on this so it isn't a public vote, but the public can still have a say on this and tell their local Councillor that they want to see a progressive woman on the Council."

Cllr John Hearne described the mother of three as a “fresh breeze who knows all about the pressures of life”. “We badly need more women in politics and I think she’s based in reality, who knows about stuff some of the rest of us haven’t gone through, which is what the Council needs.” While Ms Cullen-Delsol has confirmed she intends to stand for a Council seat in May’s Local Elections even if she doesn’t succeed on Thursday, Mr Shanahan said he isn’t “making any decision on that at the moment”.

He continued: “For now I’m focused on the facility on the grounds of UHW that is not treating patients and that will be the main focus if I get onto the Council. That needs to start treating patients properly.”

He said he believes a second cath lab is unlikely to appear anytime soon, as “nothing official has been announced” with no mention of the lab in the HSE’s proposed capital plan for 2019.

He accepted Mary Roche’s nomination after she originally announced her intention to leave the seat empty for the rest of the Council’s term, before realising that the Council pact – combined of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour – could then fill the seat instead.

“(She) very graciously suggested a co-option to me, to the Health Equality for the South East group, as a way of supporting 24/7. It’s probably the most important issue in Waterford right now,” he said.

Mr Shanahan added that he hopes that “any political parties that are in support of 24/7 would support me”.

Cllrs Breda Brennan and Hearne are both based in the City South ward, where it is understood Ms Cullen-Delsol will stand in May. The party has recently added a third candidate to its ticket, Mr Warren Fitzgerald, and so Cllr Hearne believes it stands to lose out more than other groupings in May’s Local Elections. “But this is about giving an offering for other Councillors and having a contest,” he added.