

Waterford says 'No' to directly elected mayor by only 1.6 per cent

Eoghan Dalton Reports

The plebiscite for a directly elected mayor went down to the wire in Waterford, eventually being rejected by the narrowest of margins. The 'no' side had 50.8 per cent of the vote and the 'yes' side 49.2 per cent. It failed by just 719 votes. Turnout stood at 52 per cent.

The total valid poll was 44,155 out of an electorate of 85,951. The slim margin that refused it is being seen as a sign that the proposal may be put to the people again.

Prof Ray Griffin, who co-authors the annual South-East Economic Monitor, saw interest developing in a directly elected mayor last week once local figures started championing the proposal. However, he believes it should not have been people such as himself starting discussion and instead should have been promoted harder by the government.

"It was an orphan proposal and it lacked the push from the people who put it to us," he told The Munster Express.



Counting at the WIT Arena over the weekend. | Photo: Noel Browne

Proper debate

"I feel like we didn't have a proper debate on it. Framing it at the start around the costs [of the mayor's salary] was a negative

way of conceiving the proposal." Prof Griffin was in favour of it because it had the "ability to produce an accountable role which would be the equivalent of a minister for the city". Opposition was declared early by many Waterford councillors to the proposal, with many citing the costs involved. A large majority of Waterford councillors passed an emergency motion last month stating their opposition to the proposal for a directly elected mayors. Only two councillors of the 19 present, both Sinn Féin, voted against the motion and declared their support for the government proposal. The outgoing Mayor of Waterford, Councillor Declan Doocey was among those who were against the plebiscite, describing it as "insulting" to the councillors. "I think most of our candidates were distracted by the local election, naturally. They would have been among those to push it," said Prof Griffin.

A trend emerged on Friday afternoon at the polling stations in the county, which indicated there was a lack of awareness surrounding the plebiscite.

In Kilmacthomas, presiding officer Caroline Mansfield Casey said several people declined to take the ballot papers for the plebiscite.

Awareness

This was replicated in Dungarvan where voters also declined voting on the mayoral plebiscite and, in some cases according to polling clerk Jamie Moore, said they weren't aware they would be voting on having a directly elected mayor. In the city, meanwhile, one man who had voted at The Mercy said he had voted against it because it was "creating another job for the boys".

Waterford's local authorities were separated between a City Council and a County Council until 2014 when the two amalgamated. Some believe there was added confusion due to the number of ballots people were voting on last Friday. "It definitely got lost in the melee," said former Mayor of Waterford City Mary Roche. She said the government's decision to reverse drawing the mayor's salary from the council's resources, and instead deciding that it would come from central resources, wasn't widely known. "I would contend that the government, despite it being their policy or their plebiscite, didn't want it to actually pass. I think they did everything they could to undermine the argument." "Their backing for it was lukewarm at best and damaging to the case at worst," Roche added.

'Right hames'

A number of Councillors said there was a fear there would be a "democratic deficit" as a budget could be passed with one-third of members' support. One re-elected councillor from the weekend, Eddie Mulligan of Fianna Fáil, maintained there was a "complete lack of information" around the proposal. He supports having a directly elected mayor but believes the government made "a right hames of the process". Councillor John Hearne, a former Metropolitan Mayor of Waterford, told WLR that it was "such a close call they will have to run it again" in the near future. "I'm optimistic more than disappointed." A key concern for some of its proponents is that Waterford will suffer in the long-term after Limerick passed the proposal. However Cork rejected it. "This person could have been a voice for Waterford, an advocate," said Mary Roche. She now fears Limerick could potentially "power ahead" and leave Waterford behind. "People are always saying we're forgotten about and we're on the hind tit down here."