

# 'SHE' WINS EU INNOVATION IN POLITICS AWARD FOR IRELAND

A gender equality initiative to increase the representation of women in politics in Ireland won a European Innovation in Politics Award for 2021. Dr Michelle Maher, Programme Manager for See Her Elected (SHE), and Minister of State Peter Burke, spoke to Grace Heneghan about the plans for this feminist, community-led rural project especially in the run up to Ireland's 2024 Local Elections.

**S**HE (See Her Elected) – took home the European Innovation in Politics Award in the Democracy Category last December.

This is the first time that an Irish project has won this prestigious award, in recognition of the team's work to increase the representation of women in local politics, thereby strengthening local democracy and increasing the diversity of political voices.

The award was presented to Peter Burke TD, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and SHE's Programme Manager Dr Michelle Maher in Brussels by Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, and Alain Maron, Minister of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy (Brussels-Capital Region).

The overall aim of the SHE project, which was first set up in November 2019, is to increase the number of women in local politics in the rural constituencies of the North West and Midlands, where between 78% to 95% of the elected local authority councillors are men.

The initiative, which is fully funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is under the stewardship of Minister Peter Burke. It is a joint collaboration between Longford Women's Link and 50:50 North West (a combination of organisations with strong links at grassroots level).

## GREAT ADAPTATION TO CHANGE

Dr Michelle Maher said that the 'See Her Elected' project pointed to the great adaptation to change at the early stages. "I joined the initiative in January 2020 and had some great plans. However, those plans had to be completely changed with the arrival of Covid," she recalled.

With a greater push towards digitalisation in all areas of politics due to the pandemic, Dr Maher said this necessitated moving the SHE programme online. "It meant that we were able to increase the geographical spread and the numbers of women we engaged with in rural areas, and we found that they joined in their hundreds. And we can provide this free service due to the funding received from Minister Burke's Department for the

project."

SHE engages directly with women in their communities through the innovative 'SHE School' which has been offering free online classes since April 2020, that cover issues such as politics, public policy, economics and participation, to give women the knowledge, confidence and skills to participate in local politics.

"There has been a participant-led element to SHE School, providing like-minded women with this space where they could talk about politics and learn from each other. These women have come from a variety of different backgrounds. The future for democracy in rural Ireland is looking a whole lot brighter."

SHE has also validated their viewpoints as being broader than 'women's issues', and empowered them to have their voices heard on traditionally male issues such as planning, housing, the environment, employment and water services.

In a welcoming and relaxed learning environment, women are instilled with the knowledge, confidence and skills necessary to consider running for election. They are also empowered to participate in decision-making through Ireland's Public Participation Network.

"For example, the 'Introduction to Politics' classes are designed to demystify the workings of local authorities, promote active citizenship and explore barriers to local participation for women."

## TOOLKIT OF PRACTICAL SUPPORTS

Building on this feedback from women, SHE has written Ireland's first 'Guidebook to Running in the Local Elections' as part of a toolkit of practical supports for women inspired to run for election.

SHE's new, local and targeted approach is now empowering women to participate in a traditionally male sphere, and already six women have decided to stand for the 2024 Local Elections.

"Workshops have been led by Kathleen O'Meara, who also worked closely to develop the guidebook with myself and communications consultant Mairead O'Shea, who has been a powerhouse behind all of this."

According to Minister Burke, Dr Maher and her team have been "exemplary" by putting the best use of his department's



*Pictured at the award presentation in Brussels were (l-r): Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography; Dr Michelle Maher, See Her Elected (SHE) Programme Manager; Peter Burke TD, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Helfried Carl, Founder & Managing Partner at the Innovation in Politics Institute. © Elias Pargan, Innovation in Politics Institute.*

funding into the SHE School. “SHE’s online classes have increased the level of engagement and enabled more women from rural areas to become involved in local politics. It has certainly democratised participation.”

He said that the Government has prioritised funding for organisations who work towards greater diversity and gender equality in local politics. “We must continue to support and encourage more women into local politics, until our political chambers reflect the societies they serve.”

Minister Burke noted that the application for funding is assessed by his Department on an annual basis. “I don’t see any reason why we won’t continue to support the project in the future. We’re keenly looking at the funding application for the year ahead. It’s a huge initiative and we will be as supportive as possible.”

“Targeted, influential organisations, such as SHE, have been instrumental in encouraging more women to consider local politics and supporting them to stay on and thrive within the

system,” according to the Minister.

“However while progress has been made in increasing the number of women involved in politics, this has been too slow and often limited to the urban areas of the country. We have also seen issues in retaining the talent already within the system.”

### THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

As of May 2021, 25% of elected local authority councillors in Ireland were women, with the increase in female representation mainly seen in urban areas.

The 2019 Local Elections saw women gain 48% of the seats on Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council. In contrast, women’s representation on Longford County Council reduced to 5%, Mayo County Council to 6% and Donegal County Council to 11%. It was this disparity within urban and rural constituencies that was a key factor in the establishment of the SHE Project in late 2019.

According to Minister Burke, in his own constituency of



*Pictured (l-r): Joan O'Flynn, Ireland Representative, Innovation in Politics Institute; Stephen Boucher, Founder and Partner of Dreamocracy; Tara Green, CEO of Longford Women's Link; Michelle Maher, SHE Programme Manager; Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography; Peter Burke, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Alain Maron, Minister of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy (Brussels-Capital Region); Helfried Carl, Founder & Managing Partner at the Innovation in Politics Institute; and Grace Heneghan, Editor of 'Council Review'. © Elias Pargan, Innovation in Politics Institute.*

Westmeath, the ratio of female councillors is currently poor, “out of 20 Councillors on Westmeath County Council only four are female, yet this sadly is the norm in other rural areas”.

He said that certain issues such as maternity leave, funding for women’s caucuses, councillors’ pay and conditions, and provision of support and resources need to be addressed. And despite an increase in the number of female TDs and Councillors following recent elections, 78% of TDs and 76% of councillors are still male.

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### REGIONAL WOMEN’S CAUCUS

This issue of retention of women in politics concerns Dr Maher, and one which she said remains a key concern also for the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG). “We have been looking at the success of the Women’s Caucus in the Oireachtas and at the councils where there are large numbers of women forming committees and caucuses themselves.”

Galway County Council’s Cllr Mary Hoade was responsible for spearheading a regional caucus in partnership with the project team in the early part of 2021, during her team as AILG President. “We collaborated with the AILG to put together a regional women’s caucus on a pilot basis, across the North West, Mayo and Galway, the Midlands region and Cavan/Monaghan,” according to SHE’s Programme Manager.

At their first meeting in September 2021 the regional caucus elected Cavan’s Cllr Carmel Brady as Chair with Cllr Shelly Herterich Quinn from Galway County Council elected as Vice-Chair. A cross-party Working Committee, including Independents and geographically spread, was also set up.

“They are now planning a plenary to put a strategy together for 2022-2023. It’s important for this to work because the women’s caucus is a new and innovative political institution.

### ‘SHE’ IS APPLAUDED BY AILG ON EU AWARD WIN!

**Current President Cllr Nicholas Crossan:** “Congratulations to Dr Maher and the team for their commitment to increasing female participation in local government. Along with our own series of initiatives, I’m confident that the important ongoing work of both organisations will help to maximise progress in this area and that the results will be clearly visible in terms of a marked increase in the number of female councillors at the next local elections in 2024.”

**Former President Cllr Mary Hoade:** “From working closely with SHE over the past year to establish a regional caucus structure for female councillors, I can speak first-hand of Dr Maher’s dedication and commitment and her ongoing work in supporting and empowering women within our local communities with the confidence to run for election and to navigate the local election campaign process.

“AILG continues to champion female participation and retention in local government and together with our own initiatives, such as our proposals to provide maternity leave for councillors, I am confident that we will see a marked increase in the number of female councillors by 2024.”



“When they first enter the council chambers, women will need support and advice on adapting to business, and the formal and informal policies and procedures,” she said.

For more information visit [www.seeherelected.ie/](http://www.seeherelected.ie/) or email: [info@seeherelected.ie](mailto:info@seeherelected.ie) and for further details on the Innovation in Politics Awards visit [www.innovationinpolitics.eu](http://www.innovationinpolitics.eu)

TEMPLATE FOR OTHER JURISDICTIONS

See Her Elected (SHE) was one of ten projects from Ireland, Poland, Germany, Spain and the UK to be shortlisted as 2021 finalists in the Democracy Category by a European jury of 1,032 citizens.

According to Dr Maher, the feedback from the other nine category finalists revealed that they liked the “simplicity” of the initiative and that is was not an academic-based project.

Dr Maher agreed that the project could be adopted by other jurisdictions. “The European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica expressed an interest in the initiative and said it could be as relevant to rural areas in Germany, Portugal or Poland, for example, as it is in the North West of Ireland.”

So, before the local elections in 2024, has SHE any plans to expand the initiative on a national basis? “It’s a model that is working, and there’s no reason why not it cannot expand to other regions over time. Our focus now is very much on the 2024 Local Elections and certainly to lay the groundwork for 2029. We have big plans for the SHE initiative!”

The advertisement features a central circular graphic divided into four quadrants, each representing a type of waste accepted for recycling: Tyres (top-left), ELV's / Cars (top-right), Flat Glass (bottom-left), and Ferrous & Non-Ferrous Metals (bottom-right). A large green recycling symbol is overlaid on the center of the circle. The text "We accept" is written in a large, green, sans-serif font across the top of the circle, and "We offer a nationwide collection service!" is written in a similar font across the bottom. Above the circle, the logo for "MSM recycling" is displayed, with "METAL & GLASS RECYCLING" in smaller text below it. To the right of the logo is a circular icon containing a green recycling symbol. Below the circular graphic, there are four dark green horizontal bars, each containing a white icon and text: a telephone icon with "Contact our office on 057 913 9098 for prices!", a location pin icon with "Midland scrap metal, Annagh, Birr, Co Offaly, R42 RT68", an envelope icon with "info@msmrecycling.com", and a globe icon with "www.msmrecycling.com".