

SUBMISSION BY PLANACT ON THE REVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER – A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Introduction

Planact has a long-established history of working in urban areas at the local government level, with a focus on informal settlement communities. Informal settlements are frequently overlooked in planning and development processes due to their informal nature and the limited availability of reliable information about these places, making it more difficult to plan and structure appropriate and efficient responses. According to a report issued by the Government Information System, [16,8%](#) of people in metropolitan areas live in informal settlements. There are reports of up to [4,000](#) informal settlements nationwide. Planact seeks to scale up its relationships with these communities to deliver improved development outcomes. The organisation seeks to further strengthen civic state relations through the advancement of strong participatory mechanisms to support inclusive and more equitable development approaches and government responsiveness in service delivery. These approaches are informed by and aligned with key constitutional provisions.

South Africa's democratic and constitutional order ushered in a new system of governance, setting up local government as an independent sphere of government with its own executive and legislative authority. As outlined in Chapter 7, Section 151 (1) of the Constitution, municipalities must be established 'wall to wall' across the 'whole territory of the Republic'.

The objects of local government are outlined in Section 152 of the Constitution. This branch of government serves as the closest sphere of government to the people, devolving and entrenching accountable democracy to fulfil a social and economic development mandate and meet the needs of communities through service provision. Associated with this in Section (S152) (1)(e) is the notion that communities and community organisations must be encouraged to be involved in matters of local government.

Planact prioritises meaningful public participation through community organising, capacity-building initiatives. Communities are supported to contribute to municipal Integrated Development Plans and are encouraged to engage with ward committees and ward councillors to strengthen local governance outcomes.

Planact supports and promotes community voice and agency through supporting active participation by communities in policy processes and reform by encouraging communities to attend public meetings, participate in workshops, and prepare and submit contributions.

Communities engage actively with local government to build the mechanisms and structured processes vital to unlocking more efficient and effective service provision.

In preparation for compiling this submission, Planact held an extensive workshop with communities from the three Metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng, Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane to elicit their views and experiences of local government. Their inputs have been incorporated in this submission.

The review will focus on four key areas

1. Governance, Accountability, and Institutional Capacity

Planact calls for more focused action to ensure accountable and transparent municipal governance systems.

Strengthening citizen oversight and participation through, for instance, mandatory participatory budgeting at ward level, where communities directly influence a specified percentage of municipal budgets.

Planact proposes a stronger role for community oversight through the establishment of community monitoring forums with legal recognition to track service delivery and expenditure. Ward Committees could join these efforts or play a supporting function.

Government needs to expand the use of digital platforms for real-time reporting and tracking of municipal performance, service complaints, and corruption.

Planact can attest to the negative impact political deployments have on local government programmes, projects and ultimately weak delivery of services. Compounding this is the continued soloed approaches that characterise government and undermine solution generation and problem resolution.

Corruption, mismanagement and weak leadership are pervasive in local government.

The system of appointments for key posts, such as city managers, must be reviewed and reformed to incorporate a more inclusive approach and participation by a broad array of civil society.

Communities emphasise the need for qualified professionals to improve service provision. Planact calls for strict competency-based criteria for municipal leadership roles, especially senior managers. Performance reviews should be implemented with clear sanctions for failure, such as suspension after repeated performance failures, and to improve information dissemination.

2. Service Delivery Performance

Over time, the Free Basic Services (FBS) policy has expanded to include policies for free basic water, electricity, sewerage, sanitation, and solid waste (refuse) removal. Despite this, service delivery is beset by challenges that relate to infrastructure that is inadequate to meet the needs of communities and is in disrepair from years of neglect and budgets that do not prioritise repairs and upgrades. Communities note systemic failures in service delivery and widespread dysfunctionality in municipalities

Prioritise reform and updating the indigent registers to ensure higher levels of accuracy and equitable access to grants

Procurement processes and tender system reform must be prioritised to include the implementation of cost ceilings on tenders, ensure alignment with clearly defined outcomes, and give preference to companies that demonstrate a commitment to quality and innovative improvements and effective delivery systems.

Procurement processes must be transparent.

3. Financial Viability

Communities have cited poor revenue generation as a concern. Allied to this are calls for improved transparency in public expenditure. Communities continue to criticise tender processes that result in overspending for services or missing funds, and projects not completed or poorly delivered. Political interference in tender processes is an area of disquiet.

Communities have called for an independent body to oversee municipal finances and administration.

Needs-based assessments are required, which include research and strong data gathering to underpin appropriate service provision.

Improve service delivery quality to increase revenue collection from formal and informal areas. Well-managed and maintained infrastructure improves people's willingness to pay for services.

4. Community Participation

Planact recognises that communities have a range of resources, technical, social and financial, skills, talents, relationships and organising that can be mobilised to promote and underpin positive change. This approach, also known as the Asset-Based Community Development model (ABCD), empowers communities to take ownership of their development and build sustainable solutions.

The power of engaging communities is therefore to leverage their resources and the knowledge of their local circumstances, and the types of solutions that are fit for purpose. Municipalities have not sufficiently tapped into the reservoir of expertise and local knowledge to co-create solutions to local problems in the service of improved development outcomes.

- Empower and capacitate local councillors.
- Enhance public education and engagement.
- Simplify and diversify communication channels (SMS, WhatsApp and community workshops).
- Introduce mobile municipal offices and toll-free reporting lines.
- Update social development policies regularly to reflect current needs.

Alignment with the Review Themes:

1. Governance and Political Instability

- Planact advocates for ethical, competent leadership, and advocates for changing norms of unethical and ineffectual conduct in municipalities in South Africa. Political stability is recognised as critical in consistent, efficient and effective service delivery a key issue of concern for the organisation.

2. Citizen Participation

- Through public hearings, community forums, and legal submissions, Planact strengthens grassroots democracy and participatory governance.
- Planact seeks to engage citizen groupings directly to co-create a refreshed vision for these relationships, which enables collective action and shared accountability for improved local development and transformation outcomes.

3. Service Delivery and Infrastructure

- Planact actively engages in monitoring services and engages with local government for improvements, repairs and maintenance and demands responsive, consistent, quality services.

4. **Financial Oversight and Anti-Corruption**

- Planact engages in social audits to review procurement processes and reviews budgets for IDP submissions to promote higher levels of transparency in municipal budget data.

5. **Spatial Justice**

- Planact, through various initiatives, advocates for inclusive settlements with access to the rights to the City, including the upgrading of informal settlements and improved access to housing. and protection against unjust evictions.

Persistent Challenges:

- Political instability and coalition volatility and weakness primarily since 2016.
- Service delivery failures especially in electricity, water, sanitation and waste management.
- Escalating financial stress with poor audit outcomes and underperforming State Owned Enterprises.
- High staff turnover, and high numbers of vacant posts along with politicised appointments, weakening and undermining institutional capacity.
- Spatial inequality, with poor communities still excluded from services, infrastructure and employment opportunities.
- Ineffective ward committees and ward councillors disabling progress and development.
- Low levels of trust in local government over their ability to serve communities with integrity.

Recommendations:

- Establish formal coalition governance agreements.
- Professionalise the administration with merit-based appointments.
- Develop a robust financial recovery strategy.
- Reform procurement processes, including with higher levels of transparency and accountability.
- Prioritise infrastructure investment and emergency service plans.
- Unlock innovations in service delivery and financing models.
- Enhance digital and participatory platforms for community input.
- Advance spatial transformation and inclusive urban development.

Conclusion

Civil society and NGOs, play a key role in amplifying citizen voice, promoting ethical, transparent and accountable governance. They also promote a commitment to strong social and economic development, and a safe and healthy environment in line with South Africa's constitutional precepts and principles.

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