



LOCAL
GOVERNMENT

PLAY BOOK

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LET'S GO!



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**DEMOCRACY
FROM BELOW.
GIVING PEOPLE
THE TOOLS
THEY NEED
TO ENGAGE
WITH AND
INFLUENCE
DEMOCRACY.**

THIS IS **PART 1** OF A 2-PART LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLAYBOOK.

It is founded on the experiences of 5 formations (groups of people organised around an issue) who are actively working to defend and reclaim their communities' democratic rights.

The playbook is structured as follows:

- ▶ **The Introduction:** outlines the current political context, introduces the 5 formations and describes how best to use the playbook.
- ▶ **Section 1: Understand the terrain,** unpacks the local government terrain, describing the intended roles and responsibilities of all the players.
- ▶ **Section 2: Know your tools,** directs readers to information that is available or can be demanded to support transparency and accountability.
- ▶ **Section 3: Use the election moment to build your power,** outlines strategies, including community manifestos and scorecards, that formations are using to organise around collective demands and set the political agenda for the upcoming election term.

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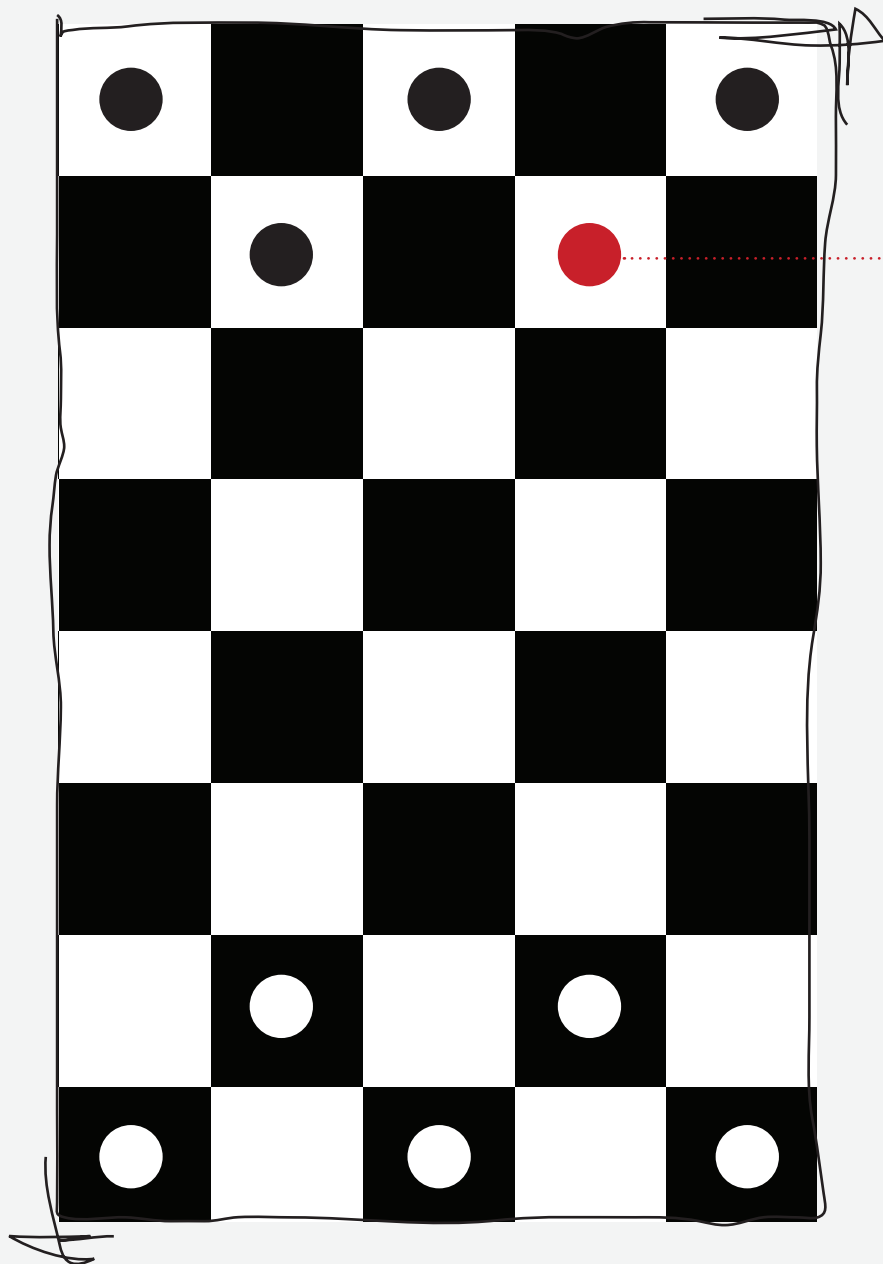
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THE INTRODUCTION

THE CURRENT POLITICAL PLAYING GROUND

**HEADLINE AFTER HEADLINE
HERALDS A HISTORIC MOMENT
OF TRANSFORMATION FOR SOUTH
AFRICANS, BUT MOST FIZZLE INTO
NOTHING. IF THERE ARE SHIFTS,
THEY'RE NOTHING MORE THAN A
SUBTLE CHANGE IN WHO HOLDS POWER.
FOR MOST SOUTH AFRICANS, POSITIVE
MATERIAL CHANGE REMAINS OUT
OF REACH. INSTEAD, RAPID DECAY
IS INCREASINGLY VISIBLE. AFTER
32 YEARS OF BROKEN PROMISES,
FRUSTRATION AND HOPELESSNESS
ARE HIGH.**

You don't have to look far for signs of this frustration.

It's in the smoke and burnt tyres, the t-shirts with faces and slogans, the marches, the petitions, the protests. It's easy for those who are far from the sites of broken promises, governance collapse and service delivery failure to dismiss protest action as disorder. There are many moral conversations about how communities should express frustration differently, especially without violence or disruption but a better question to ask is, why are communities protesting? Communities do not take to the streets because they have no understanding of democracy. In many cases, they do so because they've exhausted the formal democratic channels and are trying to make power listen. Why is protest action seen as one of the few effective ways to make the government respond? What does it tell us when people feel they must burn tyres, block roads or march to municipal offices before they are heard? In part, the answer lies in the gap between the Constitution's promise and the lived experiences of most South African communities.

Public participation is a crucial element of our democratic governance.

It's recognised in the Constitution of South Africa, 1996. Section 152 (1)(e) states that a core objective of local government is "to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government". The bedrock of South Africa's state values: "accountability, responsiveness and openness" are impossible to achieve without active citizen engagement.

Yet, South Africans will tell you, in different languages and with different levels of exhaustion, that the promises of participatory democracy have not been realised. They will tell you that meetings, forums, imbizos, pitsos, hearings and consultations feel like tick-box exercises. They will tell you they have attended meetings, raised concerns, written letters, joined ward committees, submitted petitions, asked questions, participated in processes and still found their needs ignored. For many, trying to engage with government is like screaming into a murky grey cloud for years and years without an end in sight. And yet, committed groups of people continue to organise around identified issues and explore how to engage and hold local government to account,

This playbook is a result of a collaboration between My Vote Counts and 5 such formations (groups of people organised around an issue).

Each of these formations share this question in common: How do communities build enough power to hold local governments accountable? Inherent in this question, is the sub-question: how do communities build power?

Leaning on the experiences of the 5 formations, this playbook hopes to offer communities, movements and other formations with information needed to: navigate the maze of building power and, effectively use existing tools to hold government accountable.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLAYBOOK

Developed in the context of the 2026 Local Government Elections, the playbook draws from existing activist resources, including the *R2K's Activist Guide: Local Government Transparency and Accountability and, The Activist Guide to Holding Local Government Accountable*. It is rooted in the lived experiences and knowledge of community organisers and activists, like you. Do not fret! This playbook does not treat elections as the only meaningful moment in democracy. The vote matters, but a vote alone does not guarantee democracy. Elections can open a door, but to keep the door open after the polls are closed, communities need to organise around shared demands, gather evidence and make strategic use of accountability tools.

The playbook is not meant to be a toolkit for local government elections. It is a power-strengthening guide that supports communities/formations to understand the local government terrain, build knowledge of available tools, and define their own accountability standards. The playbook invites communities to move from frustration to the collective power of shared demands, from being consulted to setting the terms of accountability.

WHO WE WALKED WITH

My Vote Counts collaborated with the following 5 formations to support and learn from their efforts to reclaim democracy:

- ▶ Cape Crisis Committee
- ▶ South Durban Community Advice Office
- ▶ MARRC
- ▶ Sakhasizwe Ward 2, and
- ▶ Umbrella Civic

These 5 formations from 3 provinces are all organised around different issues. They are organising in different contexts, with different histories, capacities and challenges. Some are developing community manifestos, some building ward-level scorecards and some translating individual experiences into collective demands. Some have years of experience engaging municipal processes, and others are still building the foundations of collective action.



CAPE CRISIS COMMITTEE (CCC), WESTERN CAPE

A community-led formation, CCC emerged out of a growing concern about the escalating levels of violence, crime, gender-based violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion affecting our communities. What brought CCC together was a shared belief that we could no longer wait for solutions to come from outside; we needed to organise ourselves, build collective power, and create spaces where residents could identify problems and work towards solutions together. What makes our context distinct is that many of the communities we work with, continue to live with the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, deep inequality, unemployment, overcrowding, and under-resourced public services. CCC believes that meaningful change happens when communities are not treated as beneficiaries but as partners, experts, and leaders in shaping our own futures.



SOUTH DURBAN COMMUNITY ADVICE CENTRE (SDCAC), SOUTH DURBAN BASIN, KWAZULU-NATAL

SDCAC is a non-profit social justice organisation. It was established in January 2022 after two years of conversations and deliberation among friends and local activists re how to address the injustices affecting them, both as individuals and as a community. SDCAC operates as a voluntary, non-membership-based Community Advice Centre to support communities in the South Durban Basin (SDB). The history of struggle carried by communities of Wentworth, Lamontville and others in the South Durban Basin shapes how residents

understand power, rights and accountability. Rights are not experiences as gifts but as entitlements that must be defended. Work that the advice centre is involved in, like The Accountability Project, creates spaces for community groups to explore personal and public accountability and how to hold duty bearers to their responsibilities.



MARRC (MSUNDUZI ASSOCIATION OF RESIDENTS, RATEPAYERS AND CIVICS), MSUNDUZI, KWAZULU-NATAL

Located in Msunduzi Municipality, uMgungundlovu district of KwaZulu-Natal, MARRC was established in May 2020 and on 21 February 2021 was registered as a voluntary, non-profit organisation. MARRC represents a non-partisan, progressive and inclusive civil society movement with 13 affiliate civic organisations that collectively represent all communities in their areas of operation. MARRC plays a catalytic role in uniting residents, ratepayers, and civic organisations to bring a wealth of expertise, knowledge, and experience into the formation. Their goal is to help address the challenges facing Msunduzi so that this provincial capital can become a prosperous place for all its residents to enjoy, a place where individuals, families and communities can thrive.



WARD 2 SOPHAKAMA, ELLIOT, SAKHISIZWE MUNICIPALITY, EASTERN CAPE

Is a small group of mostly young people who live in Ward 2, Elliot, within the Chris Hani District Municipality. They are organised under the Sophakama banner, an initiative brought to them by Afesis in collaboration with other organisations. The Sakhisizwe Local Municipality is a Category C municipality, characterised by vast rural and agricultural land. It has a very low tax revenue base, every Rand counts and must be managed properly. The young people of Ward 2 Sophakama are organising themselves so that they can hold those they have voted into power to account and exercise oversight over their municipality's limited resources.



UMBRELLA CIVIC 92+, WARD 57 AND WARD 115, CAPE TOWN, WESTERN CAPE

The Umbrella Civic is a community organisation that brings together civic organisations and individuals from areas currently defined as part of or directly adjacent to Ward 57. This includes parts of Salt River and Woodstock which are presently part of Ward 115 but are soon to be combined into Ward 92. These areas have a shared history of class struggle and culture and are once again at risk of gentrification and displacement. Umbrella Civic was born out of a need for more community participation and collaboration within the local ward structure. While ward committee structures are meant to promote community engagement throughout the ward, the broad voices of civil society are often misrepresented or absent within these spaces. Three main objectives of their work are to: advance issues of spatial justice, improve access to information and safety, and move beyond securitised approaches to governance.

HOW SHALL THE PEOPLE GOVERN?

The intention of this playbook is to explore the answer to this question! The protests, petitions, actions, training sessions and workshops have brought many communities to a point where democracy demands more than symbolic participation. It needs people to claim it, shape it and organise to make it real. For the five formations featured in this playbook, sharing their organising experiences and how they overcame obstacles is one of the ways to support communities to think about how they, shall govern!

HOW TO USE THIS PLAYBOOK

The experiences of the 5 formations form the argument for the suggested strategies and actions recorded in the playbook.

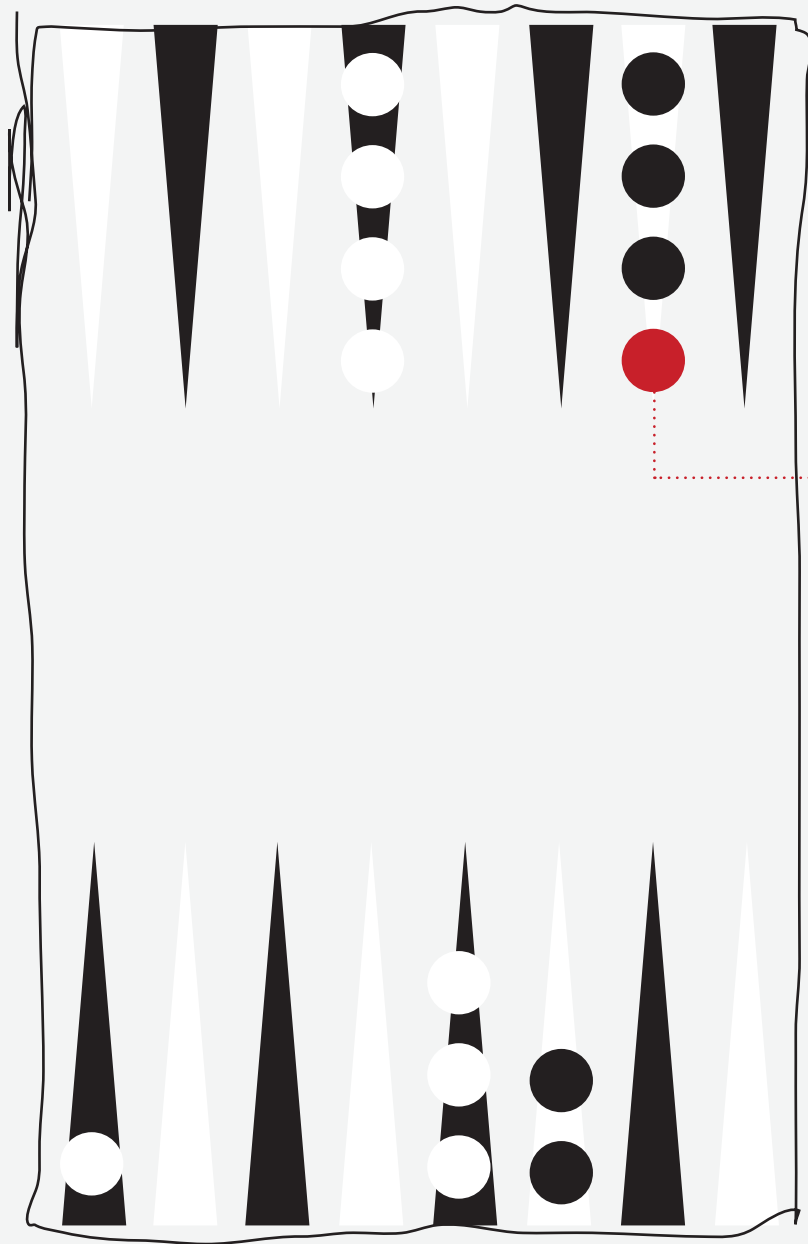
The playbook has two parts.

Part One is the work before the vote: understanding the terrain, knowing your tools, and using the moment of the election to build your power. **Part Two** begins where election day ends and turns to holding representatives to their commitments. Election day sits between them, not because it is the end point, but because it offers community's an opportunity to change the game plan.

You can read this book in any order. Start where your formation is standing. If you are still working out who decides what, start at *Section 1: Understanding the terrain*. If you already know who is supposed to do what but need evidence about what is or isn't being done, begin with *Section 2: Know your tools*. If your community is ready to organise around your shared demands, head straight to *Section 3: Use the election moment to build power*.

Keep an eye out for the **Reflection Notes** and **Power Questions**, designed to give pause for debate and discussion. The **Reality Checks** mark where the law and practice part ways.

The playbook carries the argument, the evidence and the formations' own accounts, it explains why things work the way they do. It is accompanied by a workbook with cards, checklists, and templates to guide your organising activities.



SECTION 1:

UNDERSTAND THE TERRAIN

CURRENTLY, COMMUNITIES AND ACTIVISTS OFTEN RECEIVE LATE COMMUNICATION ABOUT BUDGET PROCESSES, COMMITTEE MEETINGS, AND DISTRICT OR PROVINCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND APPROVALS. MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS BLAME THE LACK OF COMMUNICATION AND SERVICE DELIVERY ON POLITICAL OR ADMINISTRATIVE BOTTLENECKS AND CONCERNED CITIZENS ARE SENT FROM ONE OFFICE TO THE NEXT WITH NO RESOLUTION TO THEIR NEEDS OR DEMANDS.

ACTIVISTS IN FORMATIONS LIKE MARRC OR THE CAPE CRISIS COMMITTEE KNOW THAT CONFUSION IS MADE WORSE IF COMMUNITIES DO NOT KNOW WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT, WHAT PROCESSES EXIST AND WHERE COMMUNITIES CAN INTERVENE.



► **REFLECTION NOTE**

Understanding how local government works and knowing the processes and steps to follow, does not mean that communities will be taken seriously or have their demands met. But, understanding the terrain, means that we know the rules of the game, know which players to choose and which squad formation to use on the pitch.

This section shares a brief outline of local government, detailing how decisions are made, where power sits and which public participation and planning processes communities can make use of.

1.1 WHAT IS LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

South Africa has three spheres of government:

- National
- Provincial and,
- Local

Although each sphere has its own powers and responsibilities, they are meant to work collaboratively in service of South Africans.

Local government is the sphere closest to people.

It has its own elected leadership, legal powers, responsibilities and resources and is responsible for our supply of water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal, streetlights, municipal roads, cemeteries and parks. Local government is responsible for firefighting, street trading, building regulations, land use and zoning. It governs rates, by-laws, local development and ward committees and is responsible for municipal budgets. National and provincial government are largely responsible for policing, social grants, housing, education and healthcare. Although some of these services are shared across the 3 spheres with the specific intention of ensuring more effective service delivery, spheres often use this cross over of functions as a way to shift responsibility and escape blame! Knowing where responsibility sits is essential to developing strategies for meeting local community needs.



► REFLECTION NOTE

One of the most important first organising questions is: "Are we talking to the right people?"

1.2 WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT DOES AND CONTROLS

Activists who form part of MARRC have been deeply disheartened by the conduct of councillors who, in council meetings do very little to protect the needs or drive the demands of those they are meant to be representing.

Local government is made up of municipalities, which are authorised to run/ govern a specific town, city, or area and deliver services to its residents.

There are 8 metropolitan municipalities in the major cities and 205 local municipalities, (towns and surrounding rural areas). Local municipalities are organised into and share some functions with the 44 district municipalities. In a metro, a single municipality may handle both water and refuse. Outside a metro, water might be a district function while refuse collection is a local function. Each municipality is subdivided into smaller areas known as wards.

The South African Constitution states that municipalities must provide accountable, participatory and democratic governance. They must involve communities in their affairs, deliver services, put basic needs first, and take responsibility for local development (we need to see growth in our communities). Local government is intended to play a fundamental role in undoing the apartheid legacy of unequal access to land, dignity and services.



► REMINDER

A local municipality usually handles the day-to-day municipal needs of a specific town or area, while a district municipality oversees several local municipalities and coordinates development and supports service delivery across the district.

1.3 WHO MAKES UP LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

A municipality has 3 main parts or structures:

- Community
- Political
- Administrative

The community is everyone who uses municipal services. It includes residents, ratepayers, civic organisations, advice offices, NGOs, labour organisations and, business associations. Our constitution mandates community as an integral part of local governance. Community members are not simply voters, they are democratic actors with the right to contribute to decisions, submit complaints, receive responses and demand open and fair council proceedings.

The political structure is made up of elected representatives, *ward councillors* who are elected directly by voters in a ward and *proportional representatives (PR) councillors* elected off party lists in proportion to

each party's share of the vote. Together *ward and PR councillors make up council*, the highest decision-making body in a municipality. It approves the budget, adopts the Integrated Development Plan, passes by-laws, elects the mayor and speaker and, oversees the municipal administration, hiring or firing all employed senior officials.

Ward councillors are meant to represent everyone in the ward, not just those who voted for them. In theory, they should be more accountable to communities than PR councillors. In practice, most ward councillors are also political party members whose election campaigns are funded by their parties. As a result, ward councillors are often more accountable to the needs of their party, than they are to the needs of their ward residents. This is one of the biggest tensions in local democracy and government, and it is one that communities feel directly.

The administration is made up of officials hired by council to implement council decisions and deliver services. The municipal manager is the most senior official and is responsible for the administration, financial management, following the law and responding to communities. Unlike councillors, officials are not elected but are employed based on skill and are meant to serve regardless of which party is in power. The reality is that all senior officials are hired or fired, by council.



► REFLECTION QUESTION

Communities are part of local government: which spaces do we have a right to belong in?

1.4 WHERE DOES POWER REALLY SIT?

TALES FROM THE GROUND: UMBRELLA CIVIC

In April 2025, Umbrella Civic held a public stakeholders' meeting and invited 2 councillors to join and engage directly with residents about issues raised in earlier meetings. Despite being given 3-weeks' notice, only one of the councillors attended, the other sent apologies minutes before the meeting was due to start. The councillor's response to concerns of accountability and transparency was experienced as defensive and community members felt talked down to.

For Umbrella Civic, the meeting revealed that although formal representatives may be present in the room their accountability often lies with party agendas and not with the residents in the room. It was a major turning point. The community realised they must stop wasting energy chasing councillors and must begin building their own power within their community and define their own way forward. (Section 3 of the handbook focusses on ways in which communities can do this!)

Where local government power sits, is not necessarily reflected in the official organogram. Although formal power sits with the council, the municipal manager, the committees and the departments, informal power often sits elsewhere, with party caucuses, regional party leaders, contractors, business interests, senior officials, traditional leaders, local gatekeepers and local media. A council meeting may be where the formal vote happens, but that decision is often shaped earlier, in a caucus, a committee, a mayoral office or a business relationship.

Communities also have power! It sits with organised residents, civic formations, advice offices, women's and youth groups, street committees, faith groups, workers, ratepayers and coalitions across wards.

To influence decision making, communities must map all three areas of power: who formally decides, who informally shapes decisions, and where does the community's own leverage lie?

TOOL

POWER QUESTIONS

Work out where power really sits before you decide where to push.

	QUESTION	WHAT IT HELPS YOU SEE
	What decision are we trying to change?	Names the issue clearly so everyone works on the same thing.
	Who makes the formal decision?	The person or structure that signs it off on paper.
	Who shapes that decision before it is made?	The caucus, official or interest that influences it behind the scenes.
	Who benefits from things staying as they are?	Reveals who will resist change, and why.
	Who carries the cost of the current situation?	Names who the issue is really affecting.
	Where do we already have a foot in the door?	Your existing leverage and allies.
	What would make the decision-maker act?	Turns the analysis into a plan.

The last question is the one that matters most.
Everything above it is there to help you answer it.

1.5 HOW ARE DECISIONS MADE IN COUNCIL?

Some decisions; budgets, IDPs, by-laws, changes to rates and taxes, loans and the employment of senior officials must be made by the full council. Others are prepared by the executive, committees or departments before they reach council.

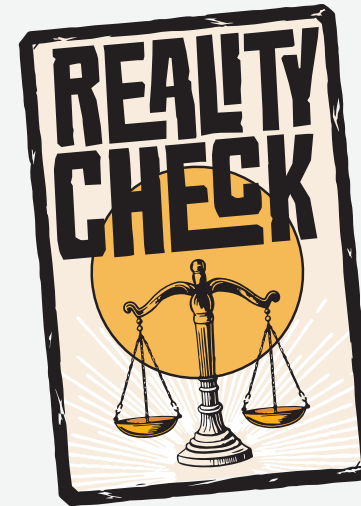
Councillors can only debate and vote on a matter if it appears on the agenda. Most matters on the agenda usually begin as a report, a proposal, a petition or a draft. If the majority support the matter, it becomes a resolution or a by-law. For communities, these are the useful questions:

- ▶ What is on the agenda?
- ▶ Which committee handled it?
- ▶ Who spoke to the issue?
- ▶ How did councillors vote?
- ▶ Did public participation take place?
- ▶ Does the final decision reflect the community's input?

1.6 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ... IT IS REAL?

MARRC has used almost every formal channel that exists, they attend monthly council meetings, sit in the MPAC (Municipal Public Accounts Committee), meet the mayor and senior managers and make submissions on the IDP and budget every year. Their assessment is blunt: in council meetings, the public can only observe; MPAC has become toothless and tariff, rates, IDP and budget consultations are nothing more than tick-box exercises to comply with the law. Irregularly, MARRC's submission on the 2024/25 annual report was not included in the Oversight Report that council approved.

The Cape Crisis Committee (CCC) raises similar concerns about participation. Meetings are held after decisions are already made and although concerns are recorded, they are never acted on. Their response has been to stop relying on invited spaces and build their own.



▶ REALITY CHECK

There is a difference between being informed and having power.

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

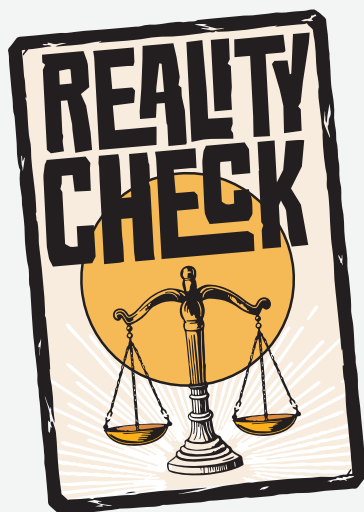
Public participation happens at different levels, from accessing information through to co-production.

Transparency is the entry level to participation. The municipality is responsible for providing minutes, budgets, declarations of interest and tender awards. Without this information, we cannot participate meaningfully.

The next level of participation includes all the channels communities use to raise grievances, including **complaints, petitions, and demonstrations**. The right to protest peacefully is one of the ways communities express demands when other channels have failed. It is legally protected and should not be treated as outside of democracy.

Consultation, the next level of participation occurs when municipalities invite input on a decision it is preparing, such as a draft IDP budget.

The fourth and most demanding level of participation is **co-production**, where communities work with the municipality to design, monitor and even implement local solutions.



► REALITY CHECK

A meeting is not automatically participatory. A public notice is not automatically inclusive. A consultation where the decision has already been made is not real participation.



► DEMOCRACY NUGGET

Participation is only meaningful when people are informed in time, the information is clear, those most affected are included, the municipality listens before deciding, and community input actually changes the outcome.

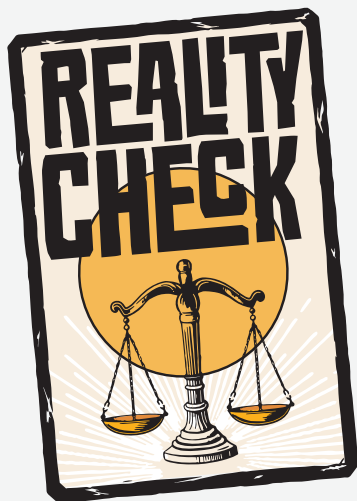
1.7 WARD COMMITTEES

Latifah Jacobs of CCC shares how in her experience, ward committees can vary completely from ward to ward, metro to metro and region to region. In some, members' input is taken seriously. In others, it is ignored. Communication from the councillor is inconsistent and councillors often don't update committee members about upcoming meetings.

Although committee members can request meetings with the councillor, there is no guarantee of a response.

At ward level, ward committees are meant to be a primary means for resident participation. Along with the ward councillor, they are responsible for the flow of information between the community and the municipality. Ward committees are supposed to keep residents informed about council matters, raise community concerns, identify ward priorities, recommend projects, support participation in the IDP and budget processes and, help document the ward's social and economic conditions. Ward committees do not make final municipal decisions. They are advisory structures that can make recommendations and shape what gets raised in municipal processes.

Each committee should have a maximum of 10 members, plus the ward councillor who chairs it. Members are elected by the community and represent different sectors or interests in the ward, such as business, churches, youth, civic organisations, women, people with disabilities, and other community groups. Together with the ward councillor, the committee helps identify needs that the municipality must address.



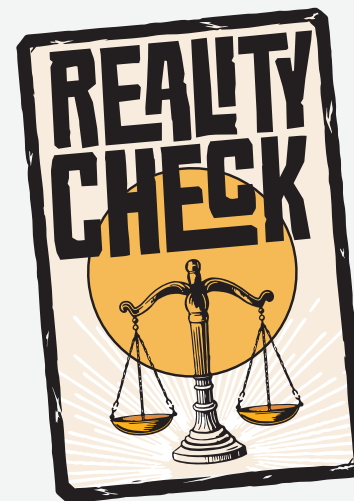
► REALITY CHECK

*South Africa has around 4,400 wards, each with a ward committee, which, on paper, means tens of thousands of residents have a formal role in municipalities but sadly, what is on **paper** is not necessarily reflected in **practice**!*

Although national guidance recommends that ward committees meet at least four times a year, each municipality has its own policy about how often ward committees meet and how ward committee members are elected.

It is our responsibility to know our municipality's ward committee policy, to check how often the committee is meant to meet and track whether it is doing so.

How often a ward committee meets tells us a lot about that committee and its councillor. If a ward committee is not meeting, not reporting back, not representing the broader community, or only serving party interests, communities can raise this with the Municipal Speaker's Office, submit a complaint, or petition the council to act.



► REALITY CHECK

Although the Speaker is responsible for ensuring that councillors follow the expected codes of conduct, community experience shows that the Speaker is often simply protecting political party's interests

Ward committees should be a powerful democratic space for community participation however the experiences of Umbrella Civic, CCC, MARRC, Ward 2 tell a different story. In some wards, members are not nominated or elected and instead of emerging from the community are set up by councillors and imposed on residents.

CCC claims that most civic education tools do not make it clear that ward committees are advisory committees with no direct authority over things like budgets or project implementation. Their effectiveness depends on relationships, access to information, political dynamics and the councillor's willingness to engage. *Getting a member from the community or your formation onto the committee is a start, not a victory.* Communities still have to stay informed, monitor commitments and hold both the councillor and the committee to account.

How effective a ward committee is, is also a reflection of how engaged a community is.

A ward committee can be hindered by political interference so it's critical that community formations honestly assess whether the ward committee in their area can be used, improved, contested or bypassed. If using the ward committees is not a viable or realistic structure for meeting community needs, formations can explore alternatives like Street Committees.



► **POWER QUESTION?**

Who really has the power to change the issue we are facing, and what will make them act?

1.8 THE PLANNING AND OVERSIGHT CYCLE

Municipalities follow an annual cycle of planning, budgeting, spending, monitoring, reviewing and adjusting. Two documents sit at the centre of this cycle: the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the municipal budget. The IDP is a plan detailing how a community’s service delivery needs are going to be met. The budget outlines the cost of implementing the plan. Community priorities will never be met if there is no plan or money assigned for implementation. **Community needs inform the IDP, the IDP informs the budget and together they lead to service delivery.** Understanding the cycle and it’s timing helps communities know when to act.

PHASE	TIMEFRAME	WHAT HAPPENS	
 PREPARATION	AUGUST TO SEPTEMBER	The mayor tables the IDP and budget process plan.	
 ANNUAL IDP REVIEW	SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER	Performance is reviewed and the public is consulted on needs and priorities.	
 BUDGET AND COSTING	NOVEMBER TO FEBRUARY	Projects are costed and revenue policies drafted.	
 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION	MARCH TO APRIL	Draft IDP and budget published for comment.	
 FINAL ADOPTION	MAY TO JUNE	Council approves the IDP and budget before 1 July.	
 IMPLEMENTATION	JULY ONWARD	Funded projects are delivered and monitored.	

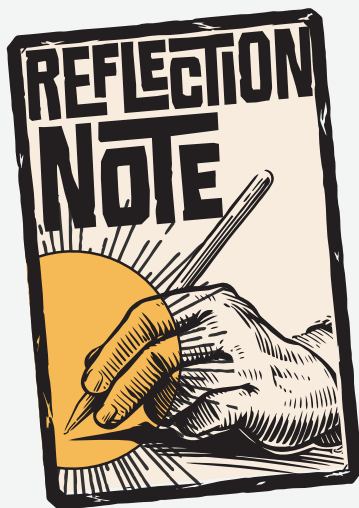
The following documents are important organising tools that help communities track promises through to delivery.

- The Process Plan (when and how participation will happen),
- The IDP (the five-year development plan, reviewed yearly),
- The Budget (the financial plan),
- The Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP), (1-year action plan showing what will be delivered, where, when and by whom),
- The monthly, quarterly and mid-year reports (track spending and performance)
- The Annual Report (a review of what the municipality actually did)
- The Oversight Report (council’s response to the annual report)

A tactical point to consider is that it is much easier to influence the budget before the official consultation window. Departments prepare the budget between August and December and by the time the draft is published for comment in March, much has already been decided.

TALES FROM THE GROUND: MARRC

Instead of waiting to comment on a budget after it has been drafted, MARRC's experiences call on us to change how data enters the system in the first place. They recommend we rely on tools like Community-Based Monitoring and Asset-Based Community Development that promote reliance on communities' knowledge and expertise to feed real-time, ward-level evidence into the IDP and budget process. These tools can also be used to provide consistent feedback into the local government planning cycle. MARRC has secured buy-in from the IDP manager, but know that they will need support from the mayor and the wider municipality to implement this strategy.



► REFLECTION NOTE

Buy-in from a single official is not an institutional commitment!

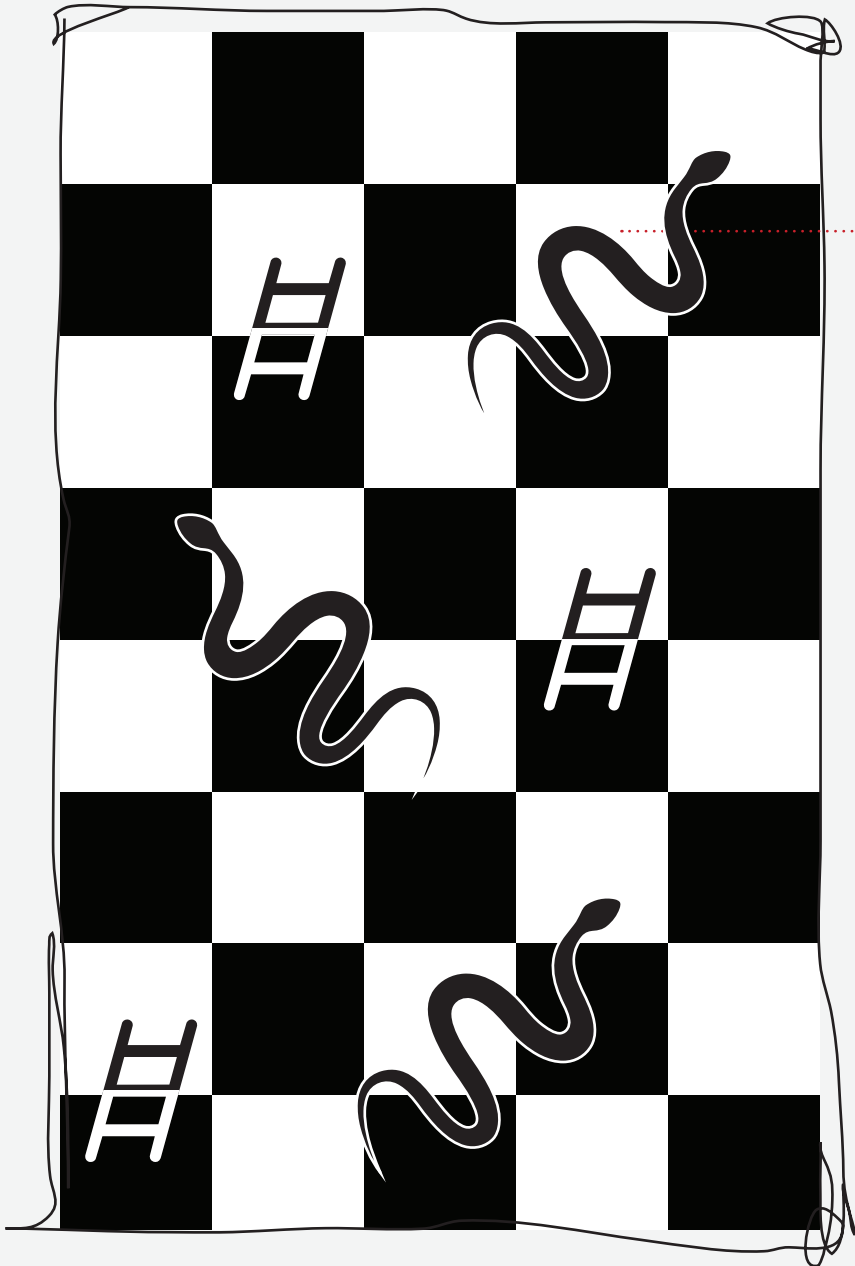
1.9 COMMUNITIES AND THE PLANNING CYCLE – HOW DOES THIS AFFECT US?

Understanding the terrain is not the end goal, it's a means to assist communities to decide where to act, who must answer, when to intervene before decisions are finalised, how to challenge tick-box consultations and where to apply pressure.



► DEMOCRACY NUGGET

The law says local government must be participatory, responsive and accountable. Many communities experience it as distant, confusing, captured or unresponsive. The work is to organise inside that gap: to understand the system well enough to use it, pressure it, and change how it responds.



SECTION 2:

**KNOW YOUR
TOOLS**

“INFORMATION SHOULD NOT ONLY BE AVAILABLE TO CABALS!”

(Leader, South Durban Advice Office)

THIS SECTION SETS OUT THE TOOLS AT COMMUNITIES’ DISPOSAL; IT COVERS THE INFORMATION YOU ARE ENTITLED TO WITHOUT HAVING TO ASK, HOW TO REQUEST THE REST, HOW TO FOLLOW THE MONEY THROUGH DISCLOSURES AND TENDERS AND HOW TO FIND OUT WHOSE FUNDING IS SHAPING POLITICAL PARTY DECISIONS AT WARD LEVEL.

THE DECISIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARE GUIDED BY INFORMATION THAT BY LAW, BELONGS TO THE PUBLIC. THE CHALLENGE IS **HOW TO ACCESS AND USE THIS INFORMATION.**



► **DEMOCRACY NUGGET**

Information on its own changes nothing; a document sitting in a community’s hands is not power. It becomes power when it is read, understood, shared and used to make a demand that an organised community is ready to back. CCC learned this the hard way: individual complaints, even when backed by evidence, were ignored or neutralised. What shifted things was when evidence was combined with mobilisation and sustained pressure.

The information tools unpacked in this section lay out a pathway to organising and mobilising.

2.1 WHAT YOU ARE ENTITLED TO WITHOUT ASKING

Municipalities are required by law to make the following documents available to the public at municipal offices, in libraries, and on the municipal website:

- Integrated Development Plan
- Annual budget and related documents
- Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan
- All by-laws
- Annual Report
- Quarterly reports tabled by the mayor
- Register of all bids received for tenders (with each bidder’s name, the amount and their BBBEE status)

- ▶ Notices of council meetings with dates and venues
- ▶ Performance agreements with senior staff
- ▶ Service delivery agreements and contracts for tenders awarded

These documents should be shared within a few days of being tabled in council. You do not need to make a formal request for any of these; they are yours. Failure to make these documents available is not a favour being withheld, it's a contravention of a legal obligation!

When documents are not available you can follow this path of escalation:

- ▶ Visit the municipal offices and ask for the information officer or the municipal manager,
- ▶ Ask your ward councillor or ward committee members, (a councillor can also be asked to obtain a document by raising a question in a public council meeting).
- ▶ Contact the Speaker's Office
- ▶ Contact the provincial or national treasury.

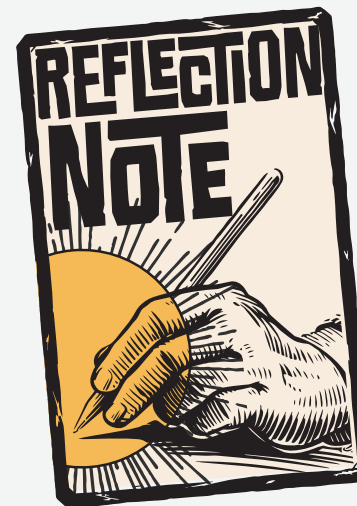


▶ REFLECTION QUESTION

What demands must we stop treating as if we need permission to raise?

2.2 PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT (PAIA): REQUESTING WHAT THEY HOLD

When a resident arrives at the South Durban Community Advice Centre (SDCAC) having already tried all the formal channels to address a problem without resolution, the team steps into assist. They gather the necessary documentation and evidence, identify the office that is actually supposed to assist and support the resident to get that office to do its job.

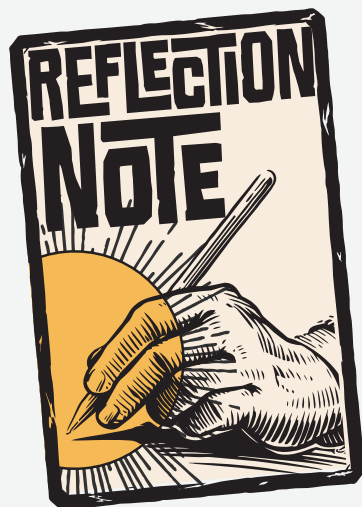


▶ REFLECTION NOTE

Information becomes useful at the exact point it is attached to a person, an office and a demand.

The Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) grants anyone the right to request information that is not available. A PAIA request can be made to any government body for any record. It can also be used to access information from a private body for a record you need in order to protect a constitutional right. The act sets timeframes for the municipality to respond and outlines a process to follow when they refuse.

Despite its clear mandate, the PAIA is often resisted. Municipalities miss deadlines, claim records do not exist or simply don't respond. In Midrand, a group of workers requested the minutes of a meeting in which a former mayor had made promises to them. The municipality replied with a sworn affidavit stating no such records existed. Sadly, this means we cannot rely on official records alone.¹



► REFLECTION NOTE

Record meetings on your phones and keep your own written notes and minutes, so you have an independent record to compare and challenge municipalities when theirs (conveniently) goes missing.

2.3 FOLLOWING THE MONEY: DISCLOSURES AND TENDERS

Corruption at local level centres around who gets paid and who decides who gets paid. The **register of financial interests** and the **tender process** are 2 tools that communities can use to “follow that money!”

Councillors must declare all their financial interests in writing within 60 days of being elected and must update this information annually. The **register of financial interest** includes a declaration of shares, directorships, partnerships, property, other business interests and employment. Councillors

must also declare gifts worth more than R1000 and record them in a gift register that names the giver, the value, and the relationship.

Knowing our councillor's interests is critical for transparency and helps us understand what they stand to gain from decisions made in council. The Auditor-General found that the majority of municipalities awarded contracts to companies in which councillors, their family members or municipal employees had a financial interest.

The **tender process** is designed for the public to be able to track all contracts awarded. Once a tender closes, the tender box must be opened in public and observers may ask for the name and amount of each bid to be read out. The full bid register must be posted on the municipal website within 10 days. Councillors are not allowed to participate in or even observe the meetings that decide who gets a tender. Anyone convicted of fraud or corruption or who failed to deliver on a government contract in the past five years is barred from contracting with the state.



► DEMOCRACY NUGGET

*The public **Database of Restricted Suppliers**, kept by National Treasury lists companies and individuals banned from doing business with the state. A community can check an awarded supplier against it.*

The lesson is not that tools and public participation spaces are useless. It is that documentation, even years of it, gets filed and forgotten unless it is paired with organised follow-through and public pressure.

2.4 TALES FROM THE GROUND, TOOLS IN ACTION: THE GLENMORE SOCIAL AUDIT

The rural community of Glenmore, in the local municipality of Ngqushwa, Eastern Cape demonstrates the tools in action!

In 2016, the municipality announced a R3 million upgrade to the community's sports facility. A contractor was appointed, the work was declared complete, full payment was made, and a certificate of completion was issued. The workmanship was so poor that the facility was a danger to public safety and had to be closed.

The community decided to investigate. Supported by Afesis-Corplan and the Social Audit Network, they obtained the tender documents and brought in built-environment engineers to physically verify the work. The engineers found major deviations from the contract and estimated the worth of the work completed at R1.6 million, not R3 million! The community invited the municipal manager and the mayor to a public hearing to face the findings. Neither came; the empty chair at the hearing spoke volumes. Glenmore did not stop, they marched to the municipality and handed over a petition to the municipal manager and the Speaker. In September 2018, the municipality announced a new tender to fix the substandard work.

Glenmore is the whole pathway in one story: access the documents you are entitled to, gather your own evidence, bring in expertise where you need it, present it publicly, and when officials refuse to engage, escalate with organised community pressure.

2.5 POLITICAL PARTY FUNDING AT WARD LEVEL

Political parties receive funding, much of it from private sources, and that funding shapes who gets access and what decisions get made. Although this feels like a national issue, it lands locally, in your ward. A party that depends on a particular donor or contractor will protect that relationship, and that protection shows up in who wins tenders and whose concerns get heard.

A practical move for local organisations during elections is to shed light on party funding.

Make use of the IEC reports of private funding to political parties. Ask your ward candidates what actions they'll take to ensure transparency - will they declare their financial interests, make private funding visible, keep their distance from the tender processes? The point is not to win a national argument about party funding, it's to make candidates account, in front of their community.

2.6 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COMMUNITIES/ FORMATIONS?

Information and evidence are important tools but as the work of MARRC, the Cape Crisis Committee and the community of Glenmore shows, it's only when they are used by an organised community that they lead to transformation. Information is read and shared; evidence is paired with pressure. Disclosure registers and tender records are just the beginning of a demand, not the end.



► DEMOCRACY NUGGET

The law gives communities a long list of rights to information. In practice, much of it is hard to get, easy to ignore, and quietly withheld. The work is to treat information as the start of an organising process and to keep pushing until the people who hold it, answer for what it reveals.

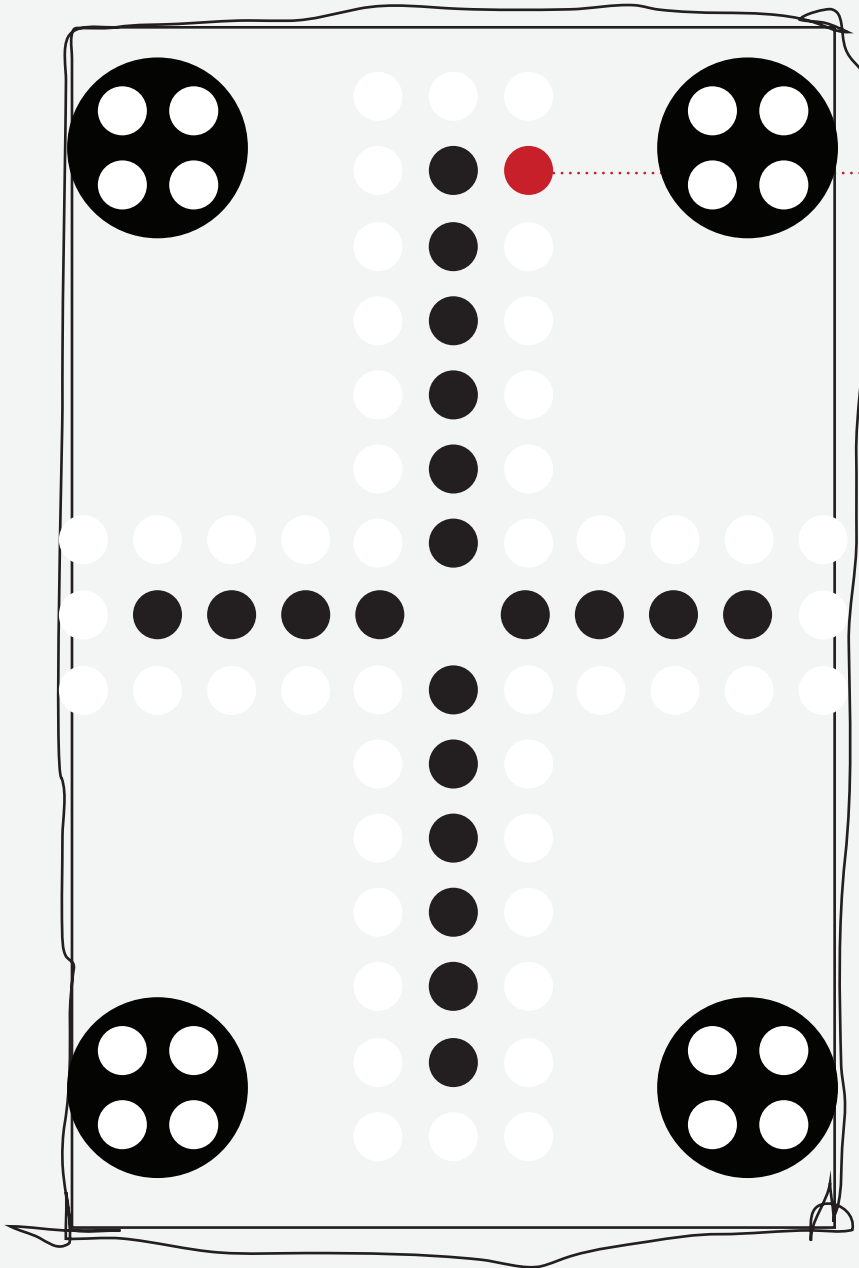
Some accountability problems can be handled through information requests, petitions, council meetings, ward committees or public pressure.

Others may need more formal escalation. If a municipality ignores a complaint, refuses to share public information, makes an unfair decision, fails to act on corruption, or fails to fulfil its basic duties, communities may need to pursue legal and institutional redress. For more detailed guidance, see **Appendix A: Accountability and Redress Ladder** and **Appendix B: Legal Hooks for Municipal Accountability**.



► POWER QUESTION?

What is the one piece of information that would change your fight, and who's counting on you not having it?

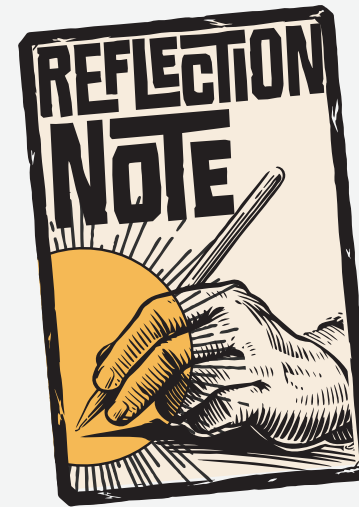


SECTION 3:

**USE THE ELECTION
MOMENT TO BUILD
YOUR POWER**

THE 2026 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS ARE SO MUCH MORE THAN A VOTING DAY, THEY ARE AN ORGANISING MOMENT, WITH A VERY SMALL WINDOW. COME ELECTIONS, THE VERY PEOPLE WHO USUALLY IGNORE COMMUNITIES, WANT SOMETHING FROM US ... THEIR NEED FOR OUR VOTE, IS OUR LEVERAGE! A COMMUNITY THAT IS ORGANISED, CAN SET THE TERMS OF THE NEXT 5 YEARS BEFORE A SINGLE VOTE IS CAST.

INFORMED ALMOST ENTIRELY BY THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF THE FORMATIONS, THIS IS THE HEART OF THE PLAYBOOK. THE MOMENT WHERE, UNDERSTANDING THE TERRAIN AND KNOWING THE TOOLS, A COMMUNITY STOPS ASKING TO BE HEARD AND STARTS TELLING CANDIDATES WHAT IT REQUIRES.



► REFLECTION NOTE

A vision only becomes a demand when there is an organised formation behind it willing to put the pressure on to hold someone to account. (Ward 2, Elliot)

In this section, we focus on creating community manifestos as a means to mobilise your community around shared demands and use the elections to make candidates answer to you.

3.1 FROM FRUSTRATION TO A MANDATE

Frustration changes nothing; communities have been frustrated for thirty years.

In Section 2, we shared a pivotal moment in Umbrella Civic's organising strategy. After being "stood up" by their councillor 15 minutes before a stakeholder meeting, the community realised it was wasting time and energy waiting on people who answered to political parties and not ward residents. What matters is what they did next to reclaim their power!

They did not hold yet another meeting to demand their councillors do better. Instead, they made an informed, democratic decision to stop begging for assistance and re-imagine what they wanted their community to be. They began by identifying the interconnected issues they could tackle without the support of their councillor. Then, through consultative workshops, they drafted a clear mandate aimed squarely at the coming election. Their mandate defined exactly what they expect from ward councillors and ward committee members.

Umbrella Civic demonstrates how we can leverage the upcoming elections. Instead of waiting to review the manifestos of political parties, we can create our own community manifestos and lead the way in setting the agenda for our ward candidates.

3.2 BUILDING THE POWER: THE WORK BEHIND THE MANIFESTO

Before a community can make demands of a candidate, it has to know what it wants and be able to hold together well enough to act collectively.

The five formations are clear that this internal work is not one of the small steps to organising. It is the organising.

Deciding what to take on. Not every issue can become a campaign. When an issue is raised, Umbrella Civic's practise is to open discussion for feedback and call for lead volunteers. This is how their public toilets subcommittee grew, with volunteers from each area assessing inaccessible toilets and preparing a proposal for the ward budget. The organisation's success depends on community participation. If there is

not enough motivation from the broader community and responsibility for driving the issue would fall solely on the executive to carry, they will not pursue it. Knowing what not to take on is also part of building power.

Making decisions together. Disagreement in multi-constituency formations is inevitable, what matters, is how they're resolved. Umbrella Civic has created a written decision rule, a 50+1 policy. Significant or divisive decisions go to the full membership, who receive the proposal, the rationale, the implications, and an opportunity to vote on it. Urgent decisions are voted on via a Whatsapp poll, all others, through in-person meetings. Votes happen within a clear time limit, usually 24 to 48 hours and only require a simple majority. This agreed on methodology, protects participation, gives structure to disagreement, sets time boundaries, and prevents a few voices from holding everything up. Formations don't need to follow this rule but having a decision-making rule is essential.

Safety, solidarity and staying power. Organising at ward level can be slow, and in some places, dangerous. Quick wins won't sustain formations through slow stretches. Ward 2 found that commitment was held through their community visioning process. This process brought together people who would not normally gather to dream about how they want their ward to look in 10 years' time. The process allowed everyone to feel heard and gave young people in particular, an opportunity to strengthen their confidence and leadership. This is the real fuel of pre-election organising: belonging, voice, and a shared vision of what you are building.

3.3 THE COMMUNITY MANIFESTO

A community manifesto is a document the community writes together before the election.

It is not a party document nor a politician's promise, it belongs to the ward.

A community manifesto does **three things**:

- ▶ Names the **priorities** that matter most in the ward.
- ▶ **Sets the standards** the community expects of its councillor, including where they should live, how they should communicate, and how they should conduct themselves.
- ▶ Defines the **accountability measures** the community requires, including how often the councillor must report back, and how residents will be kept informed across the five-year term.

Appendix C: Community Manifesto Q&A unpacks the process for creating a manifesto.

Appendix D: Community Manifesto Template offers a draft structure that formations can use to create their own manifesto.

TALES FROM THE GROUND, TOOLS IN ACTION: UMBRELLA CIVIC CREATES A COMMUNITY MANIFESTO

In April 2026, Umbrella Civic held a ward-wide meeting, asking resident representatives from Woodstock, Walmer Estate, Salt River and Observatory to answer these four questions:

1. **What are the qualities of a good councillor?**
2. **What are their top three most pressing concerns/priorities?**
3. **How often should their ward councillor engage with them, using what channels?**
4. **How should a councillor be held accountable?**

The same questions were posed in a 2nd meeting held by the Woodstock Residents Association. Discussions in a 3rd engagement in May 2026, reimagined a democratic ward committee election in which residents (not councillors) allocated priorities to portfolio seats. The key points from each of these three meetings were consolidated into a 3-page draft manifesto.

Umbrella Civic's manifesto offers concrete ways for communities to monitor progress and hold councillors accountable using a simple scorecard to track agreed-on priorities. The councillor is expected to share updates, and the community assesses whether progress is adequate. Written grievances must receive a response within two weeks. If grievances held by a substantial portion of the community are not adequately addressed, the councillor must agree to step down. This commitment to voluntary resignation is the seed of the **Right to Recall**, explored further in Part 2.

Creating the manifesto was not a seamless following of the template. When the draft was sent back to the community, members who had not attended the meetings felt underrepresented. Rather than paper over this, Umbrella Civic honestly acknowledges this shortfall in the manifesto and commit to using a door-to-door approach to widen participation.



► DEMOCRACY NUGGET

A manifesto that is honest about whose voices are still missing is stronger, not weaker, than one that pretends to speak for everyone.

3.4 A GENERAL GUIDE TO THE MANIFESTO PROCESS

Communities do not need big budgets or outside experts to create a manifesto. The process relies on what most formations already have: organised people, communication channels, and the will to follow through.

It is best to complete these 5 steps before the formal candidate campaigns begin, when candidates are most willing to listen and commit.

1. **Organise and spread the word:** reach out to local groups, street committees, churches, sports clubs and individuals through whatever channels the community already uses.
2. **Survey your ward:** ask residents what their biggest problems are, what they expect of a councillor, and how they want to be kept informed. Survey online for those with access, and door-to-door for those without.

3. **Share the findings:** take the results to open meetings and smaller group discussions and keep discussing until there is genuine agreement on the manifesto content. Deliberately include pensioners, women, young people and those who do not usually speak up.
4. **Draft the manifesto:** assign a small group to write the manifesto using the survey and the discussions, then share it widely for comment and changes before it is finalised.
5. **Hold a public signing event.** Invite all candidates to a candidate forum to listen to and commit to the manifesto in front of the community.

If your community already has a charter, a constitution, or findings from past consultations, use these as your starting point. Nobody needs to begin from scratch.



**SPREAD
THE WORD**



**SURVEY
YOUR WARD**



**SHARE
FINDINGS**



**DRAFT
MANIFESTO**



**PUBLIC
SIGNING**

3.5 SETTING THE STANDARD FOR CANDIDATES

In their community vision, Ward 2 Elliot states clearly how they will measure their candidates. The leaders they want must:

- ▶ Be from Elliot and know Elliot.
- ▶ Understand the good and the bad in the community.
- ▶ Know what the people want and how to communicate with them.
- ▶ Understand that their power lies in the people.
- ▶ Keep their word, and report back.
- ▶ Be someone who can be sent by the community and come back not just with an answer, but with an explanation of why things are happening the way they are.

The last point highlights the difference between a candidate who simply reports and one who will take account. Setting community standards in advance is how a formation/community defines the conditions of their support for candidates and takes the lead in setting their own agenda.

3.6 PRESENTING AND SIGNING THE MANIFESTO: A CANDIDATE FORUM AND A PUBLIC PLEDGE.

Before the last local government elections MARCC invited all candidates (party and independent) to a meeting in which they publicly presented the standards the community had set. Instead of waiting to be invited to hear candidates' manifestos, MARRC set the agenda, on the communities' terms.

Based on their success, these actions are worth repeating:

- ▶ **Find the right people in each party to engage, brief and set the criteria for how the event will run.**
- ▶ **Invite every party contesting.**
- ▶ **Invite the IEC to explain the voting process.**

- ▶ **Give each party a time slot to speak to their manifesto, followed by a question-and-answer session.**
- ▶ **Livestream the event on Facebook so people could send questions from home.**

A lesson they learnt the hard way is that parties might bus in their own supporters. Making sure that residents are seated before parties arrive can help the community manage a potentially rowdy room.

The power of the candidate forum lies in how it reverses the usual choreography.

Instead of residents going to a party rally to be addressed candidates ... the candidates come into a community space to be questioned by residents.

When a candidate signs the community manifesto in front of the ward, they make a public written commitment to its priorities, standards, and accountability measures, including the resignation commitment. The signed pledge with the candidate gives the manifesto its teeth! Candidates are free to refuse but the refusal becomes part of the public record the community votes on. In a ward where people are organised and paying attention, refusing to sign is a costly position to take.

This sharp distinction drawn by MARRC belongs in every formation's thinking:

- ▶ A **party manifesto** is written at party headquarters, often without input even from its own members. It is top-down, and frequently pie-in-the-sky.
- ▶ A **ward/community manifesto** is the opposite. It speaks to ward issues, sets out how the councillor should function. It can be turned into a set of key performance indicators that the community uses to evaluate the councillor.

3.7 WHAT IF NO CANDIDATE SIGNS?

If one or two candidates refuse to sign the community manifesto, they make their position visible, and the community can vote accordingly.

Even in the harder case, when all candidates refuse to sign, the community still gains clarity: a clear, public record of where each candidate stands against an agenda written by the community. That record does not disappear.

It becomes the starting point for organising over the next five years and forms the basis the refinement of a manifesto that is tighter and harder to ignore, at the next election.

3.8 VOTING DAY AND THE DAYS AFTER

A community-created manifesto allows residents to do something most never do; set the terms of an election term before it begins.

It's not the end of the work, instead it marks the start of holding councillors to account.

A signed pledge is a written record of exactly what a councillor commits to. It is the community's guiding reference for the next five years. The councillor cannot simply disappear, because the community holds the commitment and can return to it at any time. How a community uses

the record includes:

- ▶ A scorecard to measure progress against the priorities the community set.
- ▶ Report-back meetings where the councillor answers to progress made on the manifesto commitments.
- ▶ An oversight group that tracks progress between meetings.

If a councillor breaks the pledge, the community calls for them to step down in accordance with the contract agreement. How to use the pledge after the election is detailed in Part 2 of the playbook.



► **DEMOCRACY NUGGET**

A manifesto a councillor signs and then ignores has no legal force on its own. Its power is public and organised. A councillor who breaks a signed, witnessed commitment will face a motivated, well-documented community at the next election. In a ward that is paying attention, that is a real consequence.



► **POWER QUESTION?**

What would our community require of anyone who wants our vote, and are we organised enough to make them accountable for it?

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

BEFORE THE VOTE, BUILD THE POWER.

Part One of the playbook focusses on the work communities can do before the election.

It has moved from understanding the terrain, to knowing which tools we can use and ended with how to build a contract that candidates must answer to.

The vote is not the finish line! The message is clear, communities do not have to and must not wait quietly for election day. Organising must happen before.

We are part of local government. We hold the right to participate, question, demand and hold power to account. If we understand who holds power, where decisions are made, which documents matter, what information we are entitled to and how to turn frustration into shared demands we can enter public processes knowing that we are not outsiders asking for permission.

A community manifesto, a candidate forum, a public pledge or a signed manifesto only becomes powerful when there is an organised community behind it. With organisation these documents move beyond paper tools to become memory, evidence and pressure. They are our record of what was promised, by whom and outline our next steps.

The 2026 Local Government Elections open a small but important window that does not stay open long. Our task is to use it before it closes: to define community priorities, set standards for representatives, demand public commitments and build the structures that will remain long after the electioneering posters come down.

PART 2 OF THE PLAYBOOK BEGINS WHERE ELECTION DAY ENDS.

It asks what communities do after a councillor is elected and the day-to-day governance of the new term begins.

Participatory democracy does not end with the vote. It begins when communities organise enough power to make the vote answer to us.

APPENDICES: WHEN YOU NEED TO GO DEEPER

The main sections of this playbook focus on helping communities understand the terrain, use available tools, and build power during the election moment. The appendices offer additional guidance for escalating issues, identifying legal routes and determining which institution to approach when local government fails to respond.

These appendices are not a replacement for legal advice. They are practical guides to help formations decide what questions to ask, where to start, and where to go next.

- ▶ **Appendix A:** Community Manifesto Q&A
- ▶ **Appendix B:** Community Manifesto Template

QUICK LINKS

- ▶ Find your ward councillor
- ▶ Find municipal boundaries and ward delimitation information
- ▶ Find basic information about any municipality
- ▶ Find official municipal contact details
- ▶ Understand municipal finances in simple language
- ▶ More about private political party funding



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