

Delivering Services: Challenges to the implementation of leadership mandates in local government¹

By Kevin Foster and Nazreen Kola ²

Many municipalities in South Africa have encountered difficulties in sustained service delivery, face increasing debt and political and administrative instability. The Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), Dr Zweli Mkhize, recently identified 55 municipalities as being dysfunctional³. A previous minister in the same portfolio, Pravin Gordhan, had indicated in 2014 that a third of the country's municipalities were doing well, a third had the potential to do well and a third were dysfunctional⁴. Many local governments struggle to realise their mandates.

The Local Government SETA has recognised this challenge to local government and embarked on a research project with Palmer Development Group (PDG) to examine the challenges facing local government councillors in achieving their mandates and improving governance in municipalities. The project examines the political-administrative interface, the level of expertise and experience councillors have and the pressures that they face from their parties and communities.

The last comprehensive review of the political-administrative interface at local government level in South Africa was the 2009 State of Local Government report, produced by CoGTA and the Community Law Centre (now the Dullah Omar Institute)⁵. The review identified a lack of political leadership and patronage as recurring themes in local government, as well as an incoherent reporting framework that created weakened institutional and organisational abilities in municipalities. Political instability, political interference and unstable governance were also identified as factors contributing to service delivery failures, with ill-defined roles and responsibilities between councillors and municipal managers leading to fractious working relationships in local government.

The study also found that a lack of skills in the leadership of councils was also creating problems, leading to ineffective supervision of municipal administrations, and an inability to hold administrations to account.

As part of the LGSETA's 2018 research project, PDG has tested the current state of some of these 2009 findings through an online survey administered to members of executive committees and mayoral committees throughout the country. Eighty leadership councillors responded to the survey providing

¹ This article presents interim findings of the Local Government SETA's research project into the challenges facing local government leadership councillors in achieving their mandate and good governance.

² Kevin Foster and Nazreen Kola are both associates of Palmer Development Group (PDG), the consultant appointed to undertake the LGSETA's research project.

³ Mkhize Z (2018) *The ANC shall turn municipalities around*. Daily Maverick, 26 March 2018. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-03-26-the-anc-shall-turn-municipalities-around/#.WthWhohubcc>

⁴ Quintal G (2014) *Third of municipalities doing well: Gordhan*. IOL, 18 September 2014. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/third-of-municipalities-doing-well-gordhan-1753143>

⁵ De Visser J, Steytler N and May A (2009) *The Quality of Local Democracies: A study into the functionality of municipal governance arrangements*. Report by the Community Law Centre for the South African Local Government Association and the German Agency for Development Cooperation. Community Law Centre: Cape Town.

insight into the current levels of capability, accountability and responsiveness in the political and administrative leadership in local government.

Skills and experience

Looking firstly at skills and experience, there was evidence that, despite continuity and experience in council leadership being identified as important factors in improving council performance in 2009 and in research conducted by PDG in 2013⁶, over 40% of responding leadership councillors had been a councillor in local government for 5 years or less. Over 30% had been councillors for less than two years (Figure 1). This suggests little continuity in council leadership and the lack of experience and institutional knowledge remain significant challenges.

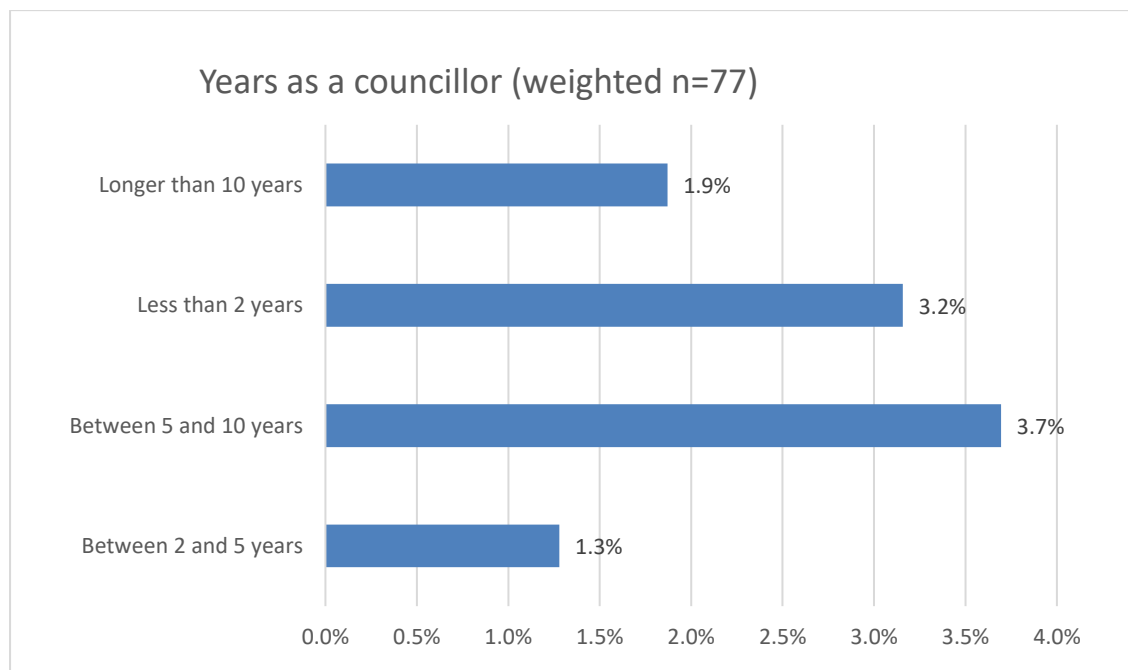


Figure 1: Length of time leadership councillors have been a member of council, weighted to account for difference response rates across provinces.

In terms of skills, of the responding leadership councillors, over a third of councillors had a matric or less as their highest level of education, whereas less than a third had a bachelor's degree or higher. Just under a quarter of the respondents had been a councillor for five years or fewer and had a matric or less as their highest level of education (Figure 2). For this cohort of leadership councillors, it is likely to prove very difficult to oversee their administration, with limited experience and education. Limited experience and education are somewhat ameliorated by training. Among respondents, 92% received some form of training on being a councillor in local government, mostly from SALGA.

⁶ PDG for COGTA (2013) Research study into the lessons learnt from, and the impact of, linking contracts of Municipal Managers to a municipal electoral term

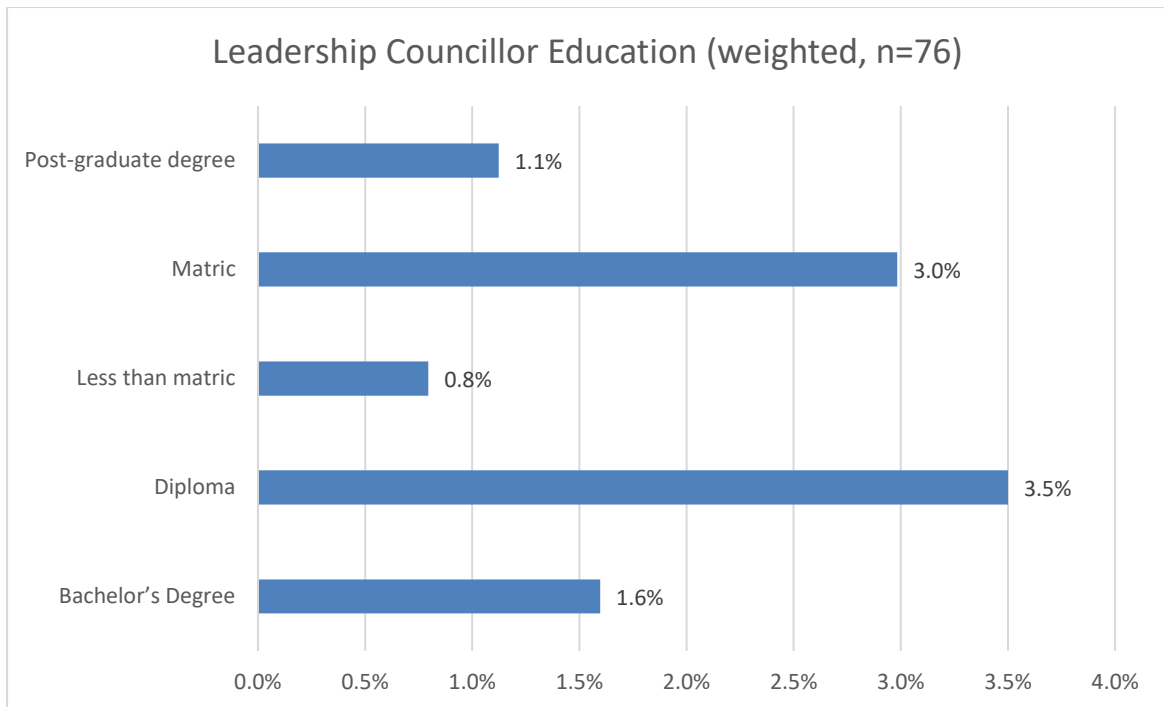


Figure 2: Leadership councillor's highest level of education, weighted to account for difference response rates across provinces.

Party interference and stability

Looking at the political-administrative interface, over 70% of responding councillors felt that they had a good relationship with senior managers in their municipalities. However, nearly a quarter of respondents indicated that they had no written terms of reference for their role as a leadership councillor, a requirement in terms of the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000. About one in five indicated that they had no written delegations for their executive role on council. This raises the concern that the line between oversight of administrative affairs and interference in administrative affairs is potentially not as clear as it should be. Just over 10% of respondents had neither a terms of reference or written delegations in place.

Further to this, nearly one quarter of leadership councillors feel that their party instructs them to act in a way that interferes with the delivery of their mandate (Figure 3). The most common type of interference identified was the party seeking preferential treatment for wards of strategic importance within the municipality; 16% of respondents identified this as a problem.

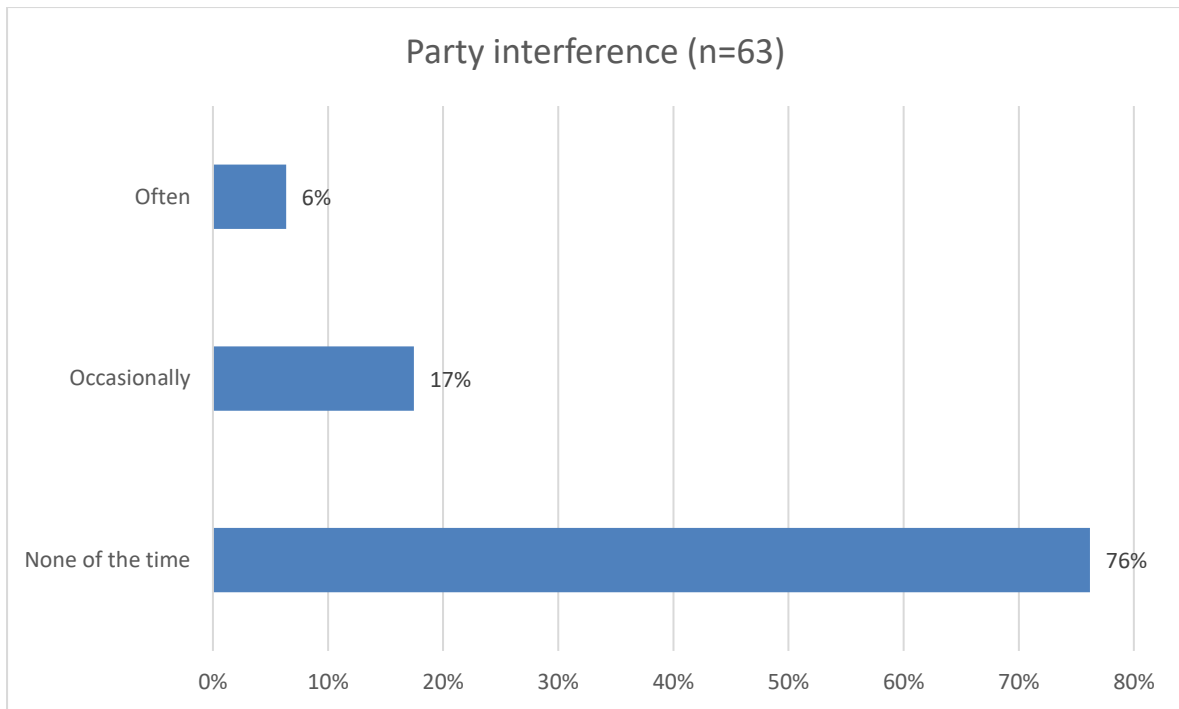


Figure 3: Councillors experiencing interference from their party in implementing their mandate

Most leadership councillors felt that there was sufficient political stability in their councils to achieve their mandate, but nearly one quarter did not think their council was stable enough. Just over one third of respondents felt that their municipal administration was not stable enough to achieve its mandate (Figure 4), with over half saying that filling vacancies in their administration is a problem. Nearly 20% of the time, council stability and administrative stability were both a problem; which is to be expected. Previous research, confirmed by stakeholder interviews for this project, shows that political stability is an important driver of administrative stability. Skilled and experienced officials are able to move to more stable environments when political instability interferes with their ability to do their work.

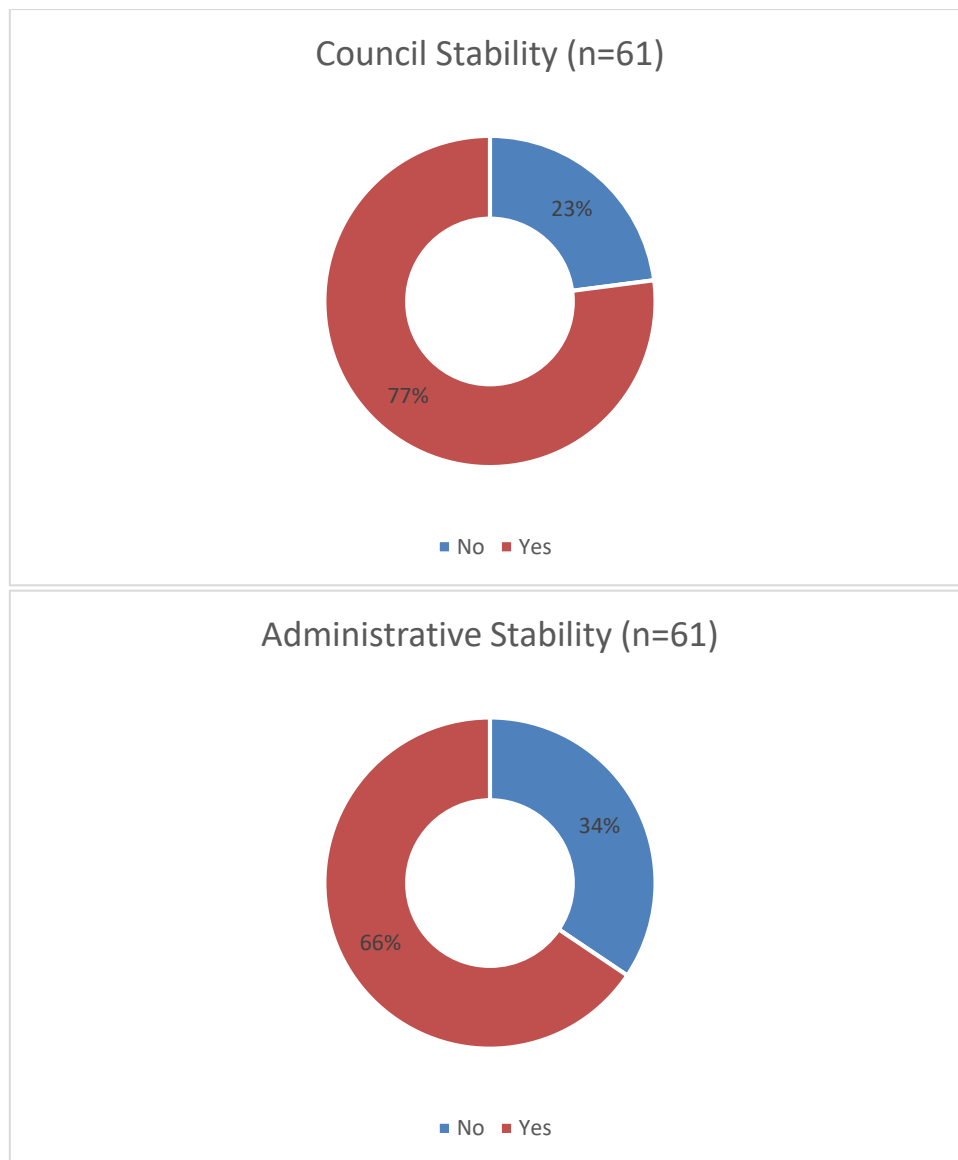


Figure 4: Are councils or administration stable enough to achieve mandates?

Conclusions

Skills and experience remain a challenge in local government leadership. Despite the opportunity over the last ten years to build experience in councils, councillor turnover remains high with many in leadership having less than five years of experience on council. Political parties need to find more councillors committed to a long-term career in local government.

Training is being provided, mainly by SALGA and seems to be reaching most councillors, which will help ameliorate the challenges. However, despite this, it will still be difficult for councillors to *hit the ground running* in their portfolios. Beyond the technical skills required, it is also important that councillors are adept at stakeholder management, have passion for serving the people, have high levels of ethics and integrity, and have a longer-term vision for their portfolio.

For a constructive and functional political-administrative interface, trust, mutual respect and a clear understanding of the differing roles and boundaries of leadership councillors, the municipal manager and senior managers in the administration, are not only essential but critical.

There remains a need to ensure that all councillors have defined roles in terms of reference and delegations and for political parties to allow councillors to implement their mandates. The consequence of neglecting this are low levels of political and administrative stability. It will be impossible for councillors to achieve their mandates, without stable administrations to implement them.

References

De Visser J, Steytler N and May A (2009) The Quality of Local Democracies: A study into the functionality of municipal governance arrangements. Report by the Community Law Centre for the South African Local Government Association and the German Agency for Development Cooperation. Community Law Centre: Cape Town.

Mkhize Z (2018) The ANC shall turn municipalities around. Daily Maverick, 26 March 2018.
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-03-26-the-anc-shall-turn-municipalities-around/#.WthWhohubcc>

PDG (2013) Research study into the lessons learnt from, and the impact of, linking contracts of Municipal Managers to a municipal electoral term. Report prepared for the Department of Co-operative Governance.

Quintal G (2014) Third of municipalities doing well: Gordhan. IOL, 18 September 2014.
<https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/third-of-municipalities-doing-well-gordhan-1753143>