

Bridging the Communication Divide: Strengthening Municipal Communication to Deepen Public Participation and Trust in Local Government

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Executive Summary

Effective communication is central to participatory, transparent, and accountable local governance. However, across South Africa, many municipalities experience persistent communication failures that undermine public trust, weaken citizen participation, and exacerbate service delivery tensions. Evidence from the COMPACT programme, which examined governance and participation practices across 12 municipalities, identifies systemic weaknesses in both internal and external communication systems, particularly in rural and resource-constrained contexts.

This policy brief presents evidence-based recommendations to strengthen municipal communication as a strategic administrative function that enables democratic governance. The brief is explicitly anchored in existing national policy instruments, including the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) Government Communication Policy, the National Communication Strategy Framework (NCSF), and the Government Communicators' Handbook.

The brief recommends the professionalisation of municipal communication structures; the institutionalisation of structured, two-way community engagement; the integration of knowledge management (KM) to support evidence-based communication; and the combined use of digital and traditional communication platforms to address the communication divide. If implemented, these measures would shift municipal communication from fragmented and reactive practices towards predictable, accessible, and citizen-centred systems. This, in turn, would strengthen transparency, rebuild public trust and improve service delivery outcomes.

1. Introduction and Background

Communication in local government functions as a strategic administrative responsibility that supports constitutional obligations for transparency, access to information, participatory governance, and public accountability. While communication is not defined as a discrete constitutional function, municipalities are required, in terms of the Constitution and the Municipal Systems Act (2000), to promote community participation and provide timely, accurate, and accessible information to the public. Communication therefore operates as an enabling mechanism through which these obligations are fulfilled.

National communication policy provides clear guidance on the role and purpose of government communication. The GCIS Government Communicators' Handbook emphasises that communication structures articulate government policy and programmes rather than determine them, and that government work is inherently public and must be communicated in a clear, open, and consistent manner. The National Communication Strategy Framework (NCSF) further requires all spheres of government to adopt an integrated, citizen-centred approach to communication that promotes coherence, responsiveness, and a single government voice, while allowing flexibility for context and capacity.

Evidence from the COMPACT programme indicates that many municipalities have not yet institutionalised communication in line with these national norms. Across the 12 partner municipalities, communication systems were frequently characterised by the absence of professionalised communication units, weak internal coordination, limited strategic planning, and inconsistent community engagement practices.

These weaknesses contribute to misinformation, declining public trust, and reduced participation, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. Strengthening municipal communication as an administrative governance function is therefore integral to the realisation of developmental local government. It aligns directly with national government communication policy, SALGA's positioning of communication through its Municipal Communicators Forum, and international good practice on public communication. Addressing these challenges requires not the development of new policy instruments, but more consistent implementation of existing communication norms, supported by institutional capacity-building and intergovernmental coordination.

2. The Problem: A Systemic Breakdown in Municipal Communication

Evidence generated through the COMPACT programme indicates that communication failures represent a systemic constraint to effective governance across participating municipalities.¹ These failures affect both the availability and quality of information shared with communities and undermine municipalities' ability to fulfil legislative obligations for meaningful public participation, transparency, and accountability.

The COMPACT Consolidated Technical Findings Report identifies persistent weaknesses in how municipalities plan, resource, and institutionalise communication. Across the 12 municipalities studied, communication practices were frequently ad hoc, reactive, and insufficiently integrated into governance and administrative processes. In several cases, communication was described by municipal officials and community members alike as inconsistent, inaccessible, or absent, reinforcing perceptions of institutional distance and disengagement.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that communication challenges are not isolated operational issues. Rather, they reflect deeper structural weaknesses, including limited professional capacity, fragmented internal coordination, and the absence of predictable engagement mechanisms. These weaknesses create conditions in which misinformation spreads easily, community frustration escalates, and trust in local government deteriorates.

2.1 Challenges at the Councillor-Community Interface

Ward councillors occupy a critical interface role between municipalities and communities and are often the primary point of contact for residents. However, COMPACT evidence indicates that many councillors face structural and capacity-related constraints that limit their ability to communicate consistently and effectively with constituents. These include limited administrative support, insufficient coordination with municipal officials, and competing governance responsibilities.

¹ COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa, pp. 108-118; 143.

In several municipalities, councillors reported difficulties in convening regular ward meetings and providing feedback on municipal decisions and service delivery issues. Community members, in turn, expressed frustration at the lack of follow-up and responsiveness, noting that concerns raised during engagements were seldom addressed or communicated back. These breakdowns weaken accountability and contribute to perceptions that participation processes are symbolic rather than meaningful.

The challenges at the councillor–community interface are amplified in geographically dispersed rural wards, where distance, infrastructure constraints, and low digital access complicate communication. Without structured support systems and clear communication protocols, councillors are left to rely on informal and uneven practices, further fragmenting engagement.

2.2 One-Way and Inaccessible Messaging

Where communication does take place, it is frequently characterised by top-down information dissemination rather than dialogue. Municipal messages are often delivered in technical or bureaucratic language that is difficult for residents to understand, limiting their usefulness and inclusivity. The COMPACT research findings show that communication materials are rarely tailored to different audiences or translated consistently into local languages, despite South Africa’s multilingual context.

This one-way approach undermines the purpose of communication as a tool for participation and accountability. When information is not accessible or responsive to community realities, it fails to empower residents to engage meaningfully in municipal processes or to hold institutions to account.

2.3 Declining Use of Traditional Outreach Methods

The COMPACT programme highlights a growing reliance on digital communication platforms, often at the expense of traditional outreach methods such as community radio, printed notices, loud-hailing, and face-to-face engagements. While digital tools offer important opportunities for expanded reach, their uneven accessibility means that exclusive reliance on them risks deepening exclusion, particularly among older residents, rural communities, and households with limited connectivity.

Communities participating in the COMPACT research consistently emphasised the continued importance of traditional communication channels for receiving information and engaging with municipal processes. The neglect of these channels has contributed to information gaps and reinforced the perception that municipalities prioritise efficiency over inclusivity.

2.4 Internal Silos and Institutional Weaknesses

Communication challenges are not limited to external engagement. Internally, many municipalities experience fragmented communication across departments, resulting in inconsistent messaging, delayed responses, and weak coordination. According to the COMPACT findings, internal communication is frequently described by municipal officials as inadequate, with information remaining siloed and feedback loops poorly defined.

These internal weaknesses directly affect external communication outcomes. Without reliable internal information flows and institutional memory, municipalities struggle to provide accurate, timely, and credible information to communities. This contributes to reactive communication during service delivery disruptions and undermines confidence in municipal leadership.

Taken together, the COMPACT evidence demonstrates that municipal communication failures are systemic rather than incidental. Addressing them requires institutional reform, capacity development, and more consistent implementation of existing communication policies, rather than isolated interventions or short-term solutions.

The evidence presented in this policy brief indicates that strengthening municipal communication does not require the development of new policy instruments. Rather, it requires more consistent, coordinated, and context-sensitive implementation of existing national communication policies and norms. The following recommendations outline priority areas for decision-makers at municipal, provincial, and national level to strengthen communication as a strategic administrative function that supports participatory governance, transparency, and accountability.

3. Why It Matters: Communication, Trust, and Democratic Governance

For the purposes of this policy brief, effective communication in local government is understood as follows:

Effective Communication in Local Government is the intentional, institutionalised, transparent and citizen-centred practice through which municipalities enable communities to be informed, included and empowered in governance; using credible, multilingual, timely and two-way democratic governance and decision-making.

Communication in local government functions as a strategic administrative responsibility that supports transparency, access to information, participatory governance, and accountable decision-making. While often treated as a support function, evidence from governance and public trust literature demonstrates that communication plays an enabling role in how citizens engage with institutions and how accountability is exercised.

Research shows that communication, participation, accountability, and trust reinforce one another through a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle. Transparent and accessible communication enables meaningful public participation; participation strengthens responsiveness and accountability; and accountable governance contributes to increased public trust. Over time, higher levels of trust further encourage engagement and cooperation, reinforcing the cycle and improving governance and service delivery outcomes (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2017).

In the South African local government context, this dynamic is central to the constitutional vision of developmental, people-centred local government. Without consistent, open, and responsive communication systems, municipalities are unable to sustain participation, manage expectations, or build durable trust with communities.

This relationship is illustrated in figure 1 below:

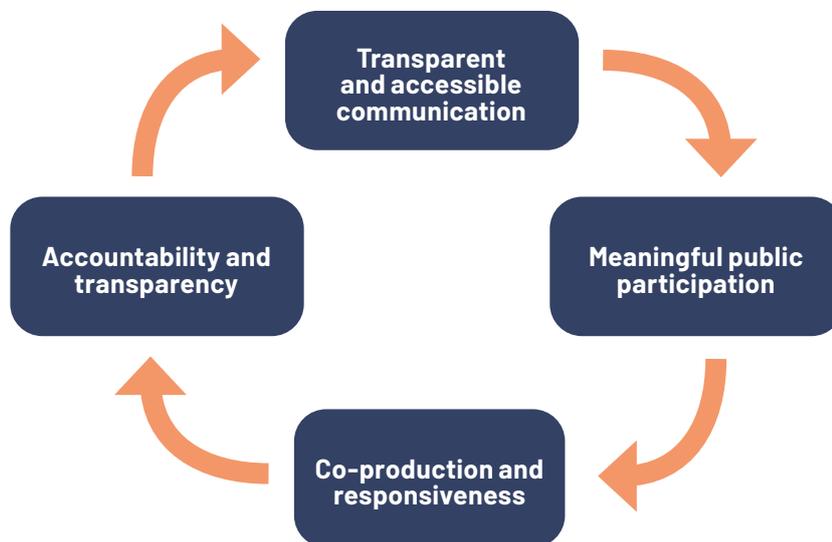


Figure 1: Virtuous cycle linking communication, participation, accountability and trust in local government

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis informed by OECD (2017) and World Bank (2017), adapted to the South African local government context using the COMPACT programme findings.

Evidence from international governance and public trust literature shows that communication, participation, accountability, and trust reinforce one another in a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2017).

4. Strengthening Municipal Communication in Practice

Recognising the central role of communication in shaping trust, participation and democratic governance at local level, these recommendations draw on COMPACT evidence and national communication policy to identify practical priorities for strengthening municipal communication in practice.

4.1 Elevate Communication Within Municipal Governance and Administration

Municipal communication should be formally recognised and positioned as a strategic administrative responsibility within municipal governance structures, consistent with the GCIS Government Communication Policy and the National Communication Strategy Framework (NCSF). While municipalities retain institutional autonomy, national policy requires communication to be integrated into planning, coordination, and decision-making processes across all spheres of government.

At municipal level, this implies locating communication units within the Office of the Municipal Manager to ensure administrative accountability and cross-departmental coordination. Heads of Communication should participate in senior management processes to enable alignment between policy decisions, implementation planning, and public communication. This positioning strengthens coherence, reduces fragmented messaging, and supports the principle of a single, coordinated government voice.

At system level, GCIS, CoGTA, and SALGA should continue to provide guidance, coordination platforms, and technical support to municipalities to promote alignment with national communication norms. SALGA's Municipal Communicators Forum plays a critical role in reinforcing professional standards, peer learning, and shared practice across municipalities.

4.2 Institutionalise Structured, Two-Way and Inclusive Engagement

Municipalities should institutionalise structured and predictable two-way engagement mechanisms that enable meaningful dialogue with communities, rather than ad hoc or compliance-driven participation processes. Evidence from the COMPACT programme shows that inconsistent communication and poorly planned engagements undermine trust and participation, particularly in marginalised and rural communities.

Regular ward meetings, mayoral and executive outreach programmes, town-hall engagements, and accessible feedback mechanisms should be aligned with Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and budget cycles. These engagements should be planned, communicated in advance, and followed by clear feedback processes that demonstrate how community inputs are considered.

To strengthen inclusivity and effectiveness, municipalities should apply the Government Segmentation Model (GSM) when designing communication and participation processes. The GSM enables municipalities to tailor communication approaches to different population groups based on language, location, access to information, and socio-economic context. Applying this model supports multilingual communication, appropriate channel selection, and more equitable participation outcomes.

4.3 Strengthen the Councillor-Community Communication Interface

Ward councillors occupy a critical interface role between municipalities and communities and are often the primary point of contact for residents. Evidence from the COMPACT programme indicates that breakdowns at this interface represent a significant weakness in municipal communication systems. Many councillors lack structured communication support, timely access to information, and administrative capacity, limiting their ability to convene regular engagements and provide meaningful feedback to communities.

The Government Communicators' Handbook highlights that effective public communication depends on strong internal coordination, clear briefing, and trusted intermediaries who can relay accurate and timely information. In the local government context, ward councillors and ward committees function as first-line communication and participation structures. When adequately capacitated, ward committees support two-way communication by disseminating municipal information, gathering community concerns, and feeding local intelligence back into municipal systems.

COMPACT findings show that where ward committees are marginalised or inconsistently supported, participation becomes sporadic and communities perceive engagement processes as symbolic. Conversely, practical experience across South African municipalities demonstrates that where ward committees receive regular briefings,

predictable engagement schedules, and basic communication tools, they contribute to improved participation, early identification of service delivery concerns, and reduced conflict.

In line with COMPACT recommendations, GCIS guidance, and SALGA practice, municipalities should strengthen the councillor–community interface by:

- providing councillors and ward committees with regular, structured briefings aligned to council and management decisions;
- equipping ward committees with simple, multilingual communication materials and clear mandates;
- integrating ward-level feedback into municipal knowledge management and communication systems; and
- recognising ward committees as active partners in participatory governance rather than ad hoc consultative bodies.

4.4 Embed Knowledge Management (KM) to Support Evidence-Based Communication

Effective municipal communication depends on reliable internal information flows and institutional memory. The COMPACT programme identifies widespread internal communication breakdowns, fragmented documentation, and weak record-keeping systems as key contributors to inconsistent and reactive communication.

Municipalities should embed Knowledge Management (KM) practices within communication, participation, and planning processes to ensure that information used for public communication is accurate, up to date, and verifiable. This includes systematically capturing council decisions, project progress, service delivery data, and citizen feedback. Establishing KM committees, integrating KM processes into IDP and communication planning cycles, and capacitating staff to document and share knowledge across departments can significantly strengthen communication quality. These practices align with GCIS guidance, which emphasises that government communication must be grounded in verified information and supported by effective internal coordination.

Effective knowledge management also enables municipalities to communicate consistently across both digital and traditional channels, ensuring that information shared with communities remains coherent, timely, and aligned regardless of the medium used.

4.5 Bridge the Communication Divide Through Inclusive Use of Digital and Traditional Channels

Bridging the communication divide in local government requires deliberate choices about how information is shared, with whom, and through which channels. Communication channel selection is not a neutral or purely technical decision; it directly shapes who is included in governance processes and who is excluded. Inclusive communication therefore requires municipalities to combine digital and non-digital approaches in ways that reflect local connectivity, language, literacy, and socio-economic realities.

Digital communication platforms offer important opportunities to improve the reach, speed, and consistency of municipal information. Maintaining updated municipal websites, using social media interactively, and deploying SMS or USSD tools can enhance access to information and support timely communication, particularly during service disruptions or emergencies. However, evidence from the COMPACT programme demonstrates that reliance on digital platforms alone risks excluding residents in rural areas, informal settlements, and low-connectivity contexts.

For this reason, traditional communication methods remain an essential component of inclusive municipal communication systems. Community radio, printed notices and pamphlets, loud-hailing, public meetings, and door-to-door engagement continue to play a critical role in reaching communities that are digitally marginalised. COMPACT findings show that when these channels are neglected, information gaps widen and participation declines, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and institutional distance. Particular attention should be given to communication methods that bridge the gap for young people who are often underrepresented in formal municipal engagement despite being active in digital and community-based spaces.

Bridging the communication divide therefore requires an integrated, multi-channel approach that combines digital and traditional methods in a complementary manner. Partnerships with Thusong Service Centres, community radio stations, and civil society organisations can extend communication reach, improve message accessibility, and support more equitable participation outcomes. International experience further confirms that combining online and offline engagement

strengthens inclusion and contributes to more resilient municipal communication systems.

The adoption of inclusive, context-sensitive channel strategies, translates into improved municipal information access, reduced exclusion, and support more consistent participation, without duplicating or overburdening ward-level communication and engagement structures.

5. Implementation Approach

This policy brief does not propose a new communication framework for local government. Instead, it outlines an evidence-based implementation approach to support municipalities in applying existing national communication policies more consistently and effectively. The recommendations presented are intended to inform decision-making and guide prioritisation at municipal, provincial, and national level, drawing on empirical insights generated through the COMPACT programme.

At municipal level, implementation begins with elevating communication as a strategic administrative responsibility aligned with the GCIS Government Communication Policy and the National Communication Strategy Framework. This requires positioning communication units within the Office of the Municipal Manager, ensuring that Heads of Communication participate in senior management structures, and integrating communication planning into IDP, budgeting, and performance management processes. These measures strengthen coordination, reduce fragmented messaging, and ensure that communication supports governance rather than operating as an ad hoc support function.

Professionalisation and capacity development are central to implementation. GCIS, CoGTA, and SALGA should continue to support municipalities through competency standards, training programmes, and peer-learning platforms, including SALGA's Municipal Communicators Forum. At municipal level, communication officials require practical skills in development communication, facilitation,

media liaison, crisis communication, and digital engagement, as outlined in the Government Communicators' Handbook. Strengthening these capabilities enables municipalities to move from reactive information dissemination to planned, responsive, and citizen-centred communication.

Institutionalising structured two-way engagement mechanisms is a further implementation priority. Municipalities should plan and communicate ward meetings, mayoral engagements, and public consultations in advance and align them with governance cycles. Applying the Government Segmentation Model enables municipalities to tailor communication methods, languages, and platforms to different community groups, addressing the exclusion and inconsistency identified in the COMPACT findings. Closing feedback loops through clear follow-up communication is essential to sustaining participation and trust.

Integrating Knowledge Management (KM) into communication and participation processes strengthens implementation by improving information accuracy, continuity, and institutional memory. Establishing KM committees, documenting decisions and service delivery progress, and linking KM systems to communication plans enable municipalities to issue consistent, credible information and respond effectively to community queries. This directly addresses COMPACT evidence on internal silos and weak information flows.

Collectively, these implementation priorities describe a realistic and achievable shift in municipal communication practice. If applied consistently, municipalities would move from fragmented and reactive communication towards predictable, inclusive and evidence-informed systems that support participation, accountability, and service delivery. Crucially, this shift does not require new policy instruments, but rather more coherent application of existing national communication norms, supported by institutional positioning, professional capacity and ward-level engagement.

6. Conclusion

Evidence generated through the COMPACT programme confirms that communication failures at municipal level are not incidental or isolated challenges, but systemic constraints that undermine public participation, accountability, and trust in local government. Fragmented communication systems, weak internal coordination, and inconsistent engagement practices limit municipalities' ability to fulfil their constitutional and legislative mandates.

This policy brief demonstrates that South Africa already possesses an adequate policy foundation for effective government communication. The challenge lies not in the absence of policy, but in uneven and inconsistent implementation at local level. Strengthening municipal communication therefore requires a more coherent application of existing GCIS norms, supported by institutional positioning, professional capacity, and intergovernmental coordination.

If the implementation priorities outlined in this brief are applied, municipal communication would become more predictable, accessible, and responsive. Communities would receive timely, multilingual information about municipal plans, services, and disruptions; participation processes would be communicated and conducted consistently; and feedback mechanisms would reinforce accountability and trust. Communication would shift from reactive crisis management to a routine governance practice embedded in planning, implementation, and oversight.

As a post-project deliverable, this policy brief is intended to inform ongoing policy implementation and decision-making beyond the lifespan of the COMPACT programme. By distilling empirical evidence into practical guidance aligned with national communication policy, it offers municipalities, provinces, and national stakeholders a credible pathway to strengthen public participation and accountability. In doing so, municipal communication becomes a practical mechanism through which the constitutional vision of democratic, developmental, and people-centred local government is advanced.

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