



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

2026 SONA

EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2026 STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS: EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

16 FEBRUARY 2026

**PARLIAMENTARY
RESEARCH UNIT (PRU)**

WWW.PARLIAMENT.GOV.ZA

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2026 STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS: EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Basic Education.....	4
3. Post-School Education and Training	7
4. Science and Innovation	9
5. Sport, Arts and Culture	12

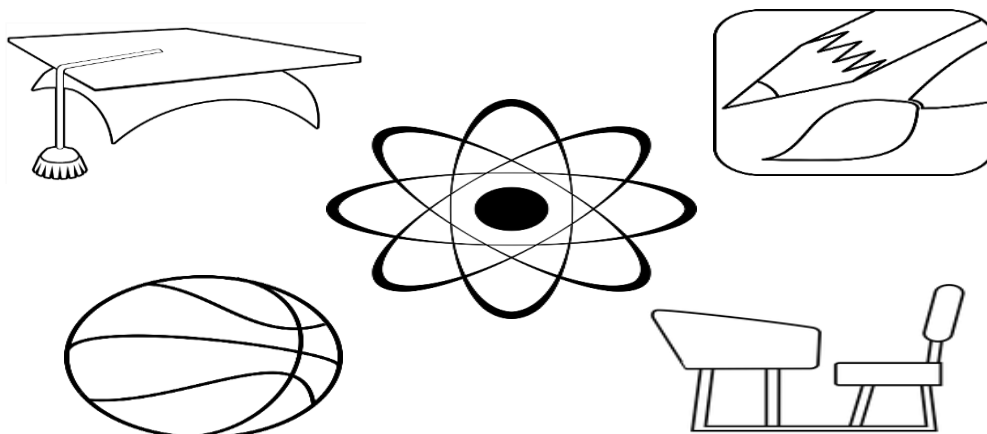
1. Introduction

President Ramaphosa delivered his State of the Nation Address (SONA) during a joint sitting of the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) on 12 February 2026. The 2026 State of the Nation Address strengthens the actions and steps taken since last year that seek to advance the strategic priorities of the Government of National Unity. These priorities are:

- ❖ To drive inclusive growth and job creation;
- ❖ To reduce poverty and tackle the high cost of living; and
- ❖ To build a capable, ethical and developmental state.

The following departments and its entities fall within the purview of the Education and Recreation Cluster:

- ✓ Department of Basic Education (DBE)
- ✓ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)
- ✓ Department of Science and Innovation (DSI)
- ✓ Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC)



2. Basic Education

2.1. SONA PRIORITY AREAS FOR BASIC EDUCATION

- ❖ Early childhood development and compulsory Grade R
- ❖ Literacy and numeracy in the early grades
- ❖ Mother-tongue-based bilingual education
- ❖ Learner retention and subject participation
- ❖ Stronger links between schooling, skills, and employment
- ❖ Expanded post-school access
- ❖ Socio-economic support for effective learning

2.2. ALIGNMENT WITH THE 2025 MTBPS

The 2025 MTBPS emphasises macroeconomic stability, debt containment, and expenditure efficiency. The 2026 SONA mirrors this stance by reaffirming:

- Primary budget surpluses
- Stabilisation of public debt
- Reprioritisation rather than large-scale new spending

In the education sector, this alignment is evident in the focus on **optimising existing programmes** (such as ECD subsidies and foundational learning interventions) rather than announcing expansive new funding commitments. However, while alignment is strong at the strategic level, both documents leave unresolved questions about implementation capacity, especially in provinces and schools serving the poorest communities. The success of this alignment will therefore depend less on policy coherence and more on execution.

2.3. TRACKING PROGRESS WITH KEY SONA 2025 COMMITMENTS AND/OR PRIORITIES

2025 SONA COMMITMENTS/PRIORITIES	PROGRESS
Improve learning outcomes	Highest matric pass rate in history (88%).
Strengthen foundational education	Expansion of ECD subsidies and compulsory Grade R. Renewed focus on literacy, numeracy, and mother-tongue instruction.
Expanding access to post-school opportunities	Although overall national Bachelor passes decreased, bachelor passes from disadvantaged schools improved. While outcome indicators show improvement, the President concedes persistent dropout rates and gaps in subject participation, indicating partial rather than complete success.

2.4. KEY AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

- ❖ **Basic Education Reforms:** Parliament must closely oversee the:
 - The rollout of **compulsory** Grade R
 - Expansion and regulation of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres
 - Delivery of literacy, numeracy, and mother-tongue-based bilingual education reforms

Oversight is critical to ensure that policy commitments translate into improved classroom outcomes, especially in under-resourced provinces.

- ❖ **Education outcomes beyond headline indicators:** While the President reported an 88% matric pass rate, Parliament should interrogate:
 - Learner dropout rates, particularly in Grades 10–11
 - Access to and performance in mathematics and science
 - Quality differentials between schools

This guards against over-reliance on aggregate pass rates that may mask systemic inequality.

- ❖ **Alignment between budget allocation and policy commitments:** Parliamentary committees must scrutinise:
 - Whether MTBPS and annual budget allocations adequately support SONA commitments
 - Efficiency and equity in provincial education spending
 - Conditional grants linked to ECD, nutrition, and school infrastructure

This ensures fiscal discipline does not undermine constitutional obligations in education and social services.

- ❖ **Public employment programmes and youth outcomes:** Given the scale of public employment initiatives, oversight should focus on:
 - Sustainability and cost-effectiveness of programmes such as the Presidential Employment Stimulus
 - Whether temporary work translates into skills development and permanent employment, particularly for youth and women
- ❖ **Infrastructure spending and procurement integrity:** With over R1 trillion committed to infrastructure, oversight priorities include:
 - Procurement processes and contract management
 - Prevention of corruption, especially in school infrastructure projects
 - Timely delivery and value for money

This is reinforced by the President's acknowledgement that procurement remains a major source of corruption.

- ❖ **Social protection and child wellbeing:** Given the link between poverty and learning outcomes, oversight is required on:
 - Redesign and continuation of the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant
 - Implementation of the commitment to end child stunting by 2030
 - Coordination between social development, health, and education departments
- ❖ **Digital transformation of public services:** Parliament should monitor:
 - Rollout of digital services affecting learners and families (e.g. digital matric certificates)
 - Data protection, accessibility, and exclusion risks
 - Capacity of departments to implement digital reforms
- ❖ **Executive accountability and intergovernmental coordination:** Parliament must ensure:
 - Regular reporting by the Executive on SONA commitments
 - Effective coordination across national, provincial, and local spheres
 - That commitments made by Cyril Ramaphosa are matched by departmental delivery

The 2026 SONA identifies ambitious reforms across education, governance, and economic development. Parliamentary oversight is therefore essential to:

- ❖ Move from policy intent to implementation
- ❖ Protect public funds
- ❖ Ensure that promised improvements are experienced by citizens, particularly learners and vulnerable communities.

3. Post-School Education and Training

3.1. SONA PRIORITY AREAS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- ❖ Reform and modernise the skills system
- ❖ Expand access to TVET and higher education
- ❖ Strengthening work-integrated learning and youth employment pathways
- ❖ Align skills to growth sectors and industrial policy
- ❖ Build an inclusive, transformation-driven post-school system

3.2. ALIGNMENT WITH THE 2025 MTBPS

The 2025 MTBPS reinforces SONA 2026 by positioning the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system as a central driver of infrastructure-led growth, industrial reform and youth employment. Skills development is expected to align closely with priority sectors such as energy, mining, agriculture, digital technology and logistics. At the same time, fiscal consolidation requires improved efficiency, stronger governance and outcomes-based funding across SETAs, TVET colleges and higher education institutions. Investment in human capital remains protected, but future allocations will depend on measurable labour-market impact and institutional performance. PSET is therefore pivotal to delivering inclusive growth and building a capable, developmental state.

3.3. TRACKING PROGRESS WITH KEY SONA 2025 COMMITMENTS AND/OR PRIORITIES

2025 SONA COMMITMENTS/PRIORITIES	PROGRESS
Expanding Access to Quality Education: Central to the Government's efforts to end poverty and develop the economy is providing decent, quality education to every young South African.	• Continued expansion of access to universities, TVET colleges, and CET colleges. • Increased financial support for students from poor and working-class backgrounds. • Policy focuses on aligning education outputs with labour market needs. • Ongoing curriculum review and programme expansion in priority sectors (e.g., digital skills, engineering, green economy, infrastructure).
Infrastructure Fund: Blended Finance Projects (R38 Billion): Through the Infrastructure Fund, twelve blended finance projects totalling nearly R38 billion were approved last year. Student accommodation is included in these projects.	• Blended finance model leverages public funds to crowd in private investment. • Student accommodation included addressing critical shortages near institutions. • Focus on: ○ Expanding bed capacity. ○ Improving safety and living conditions. • Supporting institutions in high-demand urban areas.
NSFAS and Student Funding Expansion: Over 900,000 students from poor and working-class backgrounds received funding to study at universities and colleges.	• Continued large-scale NSFAS support across universities and TVET colleges. • Stabilisation measures implemented following prior administrative challenges. • Increased oversight and system improvements to ensure timely disbursement.
Missing Middle: Phase 1 Implementation: Implementation of Phase 1 of the comprehensive student funding model for higher education to address the needs of the "missing middle". This will support approximately 10,000 students in the first year.	• Introduction of blended loan/bursary funding instruments. • Focus on households above the NSFAS threshold but below the affordability level. • Initial rollout prioritised first-year and continuing students in selected programmes.
Increasing Artisan Production Through TVET Colleges: To ensure the economy has the skills it needs, production of artisans will increase through	• Expansion of occupational programmes aligned with infrastructure and industrial policy.

TVET colleges. This is part of the shift the Government is undertaking towards education and skills development, which combines formal learning with job training.	• Strengthened partnerships with SETAs and industry bodies. • Increased focus on: ○ Apprenticeships ○ Learnerships ○ Trade testing capacity
Private Sector Call for Experiential Learning: Drawing on the models that have proved so successful in other countries, there is a call on the private sector to offer young people experiential learning opportunities while they undertake their studies.	• Renewed emphasis on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). • Incentive mechanisms via SETAs and tax incentives. • Sector-based partnership models in: ○ Engineering ○ ICT ○ Health ○ Green economy

3.4. KEY AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

Oversight emphasis:

Measurable employment outcomes, value for money, governance integrity, and alignment to national growth priorities.

- ❖ **Skills System Reform:** Progress on SETA rationalisation and governance improvements; Alignment of qualifications to priority growth sectors.
- ❖ **TVET and Artisan Development:** Capacity to support infrastructure-led growth; Throughput, certification and graduate employment rates.
- ❖ **Work-Integrated Learning & Youth Employment:** Implementation of the dual training model; Employer participation and placement outcomes.
- ❖ **National Skills Fund & Financial Management:** Outcomes-based funding implementation: Spending efficiency and audit outcomes.
- ❖ **Infrastructure & Student Accommodation:** Delivery of expansion projects and PPP compliance: Utilisation of allocated infrastructure funds.
- ❖ **Alignment to Economic Priorities:** Skills pipelines for energy, mining, agriculture, digital and logistics sectors.
- ❖ **Governance & Professionalisation:** Merit-based appointments and lifestyle audits; Disciplinary systems and corruption prevention.
- ❖ **Digital Transformation & Data Systems:** E-learning readiness and digital credentialing; Systems to track graduate employment outcomes.
- ❖ **Equity & Inclusion:** Participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities: Progress toward employment equity targets.
- ❖ **Ongoing Quarterly reporting and committee briefings on:**
 - **Universities:** Infrastructure, Spatial development and student accommodation.
 - **TVET:** Additional funding. The sector should expand with a footprint across the country to serve local communities. Access to conducive student accommodation should be expedited. Severe shortages in teaching and learning infrastructure, including student accommodation. There is a need to transfer property ownership.
 - **CET:** Remains under-funded and under-resourced. Alternative infrastructure or a review of the CET model may be required. There is a need to transfer property ownership.
 - **NSFAS:** Remains a key stakeholder in the offering of fee-free higher education. Delays in disbursement are a challenge. Explore NSFAS stipend/transport for CET.
 - **Infrastructure:** Lack of student accommodation remains a challenge. Lack of general maintenance and abandoned projects due to poor workmanship at institutions. Lack of monitoring and consequence management. Improved water infrastructure is critical.
 - **Security and Safety:** Many safety challenges at institutions, especially with off-campus accommodation, and GBV-related challenges.

4. Science and Innovation

4.1. SONA PRIORITY AREAS FOR SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

While SONA 2026 does not provide a standalone STI priorities, multiple commitments directly relate to South Africa's science and innovation system. These priorities are embedded across the President's focus on digital transformation, energy reform, crime-fighting technology, infrastructure modernisation, and skills development. The following cross-cutting priorities relate to STI:

❖ **Transforming South Africa's Energy System Through Innovation:**

- End of load shedding and shift to a resilient, diversified energy system.
- Expansion of renewable energy technologies.
- Establishment of a fully independent state-owned transmission entity.

This matters for the STI sector because energy transition accelerates demand for R&D in storage systems, green hydrogen, smart grids, and local manufacturing of renewable components.

❖ **Harnessing Artificial Intelligence & Data for Public Safety and Governance:**

- AI-powered crimefighting tools.
- Digital forensics expansion.
- Data exchange systems to support evidence-based policymaking and improved public service delivery.

These priorities stimulate development in local AI, big data capabilities, and cybersecurity research.

❖ **Strengthening the Digital Government Ecosystem:**

- National digital identity system enabling secure and remote access to government services.
- Digitisation of key government services as part of Operation Vulindlela Phase II.

Digital governance reduces administrative inefficiencies and spurs demand for software innovation, cybersecurity, and growth in digital skills.

❖ **Growing South Africa's Innovation Ecosystem:**

- The DSTI's Science Outreach Programme to strengthen STEM skills and promote careers in science and innovation among youth.
- Government's recognition that innovation and entrepreneurship must be ecosystem-driven, requiring stronger state support, risk mitigation, and long-term investment to emulate global innovation economies.

These priorities underpin human capital development, research system strengthening, and deeper public-private partnerships.

❖ **Supporting Green Technology & Climate-Friendly Industrial Development:**

- A 150% tax deduction for electric vehicle (EV) investments, encouraging local manufacturing, research, and adoption of clean mobility technologies.
- Broader commitments to building a green economy through renewable energy, decarbonisation, and environmental technology systems.

South Africa's transition to EVs, renewables, and low-carbon industrial processes depends heavily on domestic R&D and innovation funding.

❖ **Building an Innovation Economy.**

❖ **Major Investment in Digital Infrastructure & Technology Systems:**

- Digital Transformation.
 - National broadband expansion, especially in rural areas.
 - Government systems modernisation.
 - Smart city initiatives.
- Developing a digital identity system for secure access to services.
- Introducing digital payments to streamline transactions.

- Modernising government through "trusted digital channels" and a national data exchange for evidence-based policymaking.

Digital infrastructure underpins AI development, data science capacity, cybersecurity innovation, and digital public services.

❖ **Future-Proofing Education:** Prioritising the development of "future skills" in learners and increasing access for learners to be able to take and cope with subjects like mathematics and science.

❖ **Modernising Key Sectors:**

- Mining: Urging transparent, modern systems for exploration and beneficiation.
- Energy: Transitioning South Africa into a leader in renewable energy and green manufacturing.
- Agriculture: Integrating agricultural technology and innovation to ensure food security.
- Health Technology: Modernising the health system through technology.

4.2. ALIGNMENT WITH THE 2025 MTBPS

Alignment is anchored around three key pillars:

- ❖ **Venture Capital & Start-up Support:** SONA 2026 reinforces the establishment of an Innovation Fund to provide venture capital for tech start-ups emerging from higher education institutions. This matches the MTBPS focus on unlocking private-sector-led growth through innovative funding.
- ❖ **Infrastructure & Digital Transformation:** The 2025 MTBPS identified payments for capital assets as the fastest-growing expenditure. SONA 2026 translates this into action by prioritising the "bridging of the digital divide" through expanded broadband and digital services.
- ❖ **Whole-of-Society STI Ecosystem:** Both the 2026 SONA and the 2025 MTBPS support the STI Decadal Plan moving toward a "Whole-of-Society" strategy that better coordinates research across government, industry, and academia.

4.3. TRACKING PROGRESS WITH KEY SONA 2025 COMMITMENTS AND/OR PRIORITIES

2025 SONA COMMITMENTS/PRIORITIES	PROGRESS
Science, Technology and Innovation are key to equitable economic growth. In support, the President highlighted that "the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) will establish an Innovation Fund to provide venture capital to tech start-ups that emerge from our higher education institutions."	South Africa is attracting major investment in digital infrastructure, with 55 data centres already built and more than R50 billion of investment expected over the next three years. Through the Blended Finance Scheme, working with the Land Bank and commercial banks, South Africa provided R7.8 billion in innovative funding to black producers. Through the Infrastructure Fund and new regulations for public-private partnerships, South Africa is using innovative funding models to reduce risk and attract investors, thereby fast-tracking projects in energy, water, transport, and digital infrastructure.
Concerning growth and climate change, the President highlighted that: "We are harnessing the sun and the wind to make our country a leader in renewable energy and green manufacturing." In addition, the President highlighted that: "We have built meaningful partnerships between government and business, labour, civil society and other social partners to drive growth and development."	Support for the manufacturing of green products for global markets is expanding, from fertiliser to jet fuel, chemicals to steel. It was highlighted that the primary focus this year is on stepping up the fight against organised crime and criminal syndicates through technology, intelligence, and integrated law enforcement.

	In addition to crime, water is now the single most important issue for many people in South Africa. The President will chair a National Water Crisis Committee to bring together all existing efforts into a single coordinating body.
The President highlighted the following opportunity for South Africans to share their expertise and insights: "I call on all South Africans, united in our diversity, to come together in the National Dialogue to define a vision for our country for the next 30 years. The National Dialogue must reaffirm that every one of us has a role to play in building the nation we want."	The National Dialogue process is reported to be spreading across South Africa, reaching every community, every school, every university and college, and every part of our society.

4.4. KEY AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

"We are leaving behind an era of decline and turning towards an era of prosperity and growth."

President Ramaphosa, SONA 2026

- ❖ **Overall involvement of the DSTI in contributing towards an era of prosperity and growth:** Following up on the reportable and actual involvement in terms of supporting South Africa in terms of impacting the improvement of service delivery, achieving economic growth, and combating crime and corruption.
- ❖ **Evaluate the 'Future skills' development involvement of the DSTI:** More learners must be able to take subjects, like maths and science, that will enable them to progress further. South Africa is undertaking a fundamental overhaul of the skills development system to implement a dual training model that integrates education with practical workplace experience. It is urged that the DSTI be monitored and evaluated during such undertakings.
- ❖ **Conduct a critical assessment of all legislation, policies and plans noted during SONA:** Legislation to analyse in terms of embracing an enabling nature of science, technology and innovation includes: the draft Business Licensing Bill; the National Credit Act; the new Public Procurement Act; the revised White Paper on Local Government; and the National State Enterprises Bill.

5. Sport, Arts and Culture

5.1. SONA PRIORITY AREAS FOR SPORT, ARTS AND CULTURE

President Cyril Ramaphosa, identified sport as a source of national strength, stating that South Africa's strength comes from "*sporting men and women who continue to lift the South African flag on the world stage and bring glory to our nation.*" The priority areas emerging from the 2026 SONA include:

- ❖ This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Women's March to the Union Buildings to protest the extension of the Pass Laws to women;
- ❖ 2026 marks the 60th anniversary of the destruction of District Six and the forced removals thereof;
- ❖ Also, 2026 marks 50 years of the June 16 Soweto Uprising, when students in primary and secondary schools boycotted classes to protest the system of Bantu Education's imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction;
- ❖ Promotion of the country's unique cultural, historical and natural attractions that reflect the country's identity. This will be done through traditional festivals, local crafts, historical sites and natural landscapes;
- ❖ Expansion of the Presidential Employment Stimulus;
- ❖ Sports, Arts and Culture have an instrumental role towards National Dialogues and fostering social cohesion by redressing the injustices of the past, thereby unifying constitutional values of the Republic of South Africa.

5.2. ALIGNMENT WITH THE 2025 MTBPS

The 2026 State of the Nation Address (SONA) affirms sport as a unifying and nation-building instrument, highlighting "*the unifying power of sport*" in strengthening social cohesion. However, SONA 2026 does not introduce new sport-specific fiscal commitments or sectoral expansions. This position is consistent with the fiscal consolidation framework set out by the President in the 2025 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS).

5.3. TRACKING PROGRESS WITH KEY SONA 2025 COMMITMENTS AND/OR PRIORITIES

2025 SONA COMMITMENTS/PRIORITIES	PROGRESS
Prioritise national unity and cultural diversity: Strengthen programmes that promote cultural heritage, social cohesion and constitutional values, contributing to the building of a non-racial, non-sexist society.	Work is ongoing. DSAC reports to the Portfolio Committee on the overall progress for the 2025/26 financial year.
Advance economic growth and job creation: DSAC to develop programmes that stimulate employment and support sector development.	Work is ongoing. DSAC reports to the Portfolio Committee on the overall progress for the 2025/26 financial year.
Strengthening infrastructure development for Sport, Arts and Culture: Leveraging funding streams such as the Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG) and Library Grant to enhance facilities, improve access and expand community participation.	Funding for the MIG has been accessible and ring-fenced by the Department to build more sports facilities, particularly in rural areas.
Promote social cohesion and national identity: To support the National Dialogue process and facilitate inclusive programmes that foster mutual understanding, cultural appreciation and unity.	Work in progress. A full progress report has yet to be tabled before the committee by the Department.

Drive Youth empowerment and skills development: Expand initiatives such as EPWP and the Mzansi Golden Economy (MGE) to include training and employment opportunities, particularly in rural and underserved communities.	More youth have been employed through the EPWP and MGE programmes.
---	--

5.4. KEY AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

Parliament through its relevant committees needs to:

- ❖ Assess how the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) is formally integrating sport into the National Dialogue process;
- ❖ Monitor measurable outcomes demonstrating sport's contribution to dialogue, unity and shared national purpose;
- ❖ Evaluate whether sport development programmes are intentionally designed to promote non-racialism, non-sexism and constitutional values;
- ❖ Review funding allocations to ensure equitable access across all nine provinces, particularly the rural areas and townships;
- ❖ Monitor transformation targets and diversity within sport structures to ensure alignment with constitutional imperatives; and
- ❖ Scrutinise Open Calls by the Mzansi Golden Economy, focusing on:
 - Application dates.
 - Methods of application (Online and Manual)
 - Appointment of Adjudication Panels
 - Disbursement of funds
 - Completion of projects and proper utilisation of funds
 - Number of women and youth benefiting from funding
 - Number of projects from disadvantaged communities (provinces, townships and rural areas)

Sithabiso Buthelezi
Chief Researcher
sibuthelezi@parliament.gov.za

Cluster Researchers

Linda Stofile
Senior Researcher
lstofile@parliament.gov.za

Madimetja Kekana
Researcher: Basic Education
mkekana@parliament.gov.za

Agnetha Arendse
Researcher: Higher Education and Training
aarendse@parliament.gov.za

Jacques Verster
Researcher: Education and Technology
jvester@parliament.gov.za

Lindinxiwa Mahlasela
Researcher: Arts and Culture
lmahlasela@parliament.gov.za

Jakobo Jacob Moroe
Researcher: Sport
jmoroe@parliament.gov.za

What we do:

The Research Unit offers research support to individual Members of Parliament, to Committees and to the Houses.

Researchers proactively provide:

- ✓ Summaries and analysis of Bills
- ✓ Analysis of the State of the Nation Address (SONA), Budget Votes, Annual Performance Plans, Quarterly Performance and Expenditure Reports, and Annual Reports
- ✓ Briefing papers in support of Committee meetings on topical oversight issues
- ✓ Comparative studies and international best practices
- ✓ Briefing papers to prepare for oversight visits and on-site oversight visit support
- ✓ Papers in support of House debates

On request, researchers will provide briefings and presentations to Committees, as well as research support to individual Members of Parliament.

Our Values

Non-partisan impartiality
Objectivity
Confidentiality
Quality: Methodological soundness and timeliness



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Feedback



For any comments or feedback, please email Sithabiso Buthelezi
sibuthelezi@parliament.gov.za