



Soweto residents drained by aging sewer infrastructure: Ombudsman heed the call to their plight

On 20 February 2025, the Ombudsman for the City of Johannesburg, Advocate Siduduzo Gumede led an oversight visit in Ward 13 following the second successful leg of our Citizen Information Clinic programme held at the Protea South Community Centre in Soweto. A burning issue in the community was the overloaded sewage system, aging infrastructure, stormwater ingress into the sewer network, frequent blockages and inadequate maintenance, which often lead to an overflowing sewage and a contamination of yards and streets (excreta-related infections may ensue, thus posing an increasing threat to the health of residents). Something our office views with great concern.

The Ombudsman was joined by councillors and ward committee members who travelled around the area, engaging various residents who unanimously cited non-responsiveness and alleged maladministration from the respective departments and entities, as one of the leading causes of their plight.

Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common narrative as many communities continue to grapple with what they regard to be "abandonment" by the very public representatives who are meant to lend an ear. While communities understand that officials do not come with a magic wand to make things such as houses miraculously appear, these constituencies still have the right to want to know that public officials care enough to listen, serve and communicate any important developments that may potentially affect their wellbeing and quality of life.

"Although it may be difficult to quantify the effects of mental and social stress resulting from service delivery disruptions, a life filled with such difficulties and indignities can no doubt seriously compromise a community's mental and social health."



One of the many affected residential homes in Ward 13, Protea South, Soweto

As an office of last instance, we have escalated this matter with the Executive Directors of Health Infrastructure Development and Joburg Water as well as the Acting Chief of Operations Officer to help strengthen all collaborative efforts and expedite critical service delivery issues of this nature.

Resident "tapped out" after battling incorrect charges

Following the conversion of a conventional water meter to a prepaid system, *Mr. Alex McGuiness from Northriding north of Johannesburg, allegedly received a rebill of R 11 436 for the period between September 2023 and January 2024 (which was substantially higher than his usual monthly water consumption). After being pushed from pillar to post by Joburg Water and the Revenue Department, he approached our office seeking redress for the incorrect water usage bill.



Image source: Schindlers Attorneys

According to Mr. McGuiness, the issue occurred shortly after Johannesburg Water's plumbing team came to replace his existing water meter with a new one. During this process, a considerable volume of water was lost, raising concerns about potential inaccuracies in subsequent meter readings.

Yet, despite expressing these concerns to the staff at that time, he was assured that the water loss would not affect his bill on the following month. However, the monthly bills that followed, reflected a daily average consumption of 2,1 kilolitres, a notable increase from his usual 1.42 kilolitres. Additionally, Mr. McGuiness alleged that the newly installed meter did not start working at a zero reading and had also not been correctly linked to his account. Although he lodged a formal grievance with the Revenue Department, they failed to escalate the matter to Joburg Water, leaving the matter unresolved.

During the investigation, our office formally requested that Johannesburg Water provide a detailed response to the allegations, specifically requesting that the city-owned entity ascertain whether the account was billed incorrectly and, if so, outline the corrective actions to be implemented. Their response led to a speedy resolution and the complainant's account was credited with the unduly charged funds, his meter replaced with a zero reading device and correctly linked the device to his account.

* Not his real name





Residents who suspect inaccuracies in their water billing are advised to take the following steps:

- 1) *Document:* Maintain meticulous records of all water bills, meter readings, and any reference numbers from correspondence with Johannesburg Water (these records can be used as evidence to support your complaint).
- 2) *Report:* Immediately report any discrepancies to Johannesburg Water, providing all relevant documentation and your account number (*Note: a query with the entity may take up to 30 days to resolve*).

Though an office of last instance, the Office of the Ombudsman remains committed to advocate on behalf of aggrieved residents, ensuring access to fair and equitable service delivery within the City of Johannesburg.

Should you find yourself in a similar situation, please contact us on 010 288 2800 or complaints@joburgombudsman.org.za and our Intake and Registry team will take you through our complaints lodging process.

The battle continues: Johannesburg Society for the Blind (JSB) seeking answers



The Johannesburg Society for the Blind (JSB) initially lodged a query with our office concerning their electricity, rates and water accounts, where they were disputing an incorrect billing stemming from the City of Johannesburg having allegedly grouped them under an incorrect tariff category.

"The COJ categorises properties for rating purposes based on the property's zoning. This classification determines how much you are charged for property rates. For example, a residential property is normally classified as residential, while an office block is classified as commercial."

Initially, the complainant argued that they had been billed as an agricultural business rather than an NPO (which is rated at a quarter of the residential tariff as per the prevailing nationally promulgated rates ratio based on usage). Upon *Mr. John Shepherd taking over their matter, he argued that the property, on the title deed was a recognised agricultural holding, therefore the City had no reason to change the billing tariff category. His claim contradicted what *Mr. Jabulani Sibiya provided when he first lodged the query, premised on an incorrect billing and seeking relief as an existing registered NPO. The matter was two-fold:

* Not his real name

1) Rates Account

JSB applied as an NPO so that they could be recognised by the Rates Department and derive the benefit of being billed a quarter of the residential tariff which any registered NPOs is entitled to. An adjustment was passed on 2 February 2021, and there were no retrospective adjustments in this instance (of which the reasons were subsequently provided explaining to the complainant why the application became effective upon approval).

2) Water Account

JSB was billed on an institutional (as an NPO) tariff, contrary to the information provided by Mr. Shepherd. For the period of level 3 disconnection, sewer availabilities were subsequently loaded on his account, resulting in the closure of this particular section of his complaint.

What has become a matter of interest, is that Mr. Shepherd now argues prescription in terms of the Prescription Act 68 of 1969 on the basis that the debt on the organisation's electricity and water accounts cannot be legally claimed by the City because they have prescribed. However, findings from our preliminary investigation currently hold a different view to his claim because of payments that were previously made towards these respective accounts (which incidentally disturbs the prescription period), meaning Mr. Shepherd may not legally rely on this argument. After our office communicated this discovery to the complainant, he further advised that none of the JSB officials were responsible for making any of those payments, despite the respective departments having confirmed receipt of various payments from 2021 to 2023 linking them to the organisation.

"This matter is indeed a complex one and remains open on the basis that there are concerning issues that require meticulous scrutiny."

Note: Our turnaround time for the resolution of cases is typically between 3 – 6 months from the date of receipt of a complaint but depending on the complexity of each case, it may take longer. Be that as it may, we would like to reiterate that as an office, we remain impartial, and our findings are strictly based on evidence-based investigations.

Our Citizen Information Clinics are still running!

Do you have a grievance against the City of Johannesburg? Come chat to the Ombudsman and meet our team at one of the following venues, near you:

Date	Region	Venue
Thurs, 06 Mar 25	Region B	Danie Van Zyl Community Centre
Thurs, 13 Mar 25	Region C	Cosmo City Community Centre
Thurs, 20 Mar 25	Region G	Orange Farm Multi-Purpose Centre
Wed, 26 Mar 25	Region A	Diepsloot Youth Centre

Table: Citizen Engagement Clinic March Schedule

