



Own-instance investigation into the neglect of the Johannesburg Art Gallery by the Joburg Ombudsman

The Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) stands as one of Southern Africa's most significant cultural institutions, spanning approximately 10 000 square metres and housing nearly 9 500 artworks and artefacts. Its collection reflects a rich artistic heritage, including traditional African art, modern South African works and contemporary pieces.

Despite its importance, the gallery has faced decades of structural deterioration. Persistent issues such as roof leaks and drainage failures (some dating back to 1943) have progressively worsened due to limited maintenance and budget constraints. This has placed both the building and its invaluable collection at serious risk, raising concerns about the preservation of this heritage asset for future generations.



Source: friends of JAG

In response, our office initiated an own-instance investigation into the alleged neglect of JAG by the Department of Community Development: Arts, Culture and Heritage. The investigation sought to assess the extent of the deterioration and the adequacy of the city's intervention.

Key findings revealed systemic maintenance failures, including damaged flooring, ongoing water ingress and health risks linked to mould caused by damp conditions (particularly following flooding in 2016). These issues were consistent with the findings of a 2017 audit, which attributed much of the damage to original design flaws and ageing infrastructure.

The investigation also highlighted the complexity of restoring a heritage building of this nature. Any rehabilitation work must comply with strict conservation standards, requiring oversight by heritage architects and specialised contractors to preserve the building's historical character. These requirements significantly increase costs and limit the scope of permissible alterations.

Importantly, the Ombudsman's involvement brought renewed attention to the broader strategic question facing the city - whether continued investment in restoring an ageing structure is sustainable or whether alternative solutions should be considered. In this regard, the investigation highlighted the potential value of constructing a new, purpose-built museum that meets modern standards, while allowing the existing building to be repurposed in a more cost-effective approach.

The investigation also clarified institutional responsibilities. While some infrastructure-related developments (outlined by the Department of Human Settlements) are progressing in phases, further implementation remains subject to budget approvals and falls outside the Ombudsman's direct jurisdiction.

Our investigation elevated the condition of the Johannesburg Art Gallery from an operational issue to one of public accountability and strategic importance by clarifying risks, consolidating findings and defining institutional responsibilities. Although the case was closed due to jurisdictional limits, it reframed the focus from short-term maintenance to long-term planning, highlighting the need for sustainable investment in cultural frame. Ultimately, it serves as a call to action for the city to protect Johannesburg's cultural heritage through restoration, adaptive reuse or the development of a new flagship institution.

Staff attend ethics workshop to strengthen a culture of integrity

As Human Rights Month drew to a close yesterday, our staff participated in an ethics workshop on 19 March 2026, aimed at strengthening our collective commitment to integrity, accountability and meaningful service delivery.

The session, led by Ethical Governance Specialist Dr Ernest Mutenda, opened with a thought-provoking challenge: *"Are we, as individuals, truly fair, accountable and committed to integrity, transparency and accessibility in our work?"* It is a question that calls for honest reflection.



Left: Ombudsman, Adv S'du Gumede (Right): Ethical Governance Facilitator, Dr. Ernest Mutenda





The workshop quickly moved from reflection to the practical realities of building an ethical institution from the ground up. As Dr. Mutenda noted, *"We are not going to wait for everything to be okay, then we run with it"*. Ethical governance is not a destination reached under perfect conditions but it is a discipline practised in real time, often amid complexity and constraint. This perspective highlights the City's ongoing efforts to institutionalise ethics, not as an abstract ideal but as a structured, living system embedded in governance, oversight and daily decision-making.

To encourage open and honest dialogue, the session adopted the Chatham House Rule, creating a safe space for candid discussion on sensitive and often uncomfortable issues. This approach allowed participants to explore real-world challenges facing the public sector. Drawing on national trends and recent survey data, the session highlighted a sobering reality and that is, ethical risk remains a significant concern across local government and Johannesburg is no exception.

Participants discussed key concerns, including consistent accountability, ethical leadership and secure mechanisms for whistleblowing. The message was clear and that is, ethics cannot remain confined to policies but must be reflected in behaviour, leadership and the application of consequences.

In practice, this ethical alignment translates into tangible protections for the people of Johannesburg, by:

1. **Holding City departments accountable:** Through rigorous and impartial investigations, our office ensures that municipal entities do more than promise transparency by consistently demonstrating it.
2. **Guaranteeing equitable services for all:** Ethical conduct serves as a great equaliser, ensuring that every resident, regardless of race, gender or socio-economic status, receives fair treatment and equitable access to services.

Ultimately, a strong culture of integrity does more than inspire good intentions, it empowers our office to act decisively as a "guardian" of residents' rights. Whether investigating complaints or advancing corrective actions that strengthen accountability, ethics is what turns principle into practice.

By integrating these values into daily operations, our office does more than mark the conclusion of Human Rights Month - it ensures that its spirit continues well beyond March.

Outreach March in Review: Advancing accountability through community engagements

March was a month of meaningful engagement for the Joburg Ombudsman, as we took our mandate of fairness, accountability and transparency directly to communities across Johannesburg. Through civic education, targeted outreach and youth programmes, residents gained practical tools to understand municipal processes and actively participate in local governance.

In **Diepkloof (Region D2)**, residents learned how to report service delivery issues and navigate City systems, with concerns such as streetlight outages, potholes and water leaks escalated directly to officials (demonstrating how community input can lead to tangible improvements). At the **University of Johannesburg**, the Ombudsman participated in International Women's Day engagements, highlighting the importance of collaboration and investment in advancing gender equality. Outreach at the **Jabulani Civic Centre** helped residents understand how to lodge complaints, track their cases on our online portal and resolve billing issues, strengthening transparency and trust in municipal processes.



Ambassadors at a Regional Outreach

Youth development remained a central focus. At **Reshomile Primary School in Diepsloot**, learners explored water conservation, environmental sustainability, electricity safety and financial literacy, while the launch of a school garden provided practical skills with long-term community benefits. In **Alexandra**, young people were encouraged to "Know Your Rights, Know Your Power", promoting active citizenship and responsibility for protecting public infrastructure.

The impact of these initiatives extends beyond awareness to real empowerment. By equipping residents with knowledge and access, the Joburg Ombudsman fosters a culture of active citizenship where communities are informed, engaged and confident in holding the city accountable. These efforts reflect a broader shift from passive service delivery to participatory governance, where residents are not just recipients of services but partners in shaping a responsive and transparent Johannesburg.

We urge all residents to stay informed, engage in outreach programmes, use available platforms to report concerns and actively contribute to building a more accountable and inclusive city.

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