

Government prodded on accountability

June 2 2015 at 11:42am

By Marianne Merten

iol news

National Assembly Parliament GCIS Parliament's joint standing committee on intelligence has added three more names to a shortlist of candidates for the position of South Africa's new inspector general of intelligence.

Johannesburg - The Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) wants the government to develop a productivity yardstick to improve the public service and a social accountability index for municipalities.

On Monday, the FFC highlighted the need for greater efficiency in public investment from infrastructure development to education.

Education also came under the spotlight because although there was much improvement, not enough attention was paid to quality, the FFC said in its For and Equitable Sharing of National Revenue report.

Tabled in Parliament, the document looking ahead to 2016-17, is a constitutionally-required submission for the division of revenue process.

The submission advises Parliament and state departments how to equitably and fairly allocate the funds collected by the government.

It was tabled before Tuesday's Parliament budget vote debate, the last before the national legislature sits to adopt each of the 40 votes next week.

Recommending a "framework on measuring public productivity" broadly for the public sector, the commission used schools as an example.

It said productivity could be increased by the appropriate appointment of principals and ensuring they adhered to set norms and standards. Teachers would be supported through training and the teacher performance-management system should be linked to the overall outcomes of a school.

An analysis showed only 9 percent of the included secondary schools were fully efficient but most schools had the potential with the current resources, but better managed, to boost maths and science scores by an average of 60 percent to 70 percent, the FFC said.

On the infrastructure front, the commission said that while infrastructure investment was a proven way to boost economic growth, weak co-ordination and lack of accountability bedevilled programmes.

The report focused on municipalities which are meant to be at the coalface of delivery, being closest to communities and best placed to understand their needs.

However, as councils have underperformed, the national government has instituted a number of grants paid from national coffers and supervised by the relevant department.

The FFC raised questions about accountability because departments were rarely held to account for underspending and were not directly answerable to communities.

“Community accountability helps prevent corruption by making it more difficult for public officials to divert public resources for undesignated purposes. Yet, even at local level, accountability to communities is minimal,” the commission said, adding that while communities may be consulted in the drafting of an integrated- development plan, they seemed to have no say afterwards.

The FFC recommended the government, together with the South African Local Government Association, develop a social accountability framework to guide communities on how to hold local governments accountable, while such a framework would also include indicators to rate municipal performance.

In a potentially controversial recommendation, given the furore over Gauteng’s e-tolls, the FFC recommended the government “improves the acceptability of the user-pay principle” to boost infrastructure investment, although that had to be balanced with consumers’ affordability.

Similarly, the commission’s recommendation that the government “raises public debt, aggressively using the available borrowing space to help finance deserving and rigorously appraised infrastructure plans”, could raise eyebrows.

The FFC supported the continuation of socio-economic programmes, like social grants, no-fee schools and school nutrition and public employment programmes, as these improve living standards and income.