

Community Manifestos

Taking Back Power in Local Democracy

A Plain-Language Guide

Questions and Answers for Community Members

Where does the idea for the Community Manifesto come from?

For a long time, communities across South Africa have been organising to hold their local councillors to account. Community formations, civic groups, and advice offices have been doing this hard work for decades — writing charters, holding meetings, and demanding better service delivery.

The Community Manifesto idea builds on all of that experience. It takes the lessons learned on the ground and turns them into a simple, step-by-step process that any community can use. Earlier tools, like candidate pledge forms used before the 2016 local government elections, showed that asking candidates to make written commitments in public can make a real difference. The Community Manifesto goes a step further by making the community itself — not a political party — the author of those commitments.

 **Social Media Post:** *Your community has been building power for years. The Community Manifesto puts a name and a process to what you already know. It's time to use it.*
#DemocracyFromBelow #CommunityPower

Why do we need to realign power in politics?

South Africa's constitution says that local government should be run by the people, for the people. Nearly seventy years ago the Freedom Charter put it more directly: the people shall govern. Both promise the same thing — a state that listens to and answers to its citizens. Councillors are supposed to be the link between residents and the state — someone you can talk to, someone who fights for your area.

In reality, most councillors answer to their political party, not to the people who voted for them. Once the election is over, many disappear. Candidates are often chosen by the party, not by the community, so some councillors arrive in your ward not knowing the area or the people at all.

The effects are plain to see. Potholes go unfixed. Water is cut off. Rubbish piles up. And when people complain, nothing changes. Fewer and fewer people are voting in local elections — not because they do not care, but because they feel it does not matter. Voter turnout dropped from 58% in 2000 to just 46% in 2021. That is nearly half of registered voters who did not bother, because they had lost faith.

Power has quietly moved away from communities and into the hands of parties and officials. The Community Manifesto process is about pulling that power back — and placing it where it belongs.

 **Social Media Post:** *When was the last time your councillor showed up WITHOUT an election coming? Power belongs in communities, not party offices. Let's change that. #AccountabilityNow #LocalGovtSA*

What is a Community Manifesto?

A Community Manifesto is a document that your community writes together before the election. It is not a party document or a politician's promise — it belongs to you.

It sets out three things clearly. First, the priorities that matter most to your ward: water supply, housing, roads, safety, waste collection — whatever residents have identified as the most urgent issues. Second, the standards your community expects from its councillor: where they should live, how they should communicate, what skills and attitude they should bring to the role. Third, the accountability measures you require: how often the councillor must hold public meetings, whether they must provide written progress reports, and how residents will be kept informed throughout the five-year term.

Once the manifesto is finalised, all candidates who want to stand for your ward are invited to a public meeting. In front of the whole community, they are asked to sign a compact — a formal, public, and potentially binding commitment to the manifesto's priorities and rules. The compact also includes a voluntary resignation clause: if the councillor signs and then clearly fails to deliver, the community can formally call on them to step down.

Candidates who refuse to sign are free to do so. But in doing so, they tell the community openly that they are not willing to be held to account. In a ward where people are organised and paying attention, that is a very costly position to take.

 **Social Media Post:** *A Community Manifesto isn't a wish list — it's a signed contract between YOU and whoever wants your vote. Your community sets the terms. #CommunityManifesto #LGE2026*

What if no candidate is willing to sign?

It is the most common worry — and the most useful one to plan for. The point above already covers what happens when one or two candidates refuse: they make their position visible, and the community can vote accordingly. The harder situation is when every candidate refuses.

In that case the community still gains something: a clear, public record of where each candidate stood, against an agenda residents themselves wrote. That record does not disappear. It becomes a starting point for organising over the five years to come, and the basis on which the manifesto is brought back, sharper and harder to ignore, at the next election. A refusal-by-all is itself a finding about the local political landscape, and a useful one for the community to know.

What change do we hope the manifesto process will create?

The most immediate change is in the election itself. Before a single vote is cast, the community has already established its own agenda — one that every candidate must respond to publicly. Instead of candidates telling you what they plan to do, you are telling candidates what you require from them. That is a fundamental shift in who holds the power.

Beyond the election, the hope is that accountability becomes normal. A councillor who has signed a manifesto cannot simply disappear. They have made a written, public commitment. The community holds that commitment and can refer back to it at any time during the five-year term.

Over time, if community formations across the country adopt this approach, the way local democracy works could genuinely change. Councillors would know, before they even stand for election, that organised communities are watching — with specific expectations and a clear record of what was promised. That kind of pressure, sustained from ward to ward, is what makes long-term change possible.

The process also contributes to a broader push for a formal Right to Recall in South African law — the legal ability for communities to remove a non-performing councillor before the next election. The manifesto and its voluntary resignation clause are a practical step in that direction, even before such a law exists.

 **Social Media Post:** *Imagine a South Africa where every ward holds its councillor to a signed, public promise. That's what we're building — one manifesto at a time. #RightToRecall #Peoplespower*

How does this fit with the Right to Recall?

The Right to Recall is the legal ability for a community to remove a non-performing councillor before the end of their term. South Africa does not currently have such a law. There is a campaign to change that, and it is gathering support across civil society and political parties.

The Community Manifesto and its voluntary resignation clause are a practical step in the same direction. They create, ward by ward, the political and moral pressure that a formal recall law would one day make legal. Every councillor who signs a compact, every community that monitors and acts on it, and every resignation called for in public adds to the case for proper legal change. The manifesto process is not separate from the Right to Recall campaign — it is part of how that campaign is built from below.

Who can lead this in our ward?

Any credible community formation that residents trust can lead the process. That might be a residents' association, an advice office, a civic forum, a faith-based group, or a coalition of two or three of these working together. What matters is not the name on the letterhead but the trust that already exists in the community, the connections to local structures, and a willingness to do the work properly.

You do not need to be the only formation involved. Where two or three groups can share the work — one running the door-to-door survey, another convening the meetings, a third drafting the manifesto — the result is usually stronger and harder for any candidate to dismiss as the work of a small group. If you are unsure whether you are the right people to lead this, you probably are.

How can my community go about developing a manifesto?

The good news is that you do not need a big budget or outside experts. The process is designed to work with what most community formations already have: people who are organised, communication channels, and a commitment to getting things done.

The process runs across five steps, and everything should be completed before the formal election campaign begins. That is the moment when candidates are most willing to listen and commit.

Step 1: Organise and spread the word

A community coordinator reaches out to local groups — street committees, residents' associations, churches, sports clubs, and individuals. Use WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and other social media, community noticeboards, and local gatherings to let as many people as possible know what is happening and invite their involvement.

Step 2: Survey the whole ward

A structured survey is carried out across the ward — online for those with internet access, and door-to-door for those without. The survey asks residents what the biggest problems are, what they expect from their councillor, and how they want to be kept informed. Every household counts. Every voice counts.

Step 3: Share findings and agree together

Survey results are shared back with the community through open meetings and smaller group discussions — with pensioners, women, young people, residents without internet access, and others who might not usually speak up in a large gathering. The aim is to reach genuine agreement on what goes into the manifesto.

Step 4: Draft the manifesto and share it widely

A small group writes the manifesto, drawing on the survey and the discussions. The draft is then shared broadly so residents can suggest changes before it is finalised. The more people who have had input, the stronger and more credible the document becomes.

Step 5: Hold the public signing event

All candidates standing for your ward are invited to a public town hall. The manifesto is presented. Candidates are asked to sign the compact in full view of the community. This must happen before the formal campaign period begins — that is when you hold the most leverage.

If your community already has a civic charter, a constitution, or findings from previous consultations, use them as your starting point. You do not need to begin from scratch.

 **Social Media Post:** *Five steps. Three months. One powerful document that puts YOUR community in charge before election day. Here's how to get started. #HowTo #CommunityManifesto #LGE2026*

What could we do with the manifesto once it is completed?

The manifesto's work does not end when the votes are counted — in many ways, that is when it truly begins.

Once a councillor has been elected and has signed the compact, you have a written record of exactly what they committed to. Your community can use that record throughout the councillor's five-year term in several practical ways.

You can hold regular public meetings where the councillor is required to report on what has been achieved against the manifesto's priorities. You can set up a community oversight group that tracks progress between meetings and follows up when things are falling behind. You can request written progress reports on the specific issues the councillor agreed to address. And where the councillor clearly fails to honour their commitments, you can formally invoke the voluntary resignation clause — calling on them, publicly and on the record, to step down.

This last step has no legal force on its own. A councillor cannot be compelled to resign by the community alone under current law. But the power of the process lies in its public nature. A councillor who signed a manifesto and broke it will face an organised, motivated, well-documented community at the next election. That is a real and serious consequence.

Your manifesto can also inspire others. By sharing your experience — what worked, what was difficult, and what you would do differently — you help build a body of knowledge that other communities across the country can learn from and build on. Every ward that takes this step makes the next one easier.

 **Social Media Post:** *The election is just the beginning. A signed manifesto is your tool for the next five years — keep it close, use it often, and make your councillor answer for every promise. #HoldThemAccountable #DemocracyFromBelow*

Democracy starts with you.

Your ward. Your manifesto. Your power.