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Sustainability for Regions

PATHWAYS TO A MERIT-BASED RECRUITMENT SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABLE SERVICE DELIVERY: A SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE**Xolani Thusi¹, Nkosingiphile Mkhize^{2*}**¹*School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa*^{2*}*North-West University, School of Government Studies, South Africa*Email: ^{2*} nkosingiphile.e.m18@gmail.com (Corresponding author)*Received 10 May 2026; accepted 25 July 2026; published 30 September 2026*

Abstract. Section 152(1)(b) of the South African Constitution mandates local government to “ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner.” This constitutional responsibility is hindered by political interference, cadre deployment, nepotism, and severe capacity shortages, resulting in persistent service delivery protests and poor municipal performance. This paper examines how adopting a merit-based recruitment system and professionalising the public service can enhance sustainable service delivery in South African local government. The study employs the Person–Job Fit Theory as a theoretical lens, utilising secondary data analysis and a narrative literature review. Empirical evidence from 2020–2025 is drawn from Statistics South Africa, the Auditor-General, the Department of Cooperative Governance, and peer-reviewed research to evaluate service delivery performance and human resource practices. Findings reveal significant capacity deficits: many municipal officials lack required competencies; municipalities rely heavily on consultants for financial management; and governance failures manifest in widespread protests and adverse audit outcomes. The adoption of the 2022 National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector indicates a policy shift towards meritocracy. Transparent, competitive hiring and promotion based on qualifications and performance can strengthen accountability, efficiency, and service quality. Prioritising merit over political affiliation is essential to building institutional capacity and restoring public trust in local government. The paper positions meritocracy as a structural reform imperative for achieving South Africa’s developmental goals. It recommends strict enforcement of merit-based appointments, continuous skills development, and adherence to governance standards to foster a capable, ethical, and service-oriented municipal sector.

Keywords: Local government; service delivery; meritocracy; professionalisation; capacity; South Africa

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Thusi, X., Mkhize, N. 2026. Pathways to a merit-based recruitment system for sustainable service delivery: a South African local government perspective. *Insights into Regional Development*, 8(3), 174-193. <http://doi.org/10.70132/c5255288268>

JEL Classifications: H11**1. Introduction**

The pursuit of sustainable service delivery within South African local government remains one of the most complex challenges of the post-apartheid era. While the constitutional mandate provided by Section 152(1)(b) establishes a clear obligation for municipalities to ensure the provision of services in a sustainable manner, the practical realisation of this goal is frequently undermined by deep-seated structural and administrative pathologies. Central to this crisis is the tension between merit-based recruitment and the entrenched practice of political patronage, often manifesting as cadre deployment. This report provides an exhaustive examination of these dynamics, integrating critical reviewer feedback to address the one-sided nature of previous meritocracy debates and exploring the emerging phenomenon of the qualifications-experience gap within the public sector. By synthesising empirical data from 2020 to 2025, the analysis demonstrates that while meritocracy is a necessary

objective, its implementation must be contextually grounded in the unique socio-political realities of a developing state. Local government is the sphere of administration closest to communities and is often the first point of contact between citizens and the state. It is tasked with providing urgent and essential services that improve residents' quality of life (Jili & Masuku, 2019). In the context of local government, service delivery refers to the provision of public goods and basic services, such as water, sanitation, electricity, waste management, roads, and housing, by municipalities to meet the needs of communities (Reddy, 2016). South Africa, like many countries, faces serious challenges in delivering these services effectively (Sibiya & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023).

Section 152(1)(b) of the Constitution explicitly requires local government to “*ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner.*” Governments must therefore prioritise responsive and efficient delivery of fundamental services to their residents. Despite this mandate, service delivery in the South African local government sphere has not improved in recent years; on the contrary, many indicators suggest deteriorating performance. While there have been some gains in expanding access to basic services over the past decade, for example, between 2011 and 2022 access to clean water increased from 85.1% to 88.5% of households, and access to electricity rose to 94.3%, the *quality* and *reliability* of these services remain in question. Progress has been uneven across municipalities, and infrastructure maintenance has often been neglected. As a result, communities frequently experience water outages, electricity load shedding, sewerage spills, and other failures that undermine gains in nominal access. Public frustration with poor local services has led to a high number of service-delivery protests. In 2022, for instance, 193 service delivery protests were recorded nationwide, reflecting a return to pre-COVID levels of unrest (Masson, 2023). Such protests – which averaged around 200 per year in the late 2010s – have become a “firmly entrenched social phenomenon,” indicating deep-seated dissatisfaction with municipal performance (Masson, 2023). The prevalence of these demonstrations underscores the urgent need for local governments to restore public confidence by delivering basic services effectively and sustainably.

A central barrier to effective service delivery in South African municipalities is institutional capacity. Many local governments suffer from acute shortages of skilled and qualified personnel, undermining their ability to plan, budget, and implement service delivery programs. A significant proportion of municipal staff lack the formal qualifications or technical competencies required for their positions. For example, a 2020 report found that only about 53% of municipal officials met the minimum competency requirements for their jobs, and just 54% of chief financial officers in municipalities were suitably qualified (National Treasury, 2020; NewsWire, 2021; Enterprises University of Pretoria, 2024). This skills deficit is compounded by high vacancy rates in critical posts and frequent turnover of key officials. The Auditor-General's assessments have repeatedly highlighted these capacity challenges: many municipalities have vacant senior positions or employ key officials without appropriate competencies, and there has been a decline in consequence management for poor performance (Davids et al., 2022). According to a Human Sciences Research Council comprehensive skills assessment report, “most municipalities are mired by capacity issues” that prevent them from performing their functions optimally (Davids et al., 2022). In essence, a municipality's effectiveness is heavily reliant on its human capital – the skills, experience, and integrity of its public servants. When this capacity is lacking, service delivery suffers.

One of the root causes of capacity constraints in local government has been the practice of cadre deployment and other forms of patronage-based appointments. Over the past decades, there has been a tendency to fill municipal positions based on political loyalty or personal connections rather than merit (Jili & Masuku, 2019). Scholars note that the politicisation of local government hiring, often through ruling party cadre deployment, has led to the placement of individuals without the necessary skills or experience in strategic roles (Reddy, 2016). Shava and Chamisa (2018) observe that political interference in municipal human resource practices has negatively impacted recruitment, promotion, and staff development. The entrenched patronage network has resulted in nepotism, in which unqualified friends or relatives are hired or promoted, while competent professionals are sidelined. Nepotism not only creates skills gaps in the administration but also demoralises diligent employees who see opportunities blocked by favouritism (Bless, 2023). Over time, these practices have eroded the professional ethos

of the local public service and undermined the constitutional mandate of municipalities. Instead of a professional bureaucracy staffed by experts, many municipalities have become sites of political contestation over jobs and resources.

The consequences of these governance failures are evident in the outcomes: poor service delivery, financial mismanagement, and corruption. Scores of municipalities struggle to spend their budgets effectively or to collect revenue, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and unsustainable finances. The Auditor-General of South Africa's reports on local government reveal persistent breakdowns in governance and accountability. For the 2021–22 financial year, audit outcomes showed *little overall improvement*; in fact, the number of municipalities with clean audits decreased, remaining a small fraction of the 257 municipalities (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Clean audits are typically achieved by fewer than 20% of municipalities, primarily in the Western Cape, indicating that most councils fail to meet basic financial management and performance standards. Meanwhile, irregular and wasteful expenditures remain rampant, and there were fewer than hoped improvements in the many municipalities that previously had disclaimers or adverse opinions (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). These audit results mirror the lack of skills and controls in local government – problems often rooted in poor appointment practices and weak institutional capacity.

In this context, there is a growing recognition that merit-based recruitment and professionalisation of the public sector are necessary to turn around local government performance. The National Development Plan (NDP), South Africa's long-term vision, explicitly calls for building a *capable and developmental state* staffed by professionals chosen on merit. After nearly 30 years of democracy, the imperative of shifting from patronage-driven systems to meritocracy has never been clearer. A merit-based public sector system prioritises the appointment and promotion of individuals based on their qualifications, competence, and performance, rather than political affiliations or personal relationships. By hiring the *right people with the right skills* for the job, municipalities can enhance their capacity to deliver services and fulfil their constitutional obligations. Indeed, countries that have progressed towards developmental goals have generally established meritocratic civil services, underpinned by competitive selection and performance-based career development (Mulaphong, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2023).

By strengthening the case for meritocracy and providing up-to-date evidence and policy developments, this paper contributes to the public administration discourse on improving governance and service delivery at the local level in South Africa. It aligns with disciplinary standards by rooting the analysis in established theory, empirical findings, and the normative frameworks of good governance. Ultimately, the goal is to inform and persuade stakeholders – policymakers, scholars, and practitioners that a merit-based public sector is not only a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity for the developmental state that South Africa aspires to build.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Person–Job (PJ) Fit Theory posits that organisational performance is primarily driven by the alignment between an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and the specific requirements of a role (Wong & Tetrick, 2017). In the context of South African local government, this theory serves as a critical lens to explain systemic service delivery failures: the appointment of officials whose competencies do not match the technical and managerial demands of their roles leads to financial mismanagement, infrastructure collapse, and overall organisational dysfunction. Furthermore, the theory must be balanced with Person–Organisation (PO) fit, which considers how well an individual's values align with the organisational culture. In the South African public sector, a high PO fit might ironically lead to the retention of individuals who are "aligned" with a culture of patronage, even if their PJ fit is low. Table 1 outlines the study's theoretical framing and its alignment with the argument under investigation.

Table 1. Theoretical framing

Dimension of Fit	Definition in Public Sector Context	Impact on Municipal Performance
Demand-Abilities Fit	Match between technical qualifications and job requirements (e.g., an engineer managing water infrastructure).	Direct influence on service quality and technical reliability.
Needs-Supplies Fit	Match between what the employee seeks (growth, ethics) and what the municipality provides.	Influences long-term retention and resistance to corruption.
Self-Concept Fit	The degree to which the job aligns with the individual's professional identity.	Drives innovative behaviour and public service motivation.
Complementary Fit	Adding a skill or perspective missing from the existing team environment.	Essential for breaking "echo chambers" in local councils.

Source: Researchers' own compilation

Research indicates that PJ fit operates across two primary dimensions: demand-abilities fit (whether the employee possesses the necessary skills) and needs-supplies fit (whether the job satisfies the employee's needs). While South African municipalities have historically focused on the former, the latter is increasingly significant. When highly qualified individuals are placed in dysfunctional environments, where their expertise is underutilised or thwarted by political interference, the resulting "misfit" leads to burnout and high turnover.

Furthermore, PJ fit must be balanced with Person–Organisation (PO) fit, which assesses the alignment between individual values and organisational culture. In the South African public sector, a high PO fit can paradoxically be detrimental; it may lead to the retention of individuals who are "aligned" with a culture of patronage, even if their technical PJ fit is low.

Merit-based recruitment maximises PJ fit by prioritising relevant skills and proven performance. Conversely, politically motivated or nepotistic appointments often produce mismatches that undermine community well-being and democratic participation (Reddy, 2016). Empirical evidence highlights the extent of this challenge: as of 2020, only 57% of senior municipal officials, 53% of chief financial officers, and 54% of senior managers met minimum competency requirements (BusinessTech, 2020). While PJ fit is a dominant paradigm, it is not without detractors. Critics argue that an overemphasis on "fit" can lead to:

- Organisational stagnation: hiring managers may select candidates who mirror existing staff, stifling diversity and innovative perspectives.
- Exclusionary practices: rigid adherence to fit can be weaponised to exclude "outsiders" who might challenge unethical but culturally embedded practices.

However, advocates argue that without a foundational match between skills and demands, the "square peg in a round hole" syndrome is inevitable. This results in the high vacancy rates and performance failures currently seen across South African municipalities. Ultimately, the theory assumes that individual performance is a product of the interaction between personal attributes and the work environment, in which compatibility is a prerequisite for positive outcomes (Kristof, 1996).

Recruitment and promotion should therefore rigorously match candidates' qualifications and skills to job demands, for instance, ensuring that engineering posts are filled by engineers and finance positions by qualified accountants. Merit-based HR systems institutionalise this fit, aligning with Weberian bureaucracy principles that meritocratic, professional civil services improve governance (Evans & Rauch, 1999). In South Africa, both the National Development Plan and the 2022 National Framework towards Professionalisation endorse meritocratic appointments to build a capable state. Ultimately, improving person–job fit through professionalised, merit-based recruitment is key to strengthening municipal performance and delivering sustainable, high-quality public services.

2.1. Meritocracy in the Public Sector

Meritocracy in public sector employment has received considerable attention in governance and public administration literature. A merit-based system bases hiring, promotion, and other HR decisions on qualifications and demonstrated ability rather than political connections, nepotism, or favouritism. Its goal is to build a competent, professional public service that operates effectively and fairly. Scholars such as Anniza (2023) note that meritocratic systems emphasise open competition and rigorous evaluation through transparent job postings, standardised exams, competency assessments, and structured interviews to identify the most capable applicants. Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013) emphasise the need for qualifying standards and formal recruitment processes that minimise arbitrary appointments, weighing education, experience, skills, and past performance. Meritocracy contrasts with patronage systems, where jobs are rewards for loyalty rather than merit (Nielsen, 2016). Such practices often foster incompetence and corruption. By prioritising talent, effort, and achievement, meritocracy enhances perceptions of fairness (Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Empirical studies, notably Evans and Rauch (1999), link meritocratic bureaucracies with better governance and economic growth, aligning with Weber's model of a technically qualified, professional civil service.

Key features of a merit system include both practical skills and theoretical knowledge relevant to the job (Anniza, 2023). Civil service exams often assess analytical and subject-specific expertise, with higher scores correlating to better job performance. Educational qualifications serve as a baseline for competence (Evans & Rauch, 1999). Meritocracy also entails continuous performance evaluation and promotions based on achievement, ensuring that hard work is rewarded while underperformance is not shielded by seniority or political ties (Suzuki & Hur, 2022). This fosters a professional ethos in which impartiality, integrity, and public service take precedence over partisan interests. Bellows (2009) highlights Singapore's meritocratic public service as a driver of efficient governance and low corruption.

Meritocracy extends beyond efficiency to social justice and equal opportunity. According to the National School of Government (2022), merit-based public service aligns with constitutional principles of fairness and impartiality in appointments, as articulated in Section 195 of the Constitution. Section 197(3) further prohibits political discrimination in public employment (Newswire, 2022). Ideally, meritocratic processes allow all qualified individuals an equal chance to serve while preventing political affiliation from influencing hiring decisions. Challenges to pure meritocracy include balancing it with representativeness and political oversight. Nonetheless, recent policy shifts, notably the National Framework towards Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), advocate merit-based recruitment at all levels of government and call for the abandonment of cadre deployment. This marks a significant normative shift, signalling that building a capable state depends on ensuring that the right people are appointed to the right positions on the basis of merit.

The literature on public-sector meritocracy suggests that professional, rule-bound, and merit-based civil services are more likely to deliver high-quality services and uphold good governance. Such systems cultivate expertise, continuity, and accountability (see Mlambo, Thusi & Mkhize, 2022; Suzuki & Hur, 2022; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013; Bellows, 2009; Singo & Mafunisa, 2023; Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). In the South African local government context, where capacity and governance problems are acute, the literature would predict significant improvements if hiring and promotion were strongly meritocratic. The next sections of this paper examine the legislative framework for local government employment and present findings on how the lack of meritocracy has affected service delivery, thereby reinforcing arguments in the literature.

2.1.1. International Benchmarks in Meritocratic Systems

To move beyond the rhetoric, South Africa can draw lessons from countries that have successfully institutionalised merit-based recruitment. Countries such as Singapore, South Korea, Canada, and Australia provide useful models for integrating technical expertise into state machinery.

2.1.2. Singapore and the "Scholar" System

Singapore is often cited as the archetype of a meritocratic state, with its meritocratic practices intrinsically tied to the government's nation-building project (Chua et al., 2024). Its civil service is characterised by high-stakes competitive examinations and a system that identifies top-tier talent early in their careers. This process spans almost the entire lifetime of citizens from primary school through adulthood (Chua et al., 2020). This ensures a bureaucracy staffed by elite professionals, rooted in the "Weberian" ideal of a rules-based civil service that provides efficient public sector administration (Chua et al., 2020). However, this model is often critiqued for its potential to create a social divide between the "meritocratic elite" and the general populace. Critics argue that the system can foster elitism and social stratification, as the heavy reliance on standardised test scores may fail to account for systemic inequalities or the advantages provided by intergenerational transfers of status and resources (Chua et al., 2020; Chua et al., 2024).

2.1.3. Canada and Australia: Balance and Inclusivity

Canada excels in HR management and inclusivity, demonstrating that merit-based recruitment can coexist with representational diversity, particularly through its Employment Equity Act, which seeks to remove systemic barriers for underrepresented groups (Agocs, 2020). Australia also scores above average in policymaking and regulation, driven by a civil service that prioritises continuous learning and objective performance evaluations, as evidenced by the APS (Australian Public Service) Reform initiatives focused on data-driven decision-making and professional development (Halligan, 2020).

These examples suggest that a "pure" meritocracy is not only about intelligence but also about creating a culture of public service and ethical accountability. By integrating broader socio-ethical goals into hiring and promotion, these states move toward a "representative bureaucracy" that balances technical competence with the diverse values of the public they serve (Peters & Pierre, 2023).

Table 2 provides a summary of international benchmarks of merit-based public service systems.

Table 2. Summary of international benchmarks

Country	Primary Merit Mechanism	Performance Metric
Singapore	High-level entrance exams and elite scholarships.	Top rank in low corruption and efficiency.
South Korea	Transparency in budget practices and merit recruitment.	Leader in spending transparency.
Canada	Integrated inclusivity in recruitment and talent management.	High scores in HR management and diversity.
Finland	Strong emphasis on readiness to learn and job-related training.	Excellence in crisis and risk management.
Botswana	Independent anti-corruption agencies and merit hiring.	Relative regional stability and resource management.

Source: compiled by the authors

While meritocracy and professionalisation provide the technical framework for improvement, the "missing factor" in many failed municipalities is political will. Political will is defined as the commitment of political leaders to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives and to sustain the costs of those actions over time.

The Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) has consistently noted that the primary obstacle to improvement is not a deficit of legislation but a pervasive lack of administrative and political will to execute mandates effectively. For example, in 2021-22, municipalities incurred billions in irregular expenditure. Despite identifying these failures, there has been a notable decline in the adequacy of consequence management. Scores of municipalities struggle to spend their budgets effectively or to collect revenue, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and unsustainable financial positions.

The shift from a dominant-party structure toward complex multiparty coalition systems has introduced new challenges for local governance. Political polarisation often results in "administrative paralysis", where party competition overrides the need for stable municipal management. In divided councils, coordination between the

political executive and the administrative leadership often fails, leading to disruptions in public services and a breakdown in community trust.

2.2. The Duality of Political Appointments and Cadre Deployment

A comprehensive analysis of South African governance must move beyond a binary view of cadre deployment as inherently detrimental. While the literature frequently links cadre deployment to administrative inefficiency and state capture, there are theoretical arguments in favour of certain forms of political appointment, particularly in post-liberation contexts.

In some developmental contexts, political appointments provide what is known as “upward embeddedness”, social and political connections between bureaucrats and politicians that can facilitate accountability and resource flow. From this perspective, a politically aligned official may be more motivated to implement the ruling party's manifesto, ensuring that policy goals are not lost in bureaucratic inertia. The original intent of the African National Congress (ANC) regarding cadre deployment was to ensure that the state machinery was transformed to serve the majority and to prevent sabotage by a recalcitrant old-guard bureaucracy.

Conversely, the practical implementation of cadre deployment in South Africa has often diverged from this strategic ideal. Instead of placing “the most capable people into key positions”, the system has frequently devolved into a mechanism for political cronyism. This has resulted in the “blurring of the lines” between the state and the party, leading to a situation where accountability is owed first to the party hierarchy and second to the public interest. This dynamic creates a “shadow state” in which formal administrative rules are bypassed in favour of informal patronage networks, directly undermining municipalities' ability to manage budgets and deliver services.

2.3. The Expertise Paradox: Qualifications vs Practical Mastery

A critical shortcoming in contemporary public sector discourse is the failure to distinguish between formal qualifications and functional expertise. In the South African context, an emerging phenomenon involves individuals who possess the requisite academic credentials yet lack the practical experience and “on-the-job” knowledge necessary to manage complex municipal operations.

The South African labour market is currently characterised by a paradox: high unemployment among graduates coexisting with acute skills shortages in technical municipal roles. Many new entrants into the public service possess National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 6 or 7 degrees but have minimal practical exposure to local government financial management or civil engineering. Employers in the municipal sector increasingly value “practical relevance” over academic achievement alone, yet recruitment processes often rely on degree-based screening as a shortcut for assessing competence. This leads to the appointment of “qualified but inept” officials who struggle to navigate the complexities of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) or integrated development planning (IDP).

The impact of this expertise gap is most visible in the Auditor-General's reporting on municipal reliance on consultants. In the 2021-22 financial year, municipalities spent R1.61 billion on financial reporting consultants, largely because internal staff, despite holding relevant degrees, lacked the experience to produce credible financial statements. This “outsourcing of core functions” indicates that formal qualifications are being treated as a proxy for competence, which they are not. The lack of an experiential bridge between university and senior management creates a “missing middle” in the administrative hierarchy, where technical leadership is absent.

2.4. Legislative Frameworks Governing Local Government Employment

South Africa's legal and policy framework provides the principles and rules that should guide public-sector employment, including at the local government level. These frameworks, if properly implemented, support the

shift towards merit-based and professional administration. Table 3 provides a summary of important legislation that governs local government employment.

Table 3. Important legislation governing local government employment

	Description(s)
Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)	Section 195 of the Constitution outlines the core principles for public administration across all spheres of government, including professionalism, efficient use of resources, development orientation, impartiality, and fair, merit-based employment practices. It balances merit (ability, objectivity, fairness) with equity (redressing historical imbalances for representation). Section 197(3) prohibits discrimination or favouritism based on political affiliation, thereby rejecting partisan hiring. For local government, Section 152 mandates sustainable service delivery, which relies on skilled personnel. These constitutional provisions create both an ethical mandate and a practical imperative to professionalise municipal administrations, ensuring that appointments are based on competence while promoting inclusivity and equity.
Local Government Systems Act	The Municipal Systems Act promotes accountable, professional local government. The 2022 Amendment bans senior managers from political office, curbing cadre deployment, and empowers the Minister to set uniform HR standards. New regulations mandate merit-based recruitment, minimum qualifications, competency testing, and national advertising, ensuring only qualified candidates are appointed and preventing nepotism or unqualified hires.
Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (Act 56 of 2003)	The Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) promotes professionalisation in local government by setting minimum competency standards for financial officials, requiring specific qualifications, experience, and training in financial and supply chain management. Key sections emphasise the need to appoint qualified personnel to prevent unfit appointments, yet compliance remains low, with only 53% of CFOs meeting requirements by 2022. In October 2022, the Cabinet adopted the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, advocating merit-based recruitment, reduced political interference, and the rejection of cadre deployment. While not legally binding, it informs legislative reforms and supports the State Capture Commission's recommendations to curb politically motivated appointments.

Source: compiled by the authors

2.5. Meritocracy: Rhetoric versus Reality in South Africa

Despite these legislative gains, a critical assessment suggests that meritocracy remains largely a rhetoric in the South African public sector. The gap between policy intent and operational reality is vast, with many municipalities continuing to function as sites of patronage.

Section 152(1)(b) of the Constitution explicitly requires local government to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner. Governments must therefore prioritise responsive and efficient delivery of fundamental services to their residents. However, service delivery in the South African local government sphere has not improved in recent years. In stark contrast to the initial promises of democratic governance, many indicators suggest a significant deterioration in performance. Access to clean water increased slightly from 85.1% to 88.5% between 2011 and 2022, and access to electricity rose to 94.3% (Stats SA, 2024). Nevertheless, the quality and reliability of these services remain in question. Frequent water outages, electricity load-shedding, and sewerage spills continue to undermine the gains in nominal access.

A municipality, like any other organisation, requires a stable administrative core to function effectively. Progress has been uneven across municipalities, and infrastructure maintenance has often been neglected. The significance of brackets in contemporary reports, such as those by Davids et al. (2022), highlights the multidisciplinary nature of recent assessments, which combine demographic analysis with technical skills audits to provide a clearer picture of municipal dysfunction.

3. Research Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative, secondary data analysis approach combined with a narrative literature review. The research did not involve primary data collection (such as interviews or surveys); instead, it systematically gathered and synthesised information from existing sources that are pertinent to the research

objectives. The research question of this study is: What are the key factors influencing the implementation of a merit-based recruitment system in South African local government, and how do they affect sustainable service delivery?

The study focused on collecting data and literature from the period 2020–2025 to ensure up-to-date insights. The study specifically utilised peer-reviewed articles on public administration, local government, and human resource management to understand theoretical perspectives and prior research findings on merit-based systems, professionalisation, and service delivery. This included works by both local and international scholars (for example, studies on cadre deployment, meritocracy outcomes, and capacity building in municipalities). Furthermore, recent reports from oversight bodies and institutions provided empirical evidence. Critical among these were the Auditor-General's Consolidated Reports on Local Government Audit Outcomes for financial years 2020-21 and 2021-22, which contain data on municipal performance, compliance, and capacity issues. Publications by Statistics South Africa (such as Census 2022 service delivery analysis) gave quantitative indicators of service delivery reach and quality (Stats SA, 2024). Reports and press releases from the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), including media statements by the Minister and the content of the Professionalisation Framework, were used to gauge policy shifts. The National School of Government's 2022 Professionalisation Framework document was a key policy source.

The text of relevant legislation (Municipal Systems Act and its amendments, MFMA, and constitutional provisions) was examined, primarily through government gazettes and legal databases (Municipal Systems Act 2000). This ensured an accurate understanding of the legal requirements for municipal HR practices. Since the research covers contemporary developments, reputable news outlets were considered for reporting on issues like service delivery protests and notable events. For example, an article in the *Mail & Guardian* (Masson, 2023) was used for data on the number of protests and to contextualise public sentiment. However, care was taken to use media sources primarily to illustrate or supplement findings from official reports and research, rather than as primary evidence.

The data search keywords included combinations of terms such as “merit-based system South Africa,” “local government skills shortage,” “service delivery protests South Africa,” “municipal audit outcomes,” “professionalisation public service,” and “cadre deployment local government.” Searches were conducted via academic databases (e.g., Sabinet, JSTOR, Google Scholar), official websites (for AGSA, Stats SA, NSG, etc.), and general search engines for news and grey literature. The search was iterative, with initial broad searches leading to the identification of key sources, which were then snowballed to find additional relevant data (for instance, finding a statistic in a news article, then tracing it to the original report). The gathered data were analysed using a narrative and thematic approach. Being an exploratory, descriptive study, the analysis sought to piece together a coherent narrative of the current state of local government capacity and how a merit-based approach could address its challenges. Key themes that emerged and were systematically examined included:

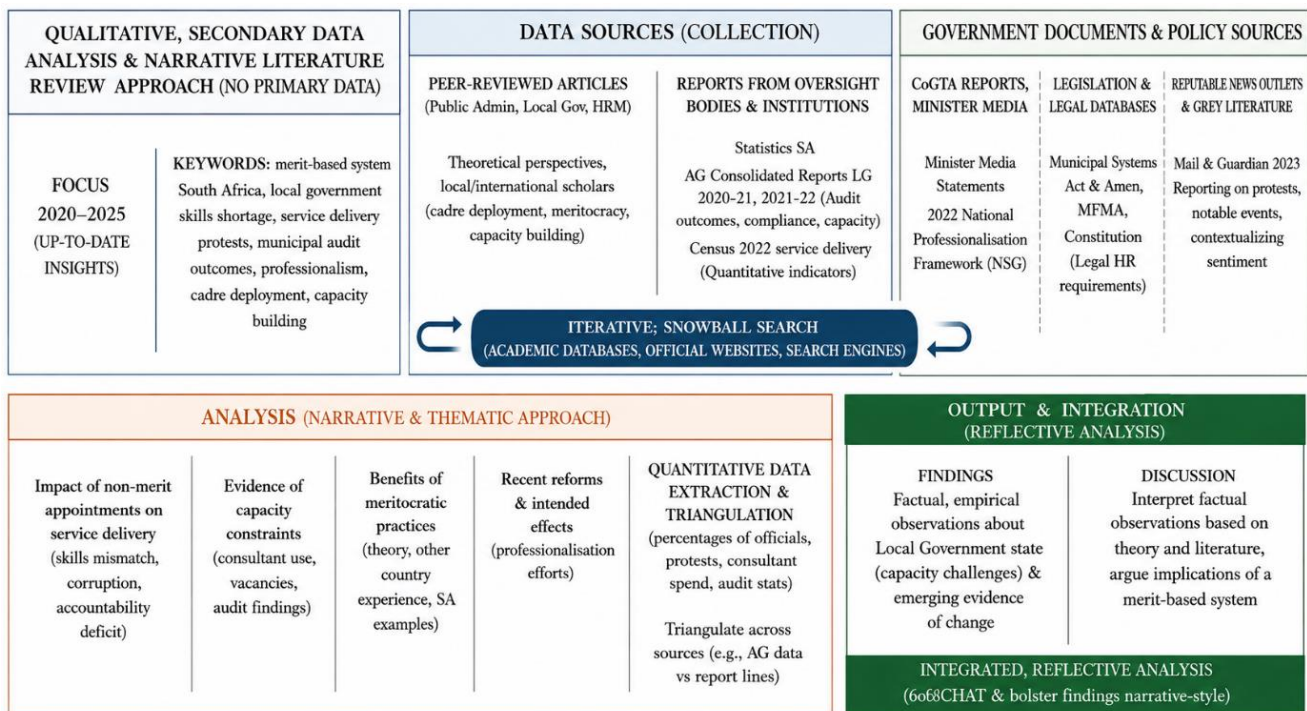
- The impact of non-merit appointments on service delivery (e.g., through themes of *skills mismatches, corruption/nepotism, accountability deficits*).
- Evidence of capacity constraints (such as use of consultants, vacancy rates, audit findings).
- The benefits of meritocratic practices, drawing from theory, other countries' experiences, and any examples within South Africa.
- Recent reforms and their intended effects (theme of *professionalisation efforts*).
- The relationship between meritocracy and sustainable service delivery (bringing together earlier themes to address the core research question).

Where possible, quantitative data, such as percentages of qualified officials, numbers of protests, consultant expenditures, and audit statistics, were extracted to provide concrete evidence within the narrative. These data points were triangulated across sources to ensure reliability; for example, a figure reported by the Auditor-General was cross-checked against the AG's official report lines or an official press release (Auditor-General of South

Africa, 2022). The literature review was integrated with the data findings to allow for a reflective analysis, meaning this paper does not rigidly separate findings and discussion but rather uses the literature to explain and bolster the findings narratively. However, for clarity and to meet academic structure requirements, distinct sections for "Findings" and "Discussion" are presented. The paper presents factual, empirical observations on the state of local government (capacity challenges) and notes emerging evidence of change. These findings are interpreted in light of theoretical expectations and the literature, and arguments are made about the implications of adopting a merit-based system.

By using this qualitative synthesis approach, the paper ensures a comprehensive view that is grounded in evidence yet able to engage with abstract concepts (like meritocracy and good governance). The approach is appropriate for the topic because it addresses complex social and administrative phenomena that require an understanding of context and causality, which pure quantitative analysis might not fully capture. The narrative style also makes the content accessible by linking cause and effect (how cadre deployment leads to poor outcomes and how merit appointments could alter that). As a secondary analysis, the study is limited by the quality and scope of available data. Some desired data (for example, a precise number of municipal staff vacancies nationwide or qualitative insights from municipal officials) were not readily available or up to date. There is also an inherent challenge in directly attributing improvements to merit-based practices, since multiple factors affect service delivery. However, by drawing on authoritative and recent sources and triangulating multiple forms of evidence, the study mitigates these limitations. The focus on the 2020–2025 period means that very recent developments are considered, but long-term historical trends are touched on only briefly (for context). Overall, the methodology provides a balanced and scholarly underpinning for the paper's analysis, ensuring that conclusions and recommendations are supported by documented evidence and established theory. Figure 1 illustrates the schematic representation of the research methodology adopted in this study.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of research methodology for this study



Source: compiled by the authors

4. Findings

Capacity Challenges in South African Local Government

The research finds that South African local governments face severe capacity and governance challenges, many of which can be linked to the absence of a strong meritocratic system in public sector employment. These challenges directly impair the municipalities' ability to deliver services sustainably. A consistent theme in the data is that many municipalities lack personnel with the necessary skills in critical areas. As noted earlier, by 2020, only about half of senior municipal officials nationwide met the minimum competency criteria for their jobs. Fields like financial management, engineering, and project management are particularly affected by shortages of qualified staff. For instance, *municipal engineering departments* often struggle to retain professionally registered engineers, affecting infrastructure maintenance and expansion. In 2020, a study highlighted that only 53% of senior managers in municipalities were appropriately qualified. This skills deficit has real consequences: complex tasks like compiling annual financial statements, planning water and sanitation systems, or managing procurement processes are not executed properly, leading to service delivery failures and audit findings.

High Reliance on Consultants due to Skills Gaps

Because of internal capacity limitations, municipalities have increasingly turned to consultants to perform essential functions, especially in financial reporting and technical projects. The Auditor-General reported that in the 2020-21 financial year, 62% of municipalities hired consultants to supplement the expertise of their finance units, and another 7% did so to fill vacant positions. In 2021-22, municipalities collectively spent R1.61 billion on financial reporting consultants, a 19% increase from R1.36 billion the previous year (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). These consultants are often used to prepare financial statements and asset registers, tasks that regular municipal staff should ideally handle (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). While consultants can provide short-term relief, the Auditor-General has warned that this practice is not sustainable – it does not build internal capacity. It often indicates that municipalities lack the necessary skills or fail to train and retain their own employees (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Indeed, some municipalities repeatedly use consultants year after year, effectively outsourcing core responsibilities. This is costly and sometimes ineffective; in a few cases, consultants failed to deliver the desired outcomes, resulting in wasteful expenditure (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). The underlying cause is that municipalities cannot find or attract skilled professionals to work in the public sector, or that hiring processes have resulted in less competent individuals who then require external help to do the job.

Vacancies and Turnover in Key Positions

Many municipalities experience instability in leadership positions. It is not uncommon for posts such as Municipal Manager or Chief Financial Officer to remain vacant or be filled in an acting capacity for extended periods. The HSRC's Municipal Capacity Assessment (2022) noted "high vacancy rates for key positions" as a recurring problem. Such instability disrupts strategic planning and weakens oversight of municipal operations. Frequent turnover – often due to political changes or dismissals tied to patronage shifts – results in the loss of institutional memory and momentum. Some municipalities have had multiple municipal managers within a single five-year term, each with possibly different priorities and varying levels of competence. This churn is exacerbated by the practice of cadre deployment, in which changes in political leadership can lead to the wholesale replacement of senior staff to align with new political patrons, rather than continuity based on merit.

Cadre Deployment and Non-Merit Appointments

The evidence strongly indicates that political appointments have undermined capacity. The ruling party (ANC) 's cadre deployment policy, which aimed to place loyalists in strategic positions, has often resulted in appointments made without due regard to merit or competence (Shava & Chamisa, 2018). A critical finding of the State Capture Commission (2022) was that such deployment was abused to facilitate patronage networks and was “*a key driver of state capture*”, even deemed unconstitutional in effect (Newswire, 2022; Mkhize, Thusi and Kayembe, 2025).

In local government, cadre deployment has manifested in municipal councils, influencing who gets appointed as managers or section heads, sometimes overruling recommendations of hiring panels. Makole (2022) finds that cadre deployment in the public service “denies qualified graduates’ opportunities” and skews hiring in favour of “*unqualified political appointees*,” thereby severely undermining state capacity. The consequence is that many municipalities have managers who are politically connected but inept, leading to poor decision-making, mismanagement, and in some cases, corruption. The morale among competent staff is also eroded in such environments, because merit and performance are not rewarded, reducing incentives for excellence or innovation.

Poor Governance and Accountability Practices

A lack of skilled, merit-appointed officials has a knock-on effect on governance. Internal controls in many municipalities are weak – evidenced by the prevalence of unauthorised, irregular, and fruitless expenditure reported by the Auditor-General each year. For example, in 2021-22, municipalities incurred billions of rands in irregular expenditures (often due to bypassing procurement rules), which suggests that officials either do not know the rules or willingly break them. The Auditor-General noted a “decline in adequate consequence management” for such transgressions (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). This means that even when wrongdoing or incompetence is identified, municipalities often fail to act (like disciplining or firing the responsible officials), which perpetuates a culture of impunity. The Public Service Commission has flagged that political interference in disciplinary processes often lets officials with serious misconduct off the hook. All of this is intertwined with non-merit appointments. When officials are in their posts due to connections, they might be protected by the same connections even if they underperform or engage in malpractice. Moreover, councillors and mayors may be reluctant to act against allies. The net effect is poor governance – financial mismanagement (wasting or misappropriating service delivery funds) and the erosion of public trust.

Service Delivery Outcomes and Protests

The ultimate test of capacity and governance is whether services are delivered. Unfortunately, the research confirms that in many municipalities, service delivery outcomes have been suboptimal or outright failing. There are municipalities where tap water is unsafe or does not flow regularly, where refuse is not collected, where electricity outages are common (aside from loadshedding), and where roads and sewer systems are crumbling. These failures have been a catalyst for community protests. As noted, 2022 saw 193 major service delivery protests across the country (Masson, 2023). Many of these protests specifically cite local issues: lack of water, persistent power failures, potholed roads, or incomplete housing projects. Analysis by Municipal IQ shows that the most protest-prone provinces (Gauteng, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal) are often those with municipalities in financial or administrative distress (Masson, 2023). The protests themselves sometimes turn violent, destroying municipal property – ironically worsening service delivery further. This level of public unrest signals that communities are not experiencing the promised improvements in services and correlates with dysfunction attributable to capacity deficits and mismanagement within local authorities.

To summarise the capacity challenges: South African local government is in many cases caught in a vicious cycle where lack of skilled staff leads to poor performance and governance, which in turn leads to service failures and public discontent, which then sometimes prompts short-term political fixes (like replacing people for political appeasement rather than fixing structural issues), further destabilising administrations. The data strongly suggests that breaking this cycle requires addressing the root problem of human resource capacity. A municipality can only be as good as the people who run it – this aligns with the earlier theoretical emphasis on person-job fit. The findings clearly show that current practices have often resulted in *misfits*: people in roles without the needed competence.

However, there are also signs of progress and recognition of these issues in recent years: Firstly, the national government's approval of a Professionalisation Framework in 2022 and the Cabinet's explicit call to “ditch” cadre deployment indicate a high-level acknowledgement of the problem (National School of Government, 2022). This

is a positive development; acknowledging the problem is the first step to solving it. As of mid-2023, municipalities are legally prohibited from appointing senior managers without proper qualifications and must vet candidates through competency assessments. Some provinces have started nullifying dubious appointments. For example, in 2023, the Eastern Cape provincial government invalidated the appointment of a municipal manager who didn't meet the requirements for a certain municipality. These enforcement actions set precedents and send a message that qualifications and merit matter. Even under current pressures, a few municipalities have maintained good performance, often credited to strong, qualified management teams. The Midvaal Local Municipality in Gauteng is frequently cited for consistently achieving clean audits and meeting most of its service delivery targets, thanks in part to a stable administration with skilled officials (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Such cases demonstrate what is possible when capacity is in place. They also show that having merit-based hiring (whether by policy or by coincidence of good leadership) correlates with better outcomes, reinforcing the argument for wider application of those principles.

Overall, the *Findings* highlight a clear gap between the current state of many municipalities and the *desired state* of a professional, high-performing local government sphere. This gap is largely a function of human resource failings – a gap that a merit-based system aims to fill. The next subsection of findings will directly address how a merit-based approach is beneficial and what evidence exists for those benefits, setting the stage for a more analytical discussion of how to transition to such a system.

5. Benefits of a Merit-Based System for Local Governance

The literature and empirical evidence highlight multiple benefits of adopting a merit-based public sector system, particularly at the local government level, where capacity and governance challenges are acute. Such a system can improve service delivery, strengthen governance, and ensure the sustainability of interventions by ensuring that capable and qualified individuals fill positions. Merit-based recruitment improves internal functioning by placing skilled people in roles where their expertise enables efficient processes, accurate service delivery, and timely task completion. In municipal contexts, this translates into better billing and revenue collection, improved infrastructure maintenance schedules, and more rigorous project management, all of which contribute to consistent service provision.

Transparency in appointments also weakens corrupt patronage networks. Open and competitive selection processes empower citizens to hold government accountable by exposing hiring practices to scrutiny, thereby deterring appointments based on loyalty or personal connections. In South Africa, where public accountability has often been compromised, requiring positions to be earned on merit diminishes the perception and reality of a “spoils system.” Career bureaucrats selected on merit are more likely to adhere to professional ethics and less beholden to political patrons, increasing their willingness to enforce rules and resist malpractice. International evidence further shows that meritocratic civil services correlate with lower corruption levels, partly because staff have more to lose when performance, rather than political favour, determines career progression.

Merit-based systems also attract top talent. Talented graduates and experienced professionals are more inclined to join public service if career advancement is based on competence rather than favouritism (Sudrajat, 2023). Such systems expand the recruitment pool, ensure equal opportunity, and help retain high performers. Conversely, in politicised environments, skilled staff often leave or disengage when advancement is blocked by nepotism. Public trust in local government can be restored when communities see that officials are appointed fairly and deliver results. The National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector identifies merit-based recruitment as central to reversing negative perceptions of public service hiring (Newswire, 2022). Examples such as competent engineers repairing infrastructure or skilled CFOs restoring municipal finances demonstrate visible improvements that bolster legitimacy, encourage resident cooperation, and support social stability.

Qualified professionals in a meritocratic environment are better positioned to implement policy effectively and innovate solutions to local challenges. Such systems integrate training and development, as seen in initiatives by the National School of Government, which enhance adaptability to technological and environmental changes. Without qualified staff, even well-designed policies, like smart metering, can fail. With competent teams, resources are used more efficiently, and service delivery supports the broader developmental agenda. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 goals, including universal access to basic services, depend on municipalities staffed by skilled administrators.

Experience from certain municipalities shows the value of professionalisation. The Western Cape, for example, recorded the highest proportion of clean audits and better service delivery in 2021–22, partly due to stricter merit-based hiring and less political interference. The Auditor-General has praised municipalities with strong audit outcomes for having stable, qualified leadership and effective financial and performance management systems. Recent policy reforms are promising. The 2022 legislative amendments prohibiting senior officials from holding political office and requiring specific qualifications have begun to improve the quality of recruitment. Some municipal manager posts now attract candidates from beyond traditional political networks, including private sector professionals and officials from other provinces, broadening the talent base. While the full impact will take time to materialise, these developments suggest a shift toward openness and competitiveness.

Makole (2022) reinforces the argument that abandoning cadre deployment in favour of performance-based meritocracy is essential for fulfilling democratic promises. By appointing the most competent individuals, municipalities can better utilise scarce financial and human resources, reduce waste, and improve delivery in critical areas such as water, electricity, waste management, and local economic development. Ultimately, moving to a merit-based system in local government is not a superficial HR reform but a foundational transformation. It directly addresses root causes of municipal underperformance, skills deficits and weak accountability, leading to more effective daily operations and better outcomes for citizens. This shift promises to replace cycles of dysfunction with systems that reward competence, professionalism, and service to the public, thereby building the institutional capacity needed for sustainable service delivery.

6. Discussion

The findings above paint a clear picture of why a merit-based public sector system is desirable for South African local government: it would directly counteract the capacity shortfalls and governance failures that hinder service delivery. In this discussion, we delve deeper into the implications of these findings, connect them with the theoretical framework and literature, and consider the pathways and challenges to realising a meritocratic local government. The central argument remains that *adopting merit-based recruitment and professionalisation is pivotal for sustainable service delivery improvement*. Here, we discuss *how and why* that is the case, as well as acknowledge the complexities involved in the transition. The Person-Job Fit Theory highlighted earlier is strongly corroborated by the evidence. Where there is misalignment (unqualified individuals in roles), performance suffers; where alignment is present (qualified, competent officials), performance improves. This seems intuitive, but is worth stressing – *getting the right people in the right jobs is a prerequisite for everything else*. Sustainable service delivery (which means consistent, ongoing delivery that meets current needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs) relies on systems and processes. Still, those, in turn, rely on people to design, operate, and maintain them. For example, a water treatment plant's sustainability depends on skilled engineers and managers overseeing it. No amount of funding or political will can compensate for a lack of necessary skills; eventually, the plant will fall into disrepair or operate below capacity. Conversely, a team of competent, motivated individuals can often do more with less – stretching limited resources, innovating to solve problems, and preemptively addressing maintenance issues. The findings about consultant reliance and financial mismanagement underscore that South Africa has been paying a price for poor person-job fit. This, in turn, strengthens the case that a merit-based approach (which maximises person-job fit) would yield better outcomes.

The discussion of benefits highlighted improved accountability and reduced corruption as expected outcomes of meritocracy. This deserves further exploration. *How exactly does merit-based hiring improve accountability?* The answer lies in both the type of individuals hired and the system around them. First, individuals selected on merit are likely to have stronger professional ethics (though this is not guaranteed; the recruitment process can include vetting of integrity and references). They also do not owe their position to a political patron, so they may feel freer to enforce rules even if it displeases politicians. Second, the act of hiring transparently sets a tone of the rule of law in the organisation. If a municipal council conspicuously follows proper procedure to hire a new manager (open advert, competitive interview, etc.), it signals to everyone in the administration that rules matter – which can translate to better enforcement of procurement rules, financial controls, etc., by that manager. This helps break the culture of impunity. Empirically, as mentioned, municipalities with clean audits tend to have had merit-based appointments, at least at the technical level; they often also have political leadership that respects administrative autonomy. The New South Institute's (2024) policy brief suggests strategies for reforming the senior civil service on the basis of merit to ensure sound governance. It argues that "political ties often take precedence over aptitude and skill" in the current system, and that reversing this will lead to more effective government. Our findings echo this: political appointments bred the dysfunction; hence, merit appointments can remedy it by placing skill and aptitude at the forefront.

The October 2022 Cabinet approval of the Professionalisation Framework marked a decisive moment in South Africa's governance reform agenda. The framework's language was unusually candid for a government policy document, explicitly criticising "deployment practices" and calling for a shift back to merit-based appointments. This change in tone was prompted by the damning findings of the Zondo Commission, combined with years of pressure from civil society and political opposition, including legal challenges to cadre deployment. The framework proposes a range of concrete measures: public service entry exams, compulsory integrity tests, and the creation of a Head of the Public Service to oversee the career progression of senior officials in a non-partisan way. For local government, recommendations include strengthening recruitment processes and engaging professional bodies, such as the Institute of Municipal Finance Officers, to vet key appointments, such as Chief Financial Officers. If fully implemented, these proposals could entrench meritocratic systems and make regression to politically driven appointments more difficult. However, policy adoption does not guarantee implementation. Resistance is likely, especially from individuals and networks benefiting from the current system. Even within the ANC, some members rejected Zondo's stance on cadre deployment as overreach. At the municipal level, councillors accustomed to influencing recruitment may resist losing that power. Overcoming this will require rigorous oversight, supported by legislative tools allowing provinces to nullify improperly made senior appointments. The Public Service Commission, civil society organisations, the media, and public opinion will be vital watchdogs in ensuring compliance and deterring cronyism.

Meritocracy must also coexist with South Africa's transformation objectives. Critics sometimes argue that strict merit-based systems disadvantage historically disadvantaged groups who, because of past inequalities, may lack the qualifications demanded. The framework addresses this by advocating universal merit standards while expanding training, mentorship, and professional development to increase the pool of qualified candidates from all backgrounds. Historical context reveals that pre-1994 nepotism often advantaged unqualified white individuals; today, nepotism can cross racial lines. The Constitution's principles of "ability, objectivity, fairness, and the need to redress past imbalances" support an approach that does not lower standards but instead helps more candidates reach them. Researchers such as Makole (2022) reinforce this balanced view: uphold merit while accelerating skills development for disadvantaged groups. The shift to merit-based appointments will not deliver instant results. Some municipalities are so institutionally damaged that even highly competent new managers may take years to reverse entrenched problems like debt, failing infrastructure, and unskilled staff. Nonetheless, improvements such as better financial discipline or customer service could be realised within a year, with more substantial outcomes, including reliable service delivery and cleaner audits, achievable over a 3–5-year horizon.

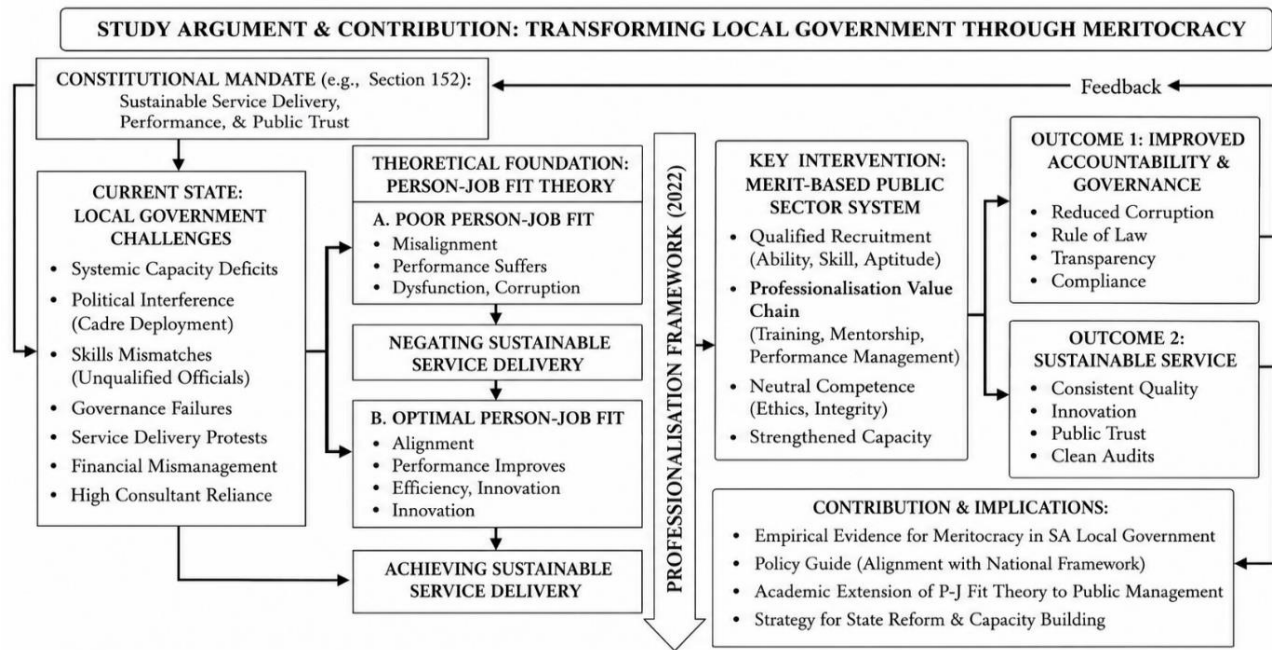
Professionalisation must be seen as a long-term process. The “professionalisation value chain” outlined by the National School of Government covers the full cycle of human resource development: pre-service training, recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and career progression. Mandatory training tied to promotion, partnerships with universities to build graduate pipelines, and mentorship from ethical professionals can strengthen this chain. Beyond internal operations, professionalisation can improve public engagement. Competent, confident officials are better positioned to engage communities transparently, encouraging citizen cooperation rather than protest. These dynamic supports enable the co-production of services, where residents actively contribute, such as by reporting infrastructure issues or paying for services. Municipalities that demonstrate responsive, reliable service provision can foster public trust, creating a positive feedback loop that supports sustained performance improvements.

The framework's emphasis on meritocracy resonates with foundational public administration theories: Weber's bureaucratic model, which stresses neutral competence; the Wilsonian separation of politics from administration; and New Public Management's focus on measurable performance. In South Africa, blurred lines between politics and administration have compromised service delivery; the merit-based approach seeks to restore professional neutrality as a cornerstone of governance. Ethics are integral to this reform. Technical qualifications alone are insufficient; an ethical public service ethos must be cultivated. If recruitment is based on loyalty rather than competence, it signals tolerance for bending the rules. Merit-based hiring allows for ethical vetting, such as checking for past misconduct or conflicts of interest. Over time, this can build a professional cadre of career civil servants who identify primarily as public servants rather than political operatives. This cultural shift valuing rule-based integrity over patronage can be as impactful as structural changes.

With professionalisation now a formal government policy, there is an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to contribute to its practical implementation. Research could focus on municipalities piloting these reforms or evaluating the effects of new training programs. This process represents a live experiment in state reform, offering valuable lessons for governance in South Africa and beyond. A merit-based public sector offers a coherent response to multiple interlinked challenges facing local government. If recruitment and promotion are based on ability, municipalities can rebuild capacity, improve services, and restore public trust. The rationale is well-supported by both theory and comparative evidence. While resistance and implementation challenges remain, these can be overcome through political leadership, institutional oversight, and active civic engagement. As the 2026 local government elections approach, municipalities will increasingly be judged on their operational competence, creating both a principled and pragmatic reason to embrace meritocracy: it is ethically sound and politically strategic for councils aiming to demonstrate tangible progress to voters.

7. Recommendations

A schematic framework (Figure 2) is further provided to distil the study's argument by showing the logical flow from the constitutional mandate for sustainable service delivery to the systemic capacity deficits caused by political interference, cadre deployment, and skills mismatches. The Person–Job Fit Theory provides the conceptual link between merit-based recruitment and improved municipal performance. At the core is the argument that professionalisation through qualified appointments, targeted skills development, and reduced political interference can strengthen capacity, accountability, and service quality while reducing corruption. The framework also highlights the study's contribution as both an empirical case for meritocracy in South African local government and a policy guide aligned with the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector.



*Empirical links between Merit-Based Appointments and Clean Audits noted in the study (refer to full discussion).

Figure 2. Conceptual framework for merit-based recruitment and professionalisation in South African local government

Source: compiled by the authors

Based on the conceptual framework developed above, the authors recommend the following measures:

- Political leadership should refrain from interfering in municipalities' nationwide recruitment processes; instead, administrative leadership should assume responsibility for these systems. Ensuring a clear line of authority will foster transparency and accountability in the recruitment process.
- The Human Resources Management Unit within municipalities must ensure that individuals appointed to positions meet the necessary qualifications. To achieve this goal, it is essential to involve experts from the respective fields in the recruitment process. These experts can provide insights into the specific skills and competencies required for each role, enhancing the overall quality of the hiring process.
- Administrative leadership in municipalities across South Africa should advocate for the professionalisation of the public service, ensuring that appointees are well suited to their roles. This professionalisation can include ongoing training and development programs that keep employees up to date on best practices and emerging trends in public administration. Additionally, administrative leadership should establish strong control systems to prevent any political interference in the recruitment process. This could involve implementing standardised procedures and transparent criteria for evaluating candidates, allowing for fair assessments based solely on merit.
- Furthermore, municipalities should consider adopting technology-driven solutions, such as applicant tracking systems, to streamline the recruitment process and maintain an organised record of applicants. By leveraging technology, the recruitment process can be made more efficient and reduce the potential for bias. Lastly, ongoing evaluations of the recruitment processes should be conducted to ensure they remain effective and aligned with the evolving needs of the municipalities. Regular feedback from employees and community stakeholders can help identify areas for improvement and reinforce the commitment to a fair and professional public service.

8. Conclusion

Over three decades into democracy, South Africa's local government system continues to struggle to meet its constitutional mandate of delivering sustainable services to all. This paper identifies a chronic skills and capacity deficit in municipalities as a central cause, rooted in persistent non-meritocratic hiring practices, including cadre deployment, nepotism, and politically motivated appointments. These approaches have repeatedly placed unqualified or unsuitable individuals in critical posts, undermining efficiency, accountability, and the effectiveness of governance. The consequences are most severe for the country's poorest citizens, who often face inconsistent or inadequate access to water, sanitation, electricity, refuse removal, and road maintenance.

Public dissatisfaction is reflected in hundreds of service delivery protests since the inception of democratic local government, with a sharp increase in recent years. These protests are grassroots expressions of frustration, signalling that in many communities, living conditions have stagnated or worsened. Each reported case of municipal corruption, infrastructure collapse, or governance failure reinforces the urgency for reform. A decisive shift toward merit-based systems is essential. Under meritocracy, recruitment and promotion prioritise qualifications, competence, experience, and ethical conduct over political loyalty or personal connections. Evidence shows that such systems, coupled with professionalisation, align staff capabilities with job demands, leading to better planning, resource management, infrastructure maintenance, and problem-solving. While implementation will face resistance from entrenched political interests and require substantial training, these are challenges of execution rather than of principle.

To operationalise this shift, strict enforcement of the 2022 legislative amendments and related regulations is needed, with oversight by bodies such as the Auditor-General and the Public Service Commission. Capacity-building initiatives should train HR personnel in competency-based recruitment, supported by toolkits from the DPISA, DCoG, and SALGA. Political leaders must respect the separation of political and administrative roles, reinforced through orientation and best-practice examples. Finally, recruitment processes should be transparent and participatory, with wide advertising, published criteria, and community observer involvement to build public trust. Embedding meritocracy in local government is both a reaffirmation of core principles of public administration and a strategic reform aligned with developmental goals. Professionalisation is not optional; it is vital. Failure to act will perpetuate service delivery breakdowns, public unrest, and declining trust in local democracy. At the same time, a merit-based approach offers the promise of capable, ethical, and citizen-centred municipalities that deliver consistently and sustainably.

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Author Contributions: Conceptualisation: XT; methodology: NM; data analysis: XT, NM, writing—original draft preparation: XT, NM, writing; review and editing: NM; visualisation: NM. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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