



Now you see it, now you don't: The elusive Nkandla

Pachydermal Nkandla conspicuously absent

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Nkandla was the elephant in the room on budget day. Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan took a strong stance on corruption and wasteful expenditure but failed to mention a single word about the R206-million spent on President Jacob Zuma's residence at Nkandla.

In his speech, Gordhan waxed lyrical: "Rooting out corruption requires collective effort from all of us."

Perhaps the trail could be picked up in the public works Budget Review document? Alas, not one of its 24 pages offered a hint at where the funding came from.

But just last month, following an internal probe, Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi confirmed the government had spent R206-million on security upgrades and consultants at Zuma's rural home. Of this, R135-million was for the "operational needs" of government departments at Nkandla, and R71-million was for consultants and security features such as bulletproof windows, security fencing, evacuation mechanisms and firefighting equipment.

If one was to guess, one might suppose the expenses could be buried in the ministry of public works' immovable asset management programme, which includes infrastructure spending for housing and associated

security for ministers, as well as the upgrading of buildings.

The audited outcome for this programme in 2011-2012 was R5-billion, and the estimate for the next financial year is R3-billion.

But the Budget Review, a barrage of text and tables, needed an interpreter. Perhaps an approach to the treasury was in order.

An official, who was not permitted to give his name, skilfully dodged the question. "We are waiting for investigations to be completed," he said.

The department has conducted an internal investigation of the matter, in addition to investigations by the public protector, the auditor general and the standing committee on public accounts.

"What you are asking is where the money came from," said the official.

"Well, yes."

"Let's wait for the investigations to see," he said, smiling broadly.

The Budget Review did suggest the department is planning to embark on a turnaround programme to completely transform its structure.

Meanwhile, more will be spent on state functions over the next three years. The expenditure is expected to increase at an average annual rate of 23.5%, mainly for the next presidential inauguration ceremony in 2014.

Hopefully the party planners will remember to cater for elephants.