

# Department risks lives of workers

The heartbreaking news of firefighters losing their lives in Johannesburg has revealed a much bigger crisis of maintenance and safety standards of government buildings on national and provincial levels.

The Bank of Lisbon tragedy was not an isolated case, it is part of a larger breakdown of asset management in the department of public works and its provincial counterparts.

Tshwane mayor Solly Msimanga averted a similar tragedy when he ordered the Poynton's Building, occupied by the correctional services department, to be evacuated.

These buildings are among thousands around the country that have been falling into disrepair.

Last year, in a DA parlia-

mentary question reply, the department revealed that 9,413, or 10%, of the 93,944 buildings it was responsible for were in poor condition, which means serious structural defects were present.

Shockingly, more than 3,000 buildings were in a very poor condition and unfit for occupation.

One might imagine not enough resources are being spent on maintenance by the department, but the truth is that the department has completely mismanaged funds that are intended for maintenance and upgrades.

In a parliamentary reply to a DA question, public works minister Thulas Nxesi revealed that of the roughly 1,000 properties the depart-

ment was leasing, it was only covering around 10% of the costs associated with the properties.

Since financial year 2015/16, the department had spent more than R1.12bn, with the department only securing R115.29m in rental income, which means a massive shortfall of nearly R1bn.

On the one end, it charges well below market rents and, on the other end, pays huge amounts for the upkeep of buildings.

In a presentation to parliament, the anti-corruption unit investigating tender irregularities in the department of public works noted, "Huge amounts of money were paid to these contractors at the time of cancellations of their

contracts, in some instances to values exceeding the contract amount. It is suspected that the department did not get value for money in this regard and/or there is no justification for the payments made."

Nxesi is no stranger to wasting the taxpayers' money.

He gave us the famous fire pool of Nkandla, purchases of multimillion-rand homes for the cabinet and millions spent on lavish furnishings for those properties.

He likes to blame all the ills of the department on "state capture forces", but it is, in fact, his leadership that has directly led to the breakdown of the department.

In both his current and previous tenure he has failed to rein in reckless spending of

his department and, more worryingly, put the lives of thousands at risk.

It is unacceptable that government employees are subjected to unsafe buildings which do not meet the required compliance with health and safety regulations.

What is required now is a complete overhaul of the asset management practices of the department that includes continued monitoring of building conditions with associated maintenance plans.

The DA will continue to ensure that needless loss of life is prevented, and those responsible for not complying with health and safety regulations are brought to book.

*Dr Malcolm Figg MP, DA shadow minister of public works*