

# Less than 13% of provincial government buildings in good condition

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An investigation into government-owned buildings in the Eastern Cape found that only 36 out of the 279 structures assessed were in good condition.

This amounts to 12.9% of the properties in question, which include clinics, hospitals and schools.

Only 229 were considered to be in fair condition while 14 were categorised as bad.

Tabling the public works committee's annual report on Tuesday, portfolio chair Nomvula Ponco said out of the technical assessments completed on 279 properties across the province, only 36 were considered to be in good condition.

"In the absence of an adequate maintenance budget, there is a risk that the properties classified as being in fair condition will regress to a bad condition."

Ponco also highlighted vacant buildings owned by the department of public works that were being vandalised or illegally occupied by individuals or institutions.

She said this was a recurring problem.

On Monday, public works MEC Babalo Madikizela said in an interview that R100m was owed to the department for unpaid rent.

This was especially a problem in Mthatha, he said.

The OR Tambo district had the biggest problem when it came to the illegal occupation of government buildings, Madikizela said.

"We've already sent lawyer's

letters to those illegal occupants and once this programme is up and running [to evict the illegal occupants] we'll roll it throughout the province," he said.

The department's property portfolio in the province is worth more than R70bn.

In December 2018, Daily Dispatch reported that 121 buildings had been hijacked from the department and the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC).

Among those were 113 houses, five offices and three business apartments.

Meanwhile, in October the department sent out a notice calling for budding entrepreneurs to submit proposals for the redevelopment and leasing of some state-owned properties in the province.

At the time, Madikizela said the vacant buildings could be used for accommodation, workshops and other specialised industries.

The proposals were for 30-year leases, with the option to extend the lease by a further 20 years.

According to Ponco, one of the problems experienced by the department was that it was struggling to recruit professional engineers to fill vacancies.

In the period under review, the department incurred fruitless and wasteful expenditure amounting to R486m.

"Though there has been a significant decrease over the years in the amount of irregular expenditure, the current balance of R131m still remains a concern to the committee.

"The committee is con-

cerned with the irregular expenditure cases that were not reported and investigated," Ponco said.

She added the consequence management system was not working effectively enough because many cases took too long to be investigated.

The portfolio committee recommended that the department fast-track investigations into cases of irregular expenditure that had been identified.

"[A] thorough investigation must be conducted to determine the causes of fruitless and wasteful expenditure, and disciplinary actions must be taken against those officials.

"A comprehensive report in this regard must be submitted to the committee," Ponco said.

On Tuesday, Madikizela said the department was committed to using the property portfolio as a means to improve the province's revenue-generation efforts.

"In this regard, the department has embarked on a process of updating its lease register with a view to ensure that leases are both legally valid and at market-related rates.

"We have also established relations with the office of the state attorney for arrears rental collection as well as effecting evictions [of hijacked buildings] where applicable.

"This work is in full swing in the OR Tambo region and soon we will be getting into [the] Amathole district municipality," he said.

On curbing irregular expenditure, Madikizela said they would implement strict consequence management.