

A Governance Framework for Planning Approval of Housing Developments to Enhance Growth in the Economy

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DOI: 10.48494/REALCORP2026.3180

1 ABSTRACT

This research investigates the components of a governance framework for planning approvals of housing developments in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on its linkages to economic growth. Through qualitative research, including interviews with 25 experienced professionals and analysis of municipal reports, the study identifies the roles of key stakeholders – such as municipal officials, technical experts, and community representatives – in the planning approval for housing development. Findings reveal that while multiple digital and administrative systems support planning approvals, their lack of integration hampers effective monitoring and reporting. The research highlights spatial disparities in development activity and demonstrates a correlation between certain approval types and economic growth datasets. However, fragmented governance structures and inconsistent reporting practices limit the ability to align planning approvals with broader economic and spatial goals. The study proposes a collaborative governance framework that incorporates standardized indicators, improved integration of digital systems, and multi-level oversight to enhance transparency, accountability, and turnaround times. While the framework may be tailored to the city of Johannesburg, the methodology and recommendations offer valuable insights for other metropolitan areas regionally and internationally.

Keywords: planning approvals, governance, housing, development, frameworks

2 INTRODUCTION

This research examines the planning approval processes for housing development. It highlights the challenges posed by fragmented and inefficient planning approval processes. The research investigates the stakeholders involved in planning approvals for housing developments in Johannesburg. It analyses historical trends in reported approvals alongside South Africa's Gross Domestic Product data set as one of the measures of economic growth and establishes a correlation between the types of planning approvals and economic growth. It proposes a governance framework to improve coordination, monitoring, and reporting of outcomes. The research is organised into background explanations, a problem statement, a literature review, key role players, input for the thematic governance framework, and a conclusion.

3 BACKGROUND

Nearly half of South Africa's population resides within eight metropolitan municipalities, which function as principal centres for economic activity and administer substantial budgets. These metros – Nelson Mandela Bay, Johannesburg, Tshwane, Cape Town, Buffalo City, eThekweni, Mangaung, and Ekurhuleni – are responsible for governing significant urban areas. South African municipalities are categorised as Category A (metropolitan), B (local), or C (district), with Category A municipalities exercising exclusive authority within their regions. Johannesburg, one of the nation's largest metropolitan areas, accommodates approximately 6.45 million residents, as reported in the 2022 census. The city draws the highest levels of domestic and international investment nationwide and encompasses an area of about 1,644 square kilometres. In recent years, Johannesburg has prioritised considerable investment in digital infrastructure, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to improve service delivery. Furthermore, Johannesburg has hosted prominent international events including the UN Global Summit (2002), FIFA World Cup (2010), and G20 and U20 Mayoral Summits (2025), establishing the city as a key venue for global urban dialogue.

4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Governance and reporting within South African metropolitan municipalities are characterised by specialisation, fragmentation and not too strong coordination arrangements, resulting in inefficiencies in both housing development and service delivery. While initiatives such as National Treasury's Municipal Finance Management Act Circular 88 have been introduced, legislative complexities arising from statutes like the Spatial Land Use Management Act (2013) and the National Environmental Management Act (1998) continue to complicate data management and administrative processes. Research indicates that convoluted procedures, overlapping reporting requirements between province and national governments, elevated system costs, and constrained regulatory capacity impede the effective assessment of economic growth. Stevens (2025) identifies regulatory overlaps, procedural complexity, high system costs, and limited regulatory resources as significant challenges. Similarly, Mokoale (2022) observes that multi-authority reporting leads to redundant and inconsistent data, thereby restricting evidence on how efficient planning approvals contribute to economic development, despite cities being recognised as engines of economic and employment growth. The City of Johannesburg (2022:150) highlights additional issues such as delays in processing planning applications, slow response times regarding requirements, inadequate bulk infrastructure, technological difficulties, and insufficient integration with related systems like billing. In 2023, the City of Johannesburg (2023:144) announced intentions to digitise manual planning procedures to improve transparency and efficiency; however, the effectiveness of these measures has yet to be determined. A key obstacle remains the absence of a cohesive governance framework capable of integrating planning data, building control, and economic growth metrics, which hampers the ability to accurately evaluate the impact of ongoing reforms.

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Countries use planning and policies to promote development and need collaboration across government and sectors for effective results. de Visser & Poswa (2019) highlight that in South Africa, the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) and the National Spatial Development Framework (NSDF) are used to guide infrastructure investment. The NSDF is mandated in terms of Spatial Land Use Management Act of 2013 to direct national development. In addition, there are funding-related frameworks such as the Medium-Term Revenue and Expenditure Framework (MTREF) and the Integrated Financial Framework for Greening South African Metropolitan Cities (IFFGSAMC). These frameworks aim to align budgets with sustainability goals. South Africa also employs a Scenario-Based Planning Framework (SBPF), which introduces flexible planning through three growth scenarios: *Nayi le Walk*, *Isibhujwa*, and *Gwara Gwara*. The *Nayi le Walk* scenario envisions a positive future where the country moves toward achieving National Development Plan (NDP) targets. In contrast, the *Isibhujwa* scenario represents a continuation of existing trends, marked by low economic growth and high inequality. The *Gwara Gwara* scenario depicts a "struggling false dawn," where aspirations remain unfulfilled.

Furthermore, to these national frameworks, international approaches also offer valuable insights. For example, the Major Infrastructure Delivery Framework (MIDF) in England focuses on climate adaptation in water infrastructure and leverages expertise in procurement and engineering. Meanwhile, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of England aims to increase housing delivery, although it has faced critiques regarding its overall effectiveness (National Treasury: 2025; Sedighi, et al: 2025; Upton: 2019).

Despite the range of frameworks available, a significant challenge remains: these frameworks often lack a mechanism of showing a clear connection between planning approvals for housing development and economic growth. For instance, despite the implementation of the NPPF, recent studies have shown that increases in housing approvals have not consistently resulted in measurable economic growth in several regions (Sedighi et al: 2025).

Recent studies by Mhlongo, Gumbo, and Musondo (2022) highlight ongoing challenges in South Africa's low-income housing sector, such as limited stakeholder involvement, weak accountability, and transparency issues. Despite multiple governance frameworks, these problems persist, underscoring the need for collaborative co-production models as proposed by Maila, Malan, and Mazenda (2024: 10), and Maila (2025), which require shared legislative understanding and active stakeholder participation. Irtyshcheva et al. (2023) stress the importance of clear objectives and robust tracking systems due to concurrent national and provincial responsibilities depicted by Mathonsi (2020), while Ndevu and Muller (2018) emphasize the critical role of local governments. Carter, Klein, and Day (2002) call for performance-driven, accountable public

sector management. Although National Treasury (2017) introduced standardized performance indicators (MFMA Circular 88), continues to refine them, gaps remain in stakeholder coordination and evidence linking planning approvals to economic and spatial outcomes. The researchers have crafted the conceptual framework in figure 1 below to emphasize the need for improved integration and monitoring, provide clarity on stakeholder roles, reporting practices, and their connection to economic development, focusing on housing development context in Johannesburg. The conceptual framework visually structures these concepts and variables and provides a basis for further research.

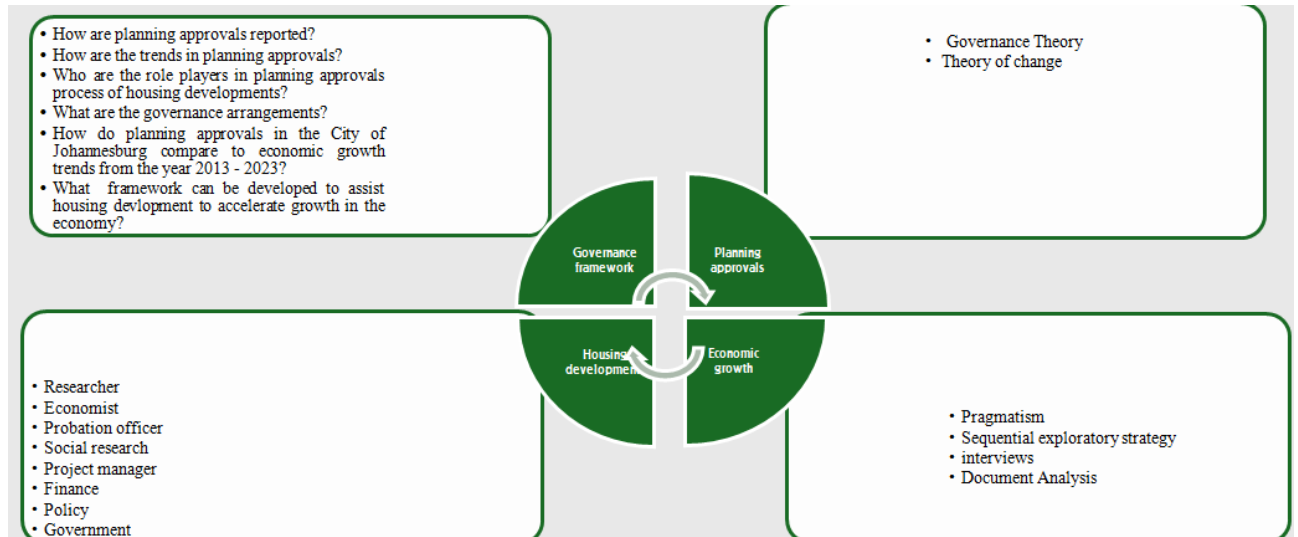


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Own diagram)

This study is grounded in Foucault's concept of governmentality (Kerr, 1999) to examine the governance frameworks shaping planning approvals for housing developments, with a particular focus on stakeholder roles and their links to economic growth. The researchers also acknowledge that post-2024 municipal planning in South Africa is now influenced by coalition governance, which necessitates balancing diverse interests alongside economic and spatial development (Kariuki & van der Walddt, 2025). Furthermore, this research draws upon Dean's (2010) refined concept of governmentality, which encompasses citizens' collective perceptions of governance. Notably, Stoker (1998), in conceptualising governance theory, clearly distinguishes between authority (government) and coordination (governance). The researchers also reference the work of Munzhedzi (2021), who asserts that effective governance involves both public and private service delivery. These considerations inform the formulation of the research questions.

6 RESEARCH QUESTION

The main question in this study is who the roleplayers are in the planning approval for housing development in Johannesburg, and what are the governance arrangements?

7 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative method, selecting around 25 experienced professionals for semi-structured virtual interviews about planning approval. Document analysis drew from city trend reports, annual reports, and systems from relevant agencies. The research focused on planning approval applications in Sunninghill, Inner City of Johannesburg, Kyalami, and Sandton.

8 FINDINGS

The study revealed the following: Reporting Practices: Planning approvals are recorded in annual and trend reports, as well as digital systems; reporting varies by application type and region. There are differences in how planning approvals are reported in the annual reports and no integrated national tracking mechanisms to better inform economic growth discussions. The study recommends further research and comparative analysis across metropolitan areas, emphasizing that current reporting gaps hinder effective monitoring and calling for greater integration at the national level.

Systems Supporting Planning Approvals: The main systems identified are as per table 1 below. At present, these systems are not fully integrated, which restricts the ability to conduct comprehensive monitoring and reporting.

System Name	Administrators
Town Planning Application System (TAS)	City of Johannesburg
Housing Subsidy System (HSS)	Provincial and National Departments of Human Settlements
Geographic Information System (GIS)	City of Johannesburg, Provincial and National Departments
Strategic Innovation Hub (SIH)	Provincial and National Human Settlements, National Cooperative Governance

Table1: Systems Supporting Planning Approvals

Trends in Planning Approval Applications within the City of Johannesburg: The planning approval process includes applications for rezoning, township establishment, subdivision/consolidation, special consent, site development/building plans, and township establishment. Outcomes are approved, refused, withdrawn, or appealed. From 2006 to 2023, the highest number of applications was in Johannesburg's inner city, followed by Sandton, Sunninghill, and Kyalami. See Table 2 for more details.

Application Type	Sunninghill	Sandton	Kyalami	Inner City
Rezoning	58	426	23	2323
New Township	8	0	12	33
Consent	42	188	22	1342
Subdivision / Consolidation	42	171	12	2644
Site Development	65	257	44	1337

Table 2: Development applications approved from 2006- 2023. Source: Own table extracted from the City Of Johannesburg development planning trend report for 2023/24Financial Year

The figures in table 2 illustrate spatial disparities in development activity across the city of Johannesburg. However, does not provide an explanation of why is it the case and what factors inform decision making.

Planning Approvals vs Gross Domestic Product in Johannesburg (2013–2023) Trends:Using data from Johannesburg’s development trends report and GDP figures from Statistics South Africa, this analysis examines links between development application types and economic growth. Over the past decade, township establishment applications have shown a correlation with GDP, while zoning applications followed a different pattern. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

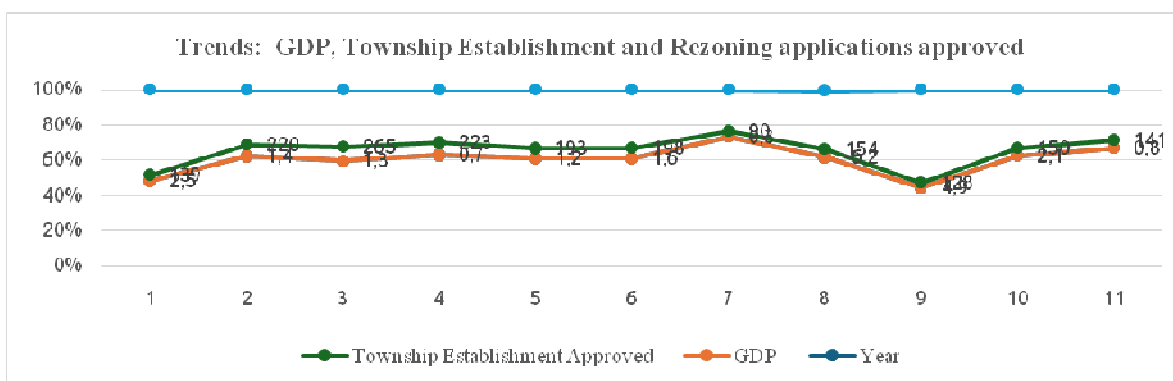


Figure 2: Graph comparison of trends in GDP, Township establishment applications approved and rezoning applications approved (Source: Authors own diagram using City of Johannesburg data and Stats SA data sets on GDP Period from 2013-2023)

Key role players in planning approval for housing developments: The approval process involves consultants or developers who coordinate applications, and municipal officials who review and approve plans. Key professionals – town and regional planners (Planning Profession Act, 2002), engineers (Engineering Profession Act, 2000), conveyancers (Deeds Registries Act, 1937), land surveyors (Land Survey Act, 1997), community facilitators (Municipal Systems Act, 2000; Housing Act, 1997), project managers, valuers, and architects – all ensure compliance, safety, legal accuracy, inclusivity, and sustainability (Oladiran et al., 2025). Citizens, especially marginalized groups, also participate through objections and consultation. Researchers emphasize governance frameworks to enhance social inclusion and address spatial inequities.

The Governance Arrangements: The city has a solid governance system for development planning, guided by frameworks such as the MSDF, RSDF, Land Use Scheme, Bi laws, Nodal Policies, council-approved delegations, business processes, and procedural manuals with checklists. Delegated officials process applications, while tribunal members handle appeals and objections, supported by a secretariat that maintains records and follows the monthly schedule of meetings. This promotes transparency, efficient project approvals, and coordinated planning in Johannesburg. However, the connection between planning approvals and economic growth remains weak. Housing stakeholders include developers, officials, and experts, but economic growth is mainly discussed informally, with no formal forum. Early assessments consider land, infrastructure, transport, heritage, and socio-economic factors. City managers track economic growth, but resource constraints limit broader integration of these discussions.

Proposed components of the Framework for Planning Approval Monitoring: Respondents identified these key elements: 1) Municipal planning approvals require inputs such as rezoning and township establishment applications submitted by qualified experts. 2) Main activities involve processing, analysing, managing objections, and reporting on applications. 3) Outputs are assessed using transparent metrics and economic valuations. 4) Desired outcomes include improved environments, spatial transformation, job creation, and economic growth. Success depends on system maintenance, timely subsidies, and regular meetings to monitor progress and resolve application issues.

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study advises government to collaborate for greater transparency, accountability, and better alignment of housing planning approvals with economic and spatial goals. It calls for a governance framework that includes young, tech-savvy professionals to address youth unemployment, revised planning indicators, coordinated governance structures involving political and administrative leaders, and a digital platform to improve tracking and performance evaluation.

10 CONCLUSION

The study finds that current planning approval monitoring is fragmented and poorly linked to economic growth. It recommends integrated national and local tracking, updated indicators, and governance structures combining political and administrative oversight. It recommends the use of digital tools to address the technical complexity, improve transparency, accountability, and speed. These steps can strengthen housing developments in Johannesburg and similar cities.

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