

ANC MPs vote to process NHI Bill submissions internally

Opposition MPs said such a decision should only be considered once they had the facts about parliament's internal capacity to do the job

In a surprise move, MPs voted on Tuesday to rescind their decision to outsource processing the tens of thousands of written submissions received in response to the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill.

The bill is the first piece of enabling legislation for the government's plan for universal health coverage, which aims to provide health services to the entire population free at the point of care.

The far-reaching bill proposes the establishment of a central NHI fund that will buy services from accredited public- and private-sector providers and proposes sweeping changes to 11 other pieces of legislation, including the National Health Act, the Competition Act, and the Medical Schemes Act. It creates uncertainty about the future role of medical schemes, which provide private healthcare access to 8.9-million people, and heralds a shake up for the role of provincial health departments, which currently provide most public health services.

The committee voted last month to appoint an external service provider to process the 32,217 hand-delivered and 32,634 e-mailed submissions received by parliament, agreeing at the time that parliament did not have the capacity for the job.

But only one response to parliament's advertisement for a request for quotations was received, and parliament's procurement office indicated that rival bids would have had to be received to appoint a service provider, according to parliament's unit manager for the social services cluster, Dennis Bandi. This would mean re-advertising the job, he said.

ANC MPs voiced their concern about the cost of appointing an external service provider, arguing that parliament's project management office should do the job instead, and voted to rescind their decision.

ANC MP Annah Gela said experienced staff from parliament's project management office could assist the committee. "Outsourcing will be too expensive in the current fiscal [climate] and there is internal capacity," she said.

Parliament had previously dealt with complex projects, such as the high-level panel assessment of key legislation, chaired by former president Kgalema Motlanthe, she said.

Opposition MPs from the DA and Freedom Front Plus (FF+) were outvoted by ANC MPs, who hold the majority of seats on the committee.

The DA and FF+ said such a decision should only be considered once they had the facts about parliament's internal capacity to do the job, and raised concern about the potential for legal challenge if they were not first briefed by parliament's project management office on how it could assist in processing the written submissions.

The DA's shadow health minister Siviwe Gwarube said it appeared the ANC had already reached a decision with parliament prior to the vote. "This comes as a shock. We were told there was no capacity [in parliament]. We are being blind-sided," she said. "I don't want to be hoodwinked, and later have a legal challenge."