

TERMS OF REFERENCE:

Procurement of a Service Provider for SACN Communications, Media and Creative Support

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND	3
2. PURPOSE OF THE ASSIGNMENT	3
3. OBJECTIVES	4
4. SCOPE OF WORK	4
4.1 Overall Communications Support	4
5. PRIORITY COMMUNICATIONS AREAS	5
5.1 SACN Strategic Business Plan 2026-2031	5
5.2 State of South African Cities Report VI	5
6. GRAPHIC DESIGN AND CREATIVE SUPPORT	6
7. MEDIA PLACEMENTS	6
Important Budget Requirement	6
8. MEDIA MONITORING	7
9. WORKING ARRANGEMENT	7
10. DELIVERABLES	8
11. BUDGET AND COST CONTROL	8
12. RECOMMENDED BUDGET STRUCTURE	9
13. CONTRACT MANAGEMENT AND APPROVALS	10
14. EXPECTED TURNAROUND TIMES	10
15. REPORTING	11
16. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	11
17. REQUIRED EXPERIENCE AND CAPACITY	12
18. PROPOSED TEAM	12
19. PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS	13
20. EVALUATION CRITERIA	14
21. CONTRACT PERIOD	14
22. ASSUMPTIONS AND EXCLUSIONS	14
23. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND CONFIDENTIALITY	15
24. VALUE FOR MONEY	15
25. SUBMISSION	15
26. ANNEXURES	15

1. BACKGROUND

The South African Cities Network (SACN) is a knowledge and learning network of South African cities that promotes good governance and management in cities, analyses strategic urban challenges, facilitates the sharing and application of knowledge, and promotes partnerships and shared learning across spheres of government.

SACN has entered a new strategic cycle for 2026/27 to 2030/31, with the ambition to strengthen its position as a credible urban intelligence and learning hub that curates, analyses and translates evidence into insights and foresights for cities.

The new Strategic Business Plan places greater emphasis on communicating evidence in ways that support decision-making, policy influence, learning and adoption. Communications are therefore not regarded solely as a promotional function, but as an important part of SACN's ability to ensure that its research, intelligence, knowledge products and strategic messages reach and influence the appropriate audiences.

The Strategic Business Plan identifies communications as a core capability and calls for communications, packaging and campaign elements to be incorporated into programmes from the outset. It also identifies the State of South African Cities Report (SoCR) as both a flagship publication and a change platform that brings together intelligence, practice evidence and policy influence.

SACN is also approaching several significant organisational milestones.

These include:

- The implementation and communication of the new SACN Strategic Business Plan;
- The development, launch and dissemination of the sixth State of South African Cities Report (SoCR VI);
- SACN's 25-year anniversary in 2027; and
- The ongoing communication and dissemination of SACN's research, programmes, events, partnerships and urban intelligence.

SACN therefore requires flexible external communications capacity to supplement its internal communications function and provide specialist support across strategic communications, graphic design, media engagement, media placement, media monitoring and related communications requirements.

2. PURPOSE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The purpose of this assignment is to appoint a suitably qualified communications service provider to deliver ongoing, strategic, flexible and cost-effective communications support to SACN, with particular emphasis on:

- Communicating and positioning SACN's new Strategic Business Plan;
- Supporting the communications and dissemination of SoCR VI;
- Providing campaign-related graphic design and creative support;
- Providing media relations and media engagement opportunities;
- Facilitating and managing agreed media placements;
- Providing campaign media monitoring and reporting; and
- Providing general and ad hoc communications support as required.

The assignment is intended to supplement SACN's internal communications capacity, not replace it.

3. OBJECTIVES

The appointed service provider will support SACN to:

- Strengthen SACN's visibility, credibility and positioning within the urban development and local government sectors;
- Communicate the organisation's new strategic direction clearly and consistently;
- Position SoCR VI as a flagship SACN knowledge product and a platform for urban dialogue and policy influence;
- Support the 25-year anniversary as a significant organisational and sector milestone when launching and disseminating the SOCR VI;
- Ensure SACN's research, knowledge and strategic messages are communicated through accessible, engaging formats;
- Increase media visibility and opportunities for SACN experts and leadership;
- Ensure consistent, professional visual communication across SACN's channels;
- Provide responsive communications support for planned and emerging opportunities;
- Strengthen the consistency and quality of SACN's external communications; and
- Deliver the above within a clearly defined, limited budget.

4. SCOPE OF WORK

The assignment will consist of the following workstreams.

4.1 Overall Communications Support

The service provider will provide ongoing communications support to SACN's Communications and Marketing function.

This may include:

- Developing and refining communications messages;
- Developing communications plans for priority activities;
- Developing campaign concepts and communication approaches;
- Supporting the development of communication calendars;
- Copywriting and editing;
- Developing press releases, media statements, briefing notes and talking points;
- Digital communications content;
- Repurposing SACN research and knowledge products into accessible communications;
- Advising on appropriate communication channels and opportunities;
- Supporting rapid-response and
- Providing general strategic communications advice.

The service provider must be able to respond to reasonable ad hoc requests within agreed turnaround times.

5. PRIORITY COMMUNICATIONS AREAS

5.1 SACN Strategic Business Plan 2026-2031

The service provider will support SACN in communicating its new Strategic Business Plan and organisational positioning.

Support may include:

- Development of key communication messages;
- Development of a strategic communications narrative;
- Design of campaign materials;
- Development of digital and social media content when required;
- Media engagement on the strategic direction;
- Providing PR opportunities for thought leadership pieces;
- Development of infographics and other visual communication products as required; and
- Working with internal communications to support ongoing communication of the strategy for the duration of the contract.

The communication approach should support SACN's positioning as a credible urban intelligence and learning hub.

5.2 State of South African Cities Report VI

SoCR VI will be a major communications priority for the assignment.

The service provider will support the communications and dissemination of SoCR VI through:

- Pre-launch communications;
- Launch communications;
- Media engagement;
- Media interviews;
- Media placements;
- Press releases and media kits;
- Opinion pieces and thought leadership;
- Social media campaign assets;
- Infographics and visual content;
- Graphic design;
- Report promotion;
- Post-launch amplification;
- Communications support for follow-up engagements, webinars, events and dissemination activities.
- As the SACN will be celebrating 25 years of existence, the launch of the SOCR VI and communications needs to reflect this milestone.

The SoCR VI communications approach should support the report's positioning as a flagship publication and a change platform, rather than treating the launch as a one-off event.

The anniversary should offer an opportunity to reflect on SACN's contribution to South African cities and to connect its history with its future strategic direction.

6. GRAPHIC DESIGN AND CREATIVE SUPPORT

The appointed service provider will provide ongoing graphic design support to SACN as and when it is required, and it will be solely linked to campaign implementation.

This will include, but is not limited to:

- Campaign Materials which include:
- Social media graphics;
- Infographics;
- Event graphics;
- Digital banners;
- Posters;
- Invitations;
- Media materials;

Design work must comply with SACN's corporate identity and brand guidelines.

Where appropriate, use existing SACN templates and brand assets to minimise costs and turnaround times.

The service provider should have established relationships with relevant South African media outlets covering local government, urban development, economics, public policy, infrastructure, sustainability, and related issues.

7. MEDIA PLACEMENTS

Where appropriate and approved by SACN, the service provider will facilitate paid and/or sponsored media opportunities and placements (additional costs for media placements will be discussed with the SACN beforehand).

Potential placements may include:

- Print advertising;
- Digital advertising;
- Online advertorials;
- Sponsored articles;
- Industry publications;
- Radio;
- Podcasts;
- Digital publications;
- Sector newsletters; and
- Other suitable media platforms.

Important Budget Requirement

Media placement expenditure must not be incurred without prior written approval from SACN.

The service provider must clearly distinguish between:

- The service provider's professional or service fee;
- Media placement costs;
- Advertising spend;
- Production costs; and

- Any third-party costs.

SACN must approve any third-party expenditure before it is committed.

8. MEDIA MONITORING

The service provider will provide media monitoring support linked to campaigns only, including:

- Monitoring SACN mentions across relevant print, broadcast and online media;
- Tracking coverage of SACN's research, leadership, programmes and priority issues;
- Providing campaign-specific media monitoring reports where required;
- Identifying positive, neutral and negative coverage;
- Tracking interviews and media placements; and

The bidder must clearly indicate in its financial proposal whether media monitoring is provided as:

- A monthly service;
- A quarterly service; or
- Part of the overall communications retainer.

SACN will retain responsibility for its social media platforms and final approval and publication of content unless otherwise agreed.

Communications should be tailored to different audiences, including city leadership, government officials, development partners, researchers, practitioners, media, civil society and the broader public.

9. WORKING ARRANGEMENT

The appointed service provider will work closely with SACN's Communications and Marketing function and with relevant programme teams.

SACN will provide:

- Relevant source material;
- Research and programme information;
- Access to relevant staff and subject-matter experts;
- Brand guidelines and existing communication assets;
- Strategic direction; and
- Approval of final outputs.

The service provider will operate as an extension of the SACN communications function and participate in regular planning and coordination meetings.

10. DELIVERABLES

SACN will determine the precise volume of outputs based on its priorities and available budget. The expected service categories include:

Workstream	Indicative Deliverables
Strategic communications	Communication plans, messaging, campaign concepts
Strategic Business Plan	Campaign materials, key messages, digital content, media support
SoCR VI	Campaign assets, media releases, media interviews, graphics, placements and dissemination support
Graphic design	Ad hoc graphics, infographics, presentations, digital assets and publications
Media engagement	Media pitching, interviews, press releases and media relations
Media placements	Approved print, digital, radio and other placements
Media monitoring	Campaign monitoring and campaign-specific reports
Digital communications	Social media content, digital campaigns and amplification linked to campaigns

11. BUDGET AND COST CONTROL

SACN has a limited budget for this assignment. Cost control and value for money are therefore critical considerations.

To avoid unforeseen costs, bidders must provide a transparent and comprehensive pricing structure covering all services proposed under this ToR.

The financial proposal must include:

A. Professional/service fees

Bidders must provide:

- Monthly retainer, if proposed;
- Daily or hourly rates for key personnel;
- Graphic design rates;
- Copywriting and editing rates;
- Media relations and PR rates;
- Media monitoring costs; and
- Any other professional service fees.

B. Unit costs

Bidders must provide indicative unit costs for:

- Social media graphics;
- Infographics;

- Digital banners;
- Factsheets;
- Policy briefs;
- Report design and layout;
- Press releases;
- Opinion pieces;
- Media pitching;
- Interview coordination;
- Media monitoring;
- Campaign management; and
- Other relevant services.

C. Media placement costs

- Clearly separate media placement and advertising costs from professional fees.
- Where possible, bidders should provide indicative rates or a management fee/commission structure for media buying.

D. Third-party costs

- Identify all third-party costs separately.
- No third-party costs may be incurred without SACN's prior written approval.

E. Maximum contract value

- The total contract value will not exceed the budget approved by SACN.
- The procurement documentation will disclose the final budget.
- Bidders must therefore demonstrate how they can deliver the proposed scope within the available budget.

12. RECOMMENDED BUDGET STRUCTURE

To manage the limited budget effectively, SACN intends to use a flexible capped-budget model.

The preferred approach is:

- Core communications support + pre-agreed unit rates + controlled media/production spend.

This will allow SACN to use the appointed service provider throughout the contract period without initiating a separate procurement process each time a small communications requirement arises, while still maintaining expenditure controls.

The financial proposal should therefore be structured as follows:

Cost Category	Bidder to Provide
Core communications/PR support	Monthly fee
Graphic design support	Monthly fee and/or unit rates

Cost Category	Bidder to Provide
Media monitoring	Monthly fee
Media relations	Included / unit rate
Copywriting/editing	Unit rate
SoCR VI campaign support	Fixed/estimated cost
Strategic Business Plan communications	Fixed/estimated cost
Media placement management	Fee/commission
Media buying/advertising	Actual approved expenditure
Other third-party costs	At cost, subject to approval

The bidder must clearly specify what is included in the core fee and what will be charged separately.

13. CONTRACT MANAGEMENT AND APPROVALS

SACN will commission all work through its designated Communications and Marketing representative.

The service provider will not:

- Commit SACN to media expenditure;
- Purchase advertising;
- Commission third-party services;
- Approve additional production costs; or
- Undertake expenditure outside the agreed scope
- without prior written approval from SACN.
- All work will be subject to SACN's review and approval.

14. EXPECTED TURNAROUND TIMES

The service provider should demonstrate capacity to respond to both planned and ad hoc requirements.

Indicative turnaround expectations are:

Requirement	Indicative Turnaround
Simple graphic/social media asset	2–3 working days
Minor graphic amendments	1–2 working days
Press release/media statement	2 working days
Media pitching	As agreed

Requirement	Indicative Turnaround
Interview coordination	As required
Urgent media response	Same working day where reasonably possible
Campaign concept	5 working days
Infographic	3–5 working days
Larger design/publication project	Agreed project timeline

These timelines may be adjusted depending on complexity and SACN approval processes.

15. REPORTING

The service provider will provide a monthly report covering:

- Activities undertaken;
- Outputs delivered;
- Media engagements;
- Media coverage;
- Media placements;
- Graphic design outputs;
- Communications activities;
- Budget expenditure;
- Remaining budget;
- Upcoming activities; and
- Recommendations.

The service provider must maintain an up-to-date record of expenditure against the approved budget.

16. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Performance will be assessed against:

Communications

- Quality and timeliness of communications outputs;
- Responsiveness to ad hoc requests;
- Consistency of messaging and brand application;
- Reach and engagement of communications activities.

Media

- Number and quality of media opportunities generated;
- Media interviews secured;
- Relevant media coverage achieved;
- Quality of media placements;
- Media relationships developed and maintained.

SoCR VI

- Visibility and reach of SoCR VI;
- Media coverage;
- Stakeholder engagement;
- Digital engagement;
- Evidence of report dissemination and uptake.

Strategic Business Plan

- Successful communication of SACN's strategic positioning;
- Stakeholder understanding and engagement;
- Consistency of the strategic narrative.

Financial management

- Delivery within the approved budget;
- Transparency of costs;
- No unauthorised expenditure;
- Demonstrated value for money.

17. REQUIRED EXPERIENCE AND CAPACITY

The successful service provider should demonstrate:

- At least five years' experience in strategic communications, public relations and/or marketing;
- Proven experience providing communications support to organisations in the public, development or research sectors, or related environments;
- Strong graphic design skills;
- Demonstrated media relations experience;
- Established relationships with relevant South African media outlets;
- Experience securing media interviews and coverage;
- Experience in media monitoring;
- Experience developing campaigns around research, policy or knowledge products;
- Strong writing and editing skills;
- Experience working with senior executives and subject-matter experts;
- Ability to respond to ad hoc requirements; and
- Demonstrated ability to work within constrained budgets.
- Experience in urban development, local government, governance, research, development or public policy will be an advantage.

18. PROPOSED TEAM

Bidders should identify the personnel who will be assigned to the account, including:

- Account/Project Lead;
- Communications/PR Specialist;
- Graphic Designer;
- Any additional proposed specialists.
- Include CVs for key personnel.

SACN reserves the right to approve changes to key personnel during the contract period.

19. PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Bidders must submit:

Technical Proposal

- Company profile;
- Understanding of SACN and the assignment;
- Proposed methodology and approach;
- Proposed communications approach;
- Approach to SoCR VI;
- Approach to the 25-year anniversary;
- Approach to communicating the Strategic Business Plan;
- Approach to media relations and media placements;
- Approach to graphic design;
- Approach to media monitoring;
- Approach to ad hoc communications support;
- Proposed team and CVs;
- Relevant previous work and case studies; and
- At least three relevant client references.

Financial Proposal

- The financial proposal must include:
- Monthly retainer, where applicable;
- Professional rates;
- Graphic design rates;
- Media monitoring costs;
- Media relations costs;
- Media placement management costs;
- Indicative media placement costs;
- Production costs;
- Third-party costs;
- Estimated costs for priority campaigns; and
- Total proposed contract value.
- All costs must include VAT where applicable and clearly identify any exclusions.

20. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Proposals will be evaluated using the following criteria:

Evaluation Criterion	Weight
Understanding of SACN and the assignment	15%
Proposed methodology and communications approach	20%
Relevant organisational experience	20%
Experience and qualifications of proposed team	15%
Graphic design and creative capability	10%
Media relations and media engagement capability	10%
Financial proposal and value for money	10%
Total	100%

SACN may apply a minimum technical threshold, in accordance with its procurement policies, before considering financial proposals.

21. CONTRACT PERIOD

The proposed contract period will be:

18 months starting from 1 October 2026

with the possibility of extension subject to SACN's procurement policies, satisfactory performance, availability of funding and continued organisational requirements.

The contract period should cover the key communications requirements associated with:

- The SACN Strategic Business Plan;
- SoCR VI;
- SACN's 25-year anniversary; and
- Ongoing SACN communications requirements.

22. ASSUMPTIONS AND EXCLUSIONS

The following principles will apply:

- SACN will provide the core research, programme and organisational information required for communications.
- SACN will retain final approval of all external communications.
- Media placement expenditure will require prior approval.
- Travel and accommodation, where required, must be approved in advance and included in the agreed budget.

- Photography, videography, animation, printing, event production and other specialist production services are not automatically included unless specifically priced by the bidder.
- Any such services required during the contract period will be subject to the approved budget and prior SACN approval.
- The service provider must clearly identify all exclusions in its financial proposal.
- No additional charges will be accepted for services that the bidder has indicated are included in its core fee.

23. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All communications materials developed specifically for SACN under this assignment will belong to SACN, subject to the terms of the final contract.

The service provider must maintain the confidentiality of SACN information, unpublished research, internal documents, stakeholder information, and other sensitive material.

24. VALUE FOR MONEY

Given SACN's limited available budget, bidders are encouraged to demonstrate how they will maximise impact through:

- Reuse and repurposing of content;
- Existing templates and design systems;
- Digital-first communication;
- Strategic rather than high-volume media buying;
- Partner and city amplification;
- Existing media relationships;
- Integrated campaigns across multiple outputs;
- Efficient approval and production processes; and
- Prioritisation of high-impact activities.

SACN is not seeking the largest volume of outputs, but rather high-quality, strategically targeted communications support that delivers maximum value within the available budget.

25. SUBMISSION

- Email all submissions to Mr Jabulani Sandleni at jabulani@sacities.net by close of business on **Tuesday, 22 September 2026 at 17:00 (5 pm)**.
- All enquiries must be sent to Mr Shaun Watson at shaun@sacities.net

26. ANNEXURES

- SACN Strategic Business Plan 2026-2031 – [Click here](#)
- State of Cities Report (SOCR) VI Presentation – [Click here](#)
- More information on the SoCR can be found on our website – [Click here](#)