

Different tack to feel pulse of people

Ministers to conduct monthly walkabouts with less pomp, strong 'resident-centric' focus

Toh Yong Chuan

The Straits Times, 17 December 2011

From next month, ministers will fan out across the island, visiting residents beyond their constituencies to understand better the pulse of the population.

While this is not a new practice - such visits are customary in every term - there are hints that monthly walkabouts could be conducted in a fresh manner. For one thing, there will be less pomp and pageantry surrounding the visiting minister and his entourage. As Mr Masagos Zulkifli, who is coordinating the visits, said with a laugh: 'There will be no big lion dance welcome.'

While noting that the visits 'have all along been meant to give the ministers a good and accurate feel of the community', the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs also acknowledged that there may be perceptions that the programmes were 'flashy' in the past.

The first minister to kick-start the series will be the youngest Cabinet member.

Mr Chan Chun Sing, 42, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, will be visiting Jurong Spring ward on Jan 15. He told The Straits Times that he hopes to 'see how the residents usually go about their daily lives'.

He said: 'I do not want them to put up or stage any displays for me. I want to find out first-hand from the residents of Jurong Spring the local and national issues of concern to them, and the challenges they face.'

He added that it was his personal preference for the programme to be 'resident-centric' and 'part of naturally occurring activities'.

The MP for the ward in Jurong GRC is Mr Desmond Lee, who said: 'My grassroots leaders are finalising the itinerary.' He added: 'Our aim is to give the minister a good sense of our community, and the needs and concerns of our residents.'

After Mr Chan's January visit, Mr S. Iswaran, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Home Affairs as well as Trade and Industry, goes to MacPherson in February.

Thereafter, the visits are 'likely to be conducted once a month', the People's Association said in a statement yesterday, without giving details of the constituencies or dates.

It listed three other ministers on the slate: Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong and Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew.

The Straits Times understands that Mr Heng will visit Ayer Rajah in March.

When asked whether such visits live up to residents' expectations, Institute of Policy Studies' senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: 'The ministers would wish for the visits to be a

learning experience, but the public they meet will wish for the visitors to bring immediate solutions to the problems they face.'