

## **New indicators for more accountability**

**Revised system also includes stricter rules on safety and health, colour code for scoring**

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Changes to the Town Council Management Report were unveiled yesterday, a week after the Government said it would put out a 'Version 2.0' of the half-yearly report card on town councils.

The changes include two new indicators - corporate governance and financial adequacy; stricter rules on issues of safety and health; and a new colour-coded scoring system.

The Ministry of National Development, which made the announcement yesterday, said that these changes would promote greater accountability, and make the report easier to understand for residents.

Under corporate governance, town councils will now have to submit a self-declared checklist on their own compliance levels. To avoid situations where there may be conflict of interest, investments and the awarding of tenders will be made public. This checklist will also have to go through the town councils' financial auditor.

Under financial adequacy, town councils will be required to plan for future expenses, such as repainting, repairs and lift replacement costs.

The ministry said this would help residents understand whether the town councils have enough money from the service and conservancy charges to 'deliver services on a sustainable basis'.

It is possible that more changes are coming: The ministry said it would appoint a consultant to develop a more thorough assessment methodology, the details of which would be announced at a later date.

The Town Council Management Report, which was started in 2009, previously ranked councils on four fronts: town cleanliness, maintenance of common facilities, lift performance, and managing arrears of service and conservancy charges.

These indicators were tweaked to 'better reflect public opinions', a ministry spokesman said.

For cleanliness and maintenance, the new framework now takes into account the severity of lapses posing hygiene, health or safety concerns.

This means that a missing manhole cover, which poses a higher threat to safety - compared with, say, a missing fluorescent light tube - will cost the town council more in terms of ratings.

When the scores are tallied, the final report will be more 'reader-friendly'. While previous reports rated the councils from one to five, the new findings will be colour coded in green, amber, and red.

These changes come after a recent phone survey of about 500 HDB residents on issues they considered important in the running of a town council.

Nearly all residents polled - 98.2 per cent - cited cleanliness as a top priority.

More than 90 per cent said it was vital for town councils to manage their funds well, and 88.4 per cent said that it was important that they complied with government regulations on their operations.

Dr Teo Ho Pin, the coordinating chairman of the 14 People's Action Party town councils, said the new framework would lead to a win-win situation. 'With prompt and constructive feedback, councils can react faster, and in the end, the whole estate benefits.'

Aljunied-Hougang Town Council chairman Sylvia Lim, who is also Workers' Party chairman, said her council was 'reserving comments at this stage'.

Dr Gillian Koh, an Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow, said the move was an important step in the right direction. She said that public interest in accountability was 'sparked by how sinking funds are being invested, and lost'.

'In this age of uncertainty, people who feel they represent the residents' and the public interest want to see transparency upfront,' Dr Koh added.

National University of Singapore corporate governance expert Mak Yuen Teen suggested that the Auditor-General's Office step in periodically to conduct performance and compliance audits.

Minister of State (National Development, and Trade and Industry) Lee Yi Shyan said that improving the report was a continual process, and called on residents to send in their feedback.

The first report under the new framework will be published by the end of the year.