

Latest Cabinet reshuffle to benefit health, social portfolios; Tan Chuan-Jin, Lawrence Wong also made full ministers as leadership renewal continues

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To address the Government's priorities and challenges as well as see the nation through its next phase of development, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it, a slew of Cabinet changes were announced yesterday.

The third round of changes — since a new Cabinet line-up was announced after the 2011 General Election — will notably beef up the ranks of the teams overseeing the social and health portfolios as leadership renewal efforts continue.

From May 1, Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin and Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong will be promoted to full Ministers. Mr Wong will also become Second Minister for Communications and Information.

Mr Sam Tan, who is the Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs and Culture, Community and Youth), will be promoted to Minister of State (Culture, Community and Youth) and will be appointed to the Prime Minister's Office to help coordinate the delivery of social policies across ministries, as well as their implementation on the ground.

Two backbenchers, Sengkang West Member of Parliament (MP) Lam Pin Min and Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, will assume political office. Dr Lam will be Minister of State (Health) from Aug 1, while Ms Phua will take over from Mr Sam Tan as Mayor of Central Singapore Community Development Council (CDC) towards the end of next month.

Ms Phua and Dr Lam, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Health, are joining the ranks of several backbenchers who have been appointed to political office over the past two years.

Parliamentary Secretary (Social and Family Development) Low Yen Ling will take on the Culture, Community and Youth portfolio as well. She will also replace Senior Minister of State (Health and Manpower) Amy Khor as Mayor of South West CDC.

Describing the Cabinet changes as part of continuing efforts to inject new blood, Mr Lee said he expects to conduct further reshuffles from time to time "to ensure that we always have the best team for Singapore". Mr Lee noted that the two Acting Ministers have performed well and have mastered their portfolios. "They have also worked hard on the ground, winning the respect and trust of Singaporeans," he said.

Reiterating that Singapore is going through an "important transition", Mr Lee said he was strengthening the teams in charge of the social sector and at the Ministry of Health. Citing the Pioneer Generation Package and the proposed MediShield Life scheme as examples, he said the ministry was "at the forefront of the changes" that the Government is making. "We are also investing heavily to expand and upgrade our healthcare system to cater for an ageing population and growing healthcare needs," he said.

Adding that Dr Khor will focus on implementing the Pioneer Generation Package, Mr Lee said Dr Lam — an eye specialist who will give up private practice — will play an important role in helping to review healthcare policies and develop new models of care, especially in the areas of aged care and primary care.

Political watchers said the changes signalled a commitment to successfully implement important policies such as the Pioneer Generation Package and MediShield Life, as well as the progression of younger leaders into key government portfolios. Singapore Management University law don and Nominated MP Eugene Tan said: “Much political gunpowder has been invested ... and obviously, the Government is pulling out all the stops to make sure that the policies work well.”

On his promotion, Mr Wong said he was “grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve in a larger capacity” and that he looked forward to working with partners and stakeholders, as there was “still much more to be done” for his 18-month-old ministry. Mr Tan thanked his colleagues and grassroots volunteers who have supported his work at the Manpower Ministry and, previously, at the Ministry of National Development.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh noted that the promotions of both Acting Ministers were a vote of confidence in their abilities. The pair, along with Education Minister Heng Swee Keat and Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing, had been earmarked as the core of the party’s fourth-generation leadership. Dr Koh said it was also important to pay attention to backbenchers who have become office holders when thinking about the ruling party’s fourth generation leaders.

On Dr Lam’s appointment, she said: “It will be interesting to see if the promotion of a GPC chairperson becomes another track by which PAP backbenchers progress in their political careers.”