

Report flags issue of service continuity when MPs change

More time for operational handover, automatic extension of contracts among suggestions from town councils

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More time should be allowed for an operational handover of town councils (TCs) when there is a change of political party in the ward, with the Ministry of National Development (MND) playing a “bigger role” in facilitating the process.

This was among the suggestions town councils gave during the MND’s review of the controversial sale of software by People’s Action Party (PAP) town councils to Action Information Management (AIM), a PAP-owned company.

The MND report released yesterday said the review surfaced “a broader issue” of how to ensure continuity of services to residents in the event of a change of Members of Parliament (MPs).

“The main issue is how to ensure continuity of the services to residents while allowing the newly-elected MPs full authority and accountability immediately after an election,” added the MND Town Council Review Team.

To minimise the risk of disruption to critical services, the report said town councils could put in place contractual provisions for automatic one-off extensions after an election when there is a change of party in charge, and to impose a minimum notice period for termination initiated by the contractor or key appointment holders, such as general managers.

Currently, under the Town Councils Act, where an area within one town is being transferred to another, the National Development Minister may specify that the town council continue to maintain and manage the area for a period not exceeding 90 days. There are no other provisions in the Act for transition when there is a changeover of MPs.

Newly-elected MPs assume office as town councillors once the election results are published, and assume legal responsibility for the town when the relevant orders are gazetted.

During the review, the MND team sought inputs from Potong Pasir Town Council and the then-Aljunied-Hougang Town Council, which saw a change of political parties after the 2011 General Election.

While major contracts and systems continued after the changeover, the only exception was in managing agent services, where both town councils exercised a waiver of competition for tender for a one-year contract.

While there was no compromise of services, the Review Team felt the arrangement was “not ideal” and more time should be given to TCs to select and appoint their managing agent, which provides an essential service to residents.

The Review Team felt “there is value” to consider placing safeguards to minimise the risk of disruption of critical services during a change in leadership, even though the elected MPs should be given full authority and autonomy after an election.

“The interests of residents should be the paramount priority for all political parties and MPs in any such situations. These services should include managing agent services, conservancy and cleaning, lift maintenance and servicing, and critical IT systems,” added the Review Team.

Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan felt more “robust” rules should be put in place to deal with the handover of town councils, as fewer six-MP Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) and smaller GRCs were introduced during the 2011 General Election.

Prior to that, the handover of town councils among political parties was rare, as most wards were held by political parties for decades, noted the Singapore Management University assistant law professor.

Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies felt handover protocols have to be “more finely tuned, more detailed.”

“Accountability during the handover period have to be clearly established and I’m sure there are good legal minds to figure out what are the things that can go wrong and write it into the protocol,” she said.