

## **GRADING TIME FOR TOWN COUNCILS**

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TOWN councils have been around for 20 years. Almost 85 per cent of Singapore's population lives in housing estates the councils manage. Yet most people do not really know what they do.

This lack of awareness could mean two things. One, that town councils are quietly and efficiently doing their job and residents are happy with their performance. Or it could mean that residents are totally indifferent to the councils and assume that they are just a government agency that collects fees to clean the estates.

However, recent events have put town councils in the spotlight, not least the Ministry of National Development's (MND) decision to issue a report on them. The framework of the Town Council Management Report will be released at the end of this month and the initial report is expected in mid-2010.

Town councils have a number of roles. They typically have several sub-committees with various responsibilities, including estate improvement and maintenance, finance and investment, tenders and contracts, and community relations.

Estate improvement and maintenance covers routine cleaning as well as improvement and upgrading works. While these may seem mundane, they ensure that the estates remain livable. In fact, all the other activities of the councils are undertaken to support these core functions.

Most town councils are supported by professional managing agents who report to the council, which consists of elected and appointed members.

Financial planning and management are crucial. The councils' revenue comes mainly from service and conservancy charges (S&CC) and government grants. Part of the revenue goes into a sinking fund for future cyclical maintenance. As the sinking fund is meant for the future, most of it is invested. The rest of the revenue is used for routine operations, the managing agent's fee and utilities for the common areas. Annual surpluses could be used for improvement works.

The councils serve the residents of housing estates. They would, therefore, do well to engage residents in decision-making and attend to their complaints and queries. Most town councils have resident representation at various levels. Town councils have also established channels to reach out to residents.

The diversity and complexity of a town council's functions have to be taken into consideration when assessing its performance. Some performance indicators could be subjective. When we check an estate's cleanliness, for instance, are we assessing the competence of the town council's staff or the residents' social habits? HDB estates are public – they belong to everyone – but this also means that they belong to no one.

Furthermore, resident profiles and household characteristics differ from area to area. This can influence the arrears in S&CC as well as the types of improvement works carried out – making it even harder to assess town councils.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the time has come for us to take stock of how town councils are performing. With a population that is becoming more knowledgeable and discerning, the question of performance would have arisen sooner or later. MND's decision to produce the Town Council Management Report is, therefore, a step in the right direction. However, the devil is in the details: What should the report include? What indicators should it use?

Given the town councils' core functions, cleanliness and maintenance of common areas are obvious indicators. However, much thought is needed to arrive at objective and quantitative measures of these indicators.

One suggestion was for a neutral body to inspect the work done by all the different councils. Another was to consider the number of defects on a per block basis to measure shortfalls in performance.

The Town Council Management Report should also be read in conjunction with other information already provided by the councils, such as the annual financial report and data on improvement works. Town councils could consider publicising their service standards and response time. It may even be a good idea for the councils to hold an annual open house for residents to better understand their operations and performance. This will help town councils to engage and educate their residents, which would hopefully lead to greater involvement.

To produce the Town Council Management Report, consultation were held with all the stakeholders – residents, grassroots leaders, town councillors, managing agents and industry experts. Residents' views were particularly enlightening. While most feedback focused on the practical concerns of cleanliness, maintenance and financial management, there were also insightful points made about the impact of design on maintenance. This reflects the wealth of ideas that town councils can tap.

The report should be seen as a guide for town councils to gauge their performance. Taken in the right spirit, the councils can learn from each other. Most importantly, the councils should view the exercise as one to help them deepen their relationship with their residents. After all, without residents, town councils would not exist.

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