

Embracing the spirit off the parade square

THE spirit of inclusion is not just limited to this year's National Day Parade.

Of late, Singapore has strived to make those from all walks of life – from foreigners to the disabled – feel at home.

New programmes and investments have improved accessibility for the disabled and boosted their chances of employment.

The Government has set aside \$200 million for better lifts, ramps, grab bars and wheelchair-friendly toilets in public areas and buildings, to be installed between now and 2011.

The programmes include the Building and Construction Authority's Accessibility Fund, which offers grants of up to \$150,000.

So far, 13 property owners have applied for the grant and three buildings have been retrofitted, including the Singapore Power office.

Getting around is also easier with SBS Transit's 400 wheelchair-accessible buses. Another 300 are on the way. MRT stations islandwide are also disabled-friendly.

To keep some of the 150,000 expatriate Singaporeans connected, overseas clubs were set up in Sydney and Melbourne last year. More are under way in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen.

Come the next general election in 2011, more Singaporeans abroad will have a say in the country's future, following a decision by the Government to relax voting rules.

Singapore has also aggressively courted foreign talent. Last year, the foreign population – who include professionals, workers, students and their families – exceeded one million for the first time.

SUMATHI V. SELVARETNAM