

Parliament No:	14
Session No:	1
Volume No:	95
Sitting No:	94
Sitting Date:	21-03-2023

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTEENTH PARLIAMENT

VOLUME 95

FIRST SESSION
Tuesday, 21 March 2023
The House met at 10:30 am

NO 94

ATTENDANCE

PRESENT:

Mr SPEAKER (Mr Tan Chuan-Jin (Marine Parade)).

Mr Abdul Samad (Nominated Member).

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member).

Mr Ang Wei Neng (West Coast).

Mr Baey Yam Keng (Tampines), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment and Minister for Transport.

Mr Chan Chun Sing (Tanjong Pagar), Minister for Education.

Mr Mark Chay (Nominated Member).

Mr Chee Hong Tat (Bishan-Toa Payoh), Senior Minister of State for Finance and Transport.

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member).

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines).

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui (Holland-Bukit Timah).

Mr Chong Kee Hiong (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines).

Mr Eric Chua (Tanjong Pagar), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Minister for Social and Family Development.

Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah), Deputy Speaker.

Ms Foo Mee Har (West Coast).

Mr Gan Kim Yong (Chua Chu Kang), Minister for Trade and Industry.

Ms Gan Siow Huang (Marymount), Minister of State for Education and Manpower.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied).

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon).

Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang).

Mr Heng Chee How (Jalan Besar), Senior Minister of State for Defence.

Mr Heng Swee Keat (East Coast), Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies.

Prof Hoon Hian Teck (Nominated Member).

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong).

Ms Indranee Rajah (Tanjong Pagar), Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and National Development and Leader of the House.

Mr S Iswaran (West Coast), Minister for Transport and Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations.

Dr Janil Puthucheary (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health and Government Whip.

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan (Hong Kah North), Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment and Transport.

Dr Koh Poh Koon (Tampines), Senior Minister of State for Manpower and Sustainability and the Environment.

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru).

Mr Desmond Lee (West Coast), Minister for National Development, Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration.

Mr Lee Hsien Loong (Ang Mo Kio), Prime Minister.

Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang).

Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten).

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang).

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied).

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang).

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M (Tampines), Minister for Social and Family Development, Second Minister for Health and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs.

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim (Nee Soon), Minister of State for Home Affairs and National Development.

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon).

Ms Ng Ling Ling (Ang Mo Kio).

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast).

Mr Ong Ye Kung (Sembawang), Minister for Health.

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar).

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied).

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar).

Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member).

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang).

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Minister for Law.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade).

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member).

Mr K Shanmugam (Nee Soon), Minister for Home Affairs and Law.

Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

Ms Sim Ann (Holland-Bukit Timah), Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development and Deputy Government Whip.

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir).

Ms Hany Soh (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

Ms Sun Xueling (Punggol West), Minister of State for Home Affairs and Social and Family Development.

Mr Alvin Tan (Tanjong Pagar), Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry.

Ms Carrie Tan (Nee Soon).

Mr Desmond Tan (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office.

Mr Tan Kiat How (East Coast), Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and National Development.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang).

Dr Tan See Leng (Marine Parade), Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Trade and Industry.

Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast), Deputy Speaker.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong).

Mr Teo Chee Hean (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security.

Mrs Josephine Teo (Jalan Besar), Minister for Communications and Information and Second Minister for Home Affairs.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member).

Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson).

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai (Marine Parade), Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law.

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang).

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (Holland-Bukit Timah), Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar).

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang).

Mr Lawrence Wong (Marsiling-Yew Tee), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang).

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas).

Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Marsiling-Yew Tee), Senior Minister of State for Defence and Manpower and Deputy Leader of the House.

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang).

ABSENT:

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast).

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang).

Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien (Yuhua), Minister for Sustainability and the Environment.

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member).

Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member).

Ms Low Yen Ling (Chua Chu Kang), Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry.

Ms Mariam Jaafar (Sembawang).

Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman (East Coast), Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs.

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman (Marine Parade).

Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap (Aljunied).

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok).

Dr Ng Eng Hen (Bishan-Toa Payoh), Minister for Defence.

Dr Tan Yia Swam (Nominated Member).

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer).

Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (Jurong), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

Mr Xie Yao Quan (Jurong).

Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

PERMISSION TO MEMBERS TO BE ABSENT

Under the provisions of clause 2(d) of Article 46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, the following Members have been granted permission by the Speaker to be absent from sittings of Parliament (or any Committee of Parliament to which they have been appointed) for the periods stated:

Name	From	To
	(2023)	(2023)
Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan	15 Mar	24 Mar
Dr Wan Rizal	15 Mar	23 Mar
Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap	18 Mar	25 Mar
Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling	19 Mar	21 Mar
Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis	20 Mar	24 Mar
Ms Low Yen Ling	20 Mar	22 Mar
Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman	20 Mar	22 Mar
Mr Murali Pillai	20 Mar	22 Mar
Dr Tan Yia Swam	20 Mar	21 Mar
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam	20 Mar	28 Mar
Mr Xie Yao Quan	20 Mar	22 Mar
Ms Yeo Wan Ling	20 Mar	22 Mar
Mr Gan Kim Yong	21 Mar	23 Mar
Ms Mariam Jaafar	21 Mar	23 Mar
Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman	21 Mar	22 Mar

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS RETURNING TO WORK AFTER EXTENDED ABSENCE AND FOR TEACHERS OF INFANTS OR PRESCHOOL-GOING CHILDREN

1 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Education (a) what support is available for school teachers returning to work after extended illness leave; (b) whether this support includes flexible work arrangements (FWAs); and (c) whether the Ministry has data on what proportion of such returnees have taken up FWAs and how the FWAs are structured.

2 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Education (a) what support is available for school teachers who are parents of young preschool children or infants, with difficulties finding childcare arrangements that can accommodate the early morning start to their workday; and (b) whether the Ministry has data on how many of such teachers have taken up flexible work arrangements (FWAs) and how the FWAs are structured.

The Minister of State for Education (Ms Gan Siow Huang) (for the Minister for Education): Mr Speaker, may I take Question Nos 1 and 2 together?

Mr Speaker: Please do.

Ms Gan Siow Huang: The Ministry of Education (MOE) provides a range of options for teachers who require flexible work arrangements, including to meet medical needs or caregiving responsibilities. These include part-time work arrangements for teachers who require a reduced workload.

Teachers who need more flexible work hours, such as a later reporting time to send their young children to a childcare centre, should discuss their needs with their schools early so that arrangements can be made to support them, where operationally feasible. Schools implement such flexible work arrangements based on their operational needs while maintaining a duty of care to their students. As many of these flexible work arrangements are localised and could be on an ad hoc or short-term basis, MOE does not collect such data.

Mr Speaker: Dr Tan.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): I thank the Minister of State for her answer. Some of my Clementi residents are teachers and I have met a Clementi resident who is a teacher and herself is a young mother with young children. She has found that her workplace requires her to report by 7.15 am, but all the childcare options that she has explored only open from 7.00 am. So, she finds it hard to get to work in time for the prescribed reporting time of 7.15 am. I was told that it has been suggested to her that she go part-time as the flexible working arrangement, with implications for salary and career progression.

Can I ask the Minister of State if MOE would consider working with agencies such as the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) to help facilitate childcare arrangements for such young teacher-parents, childcare arrangements as near to the school, place of work, as possible to help these teachers continue as fully as possible at work while maintaining their responsibilities to their own children at home as well?

Ms Gan Siow Huang: Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for showing care for our teachers, including those who are residents in Clementi. We have a duty of care to our students. So long as the students are physically present in school, our teachers will have to be present with their students. At the same time, we care for our teachers as well, as they are the backbone of our education system.

So, when a teacher has a need for flexible work or certain reporting times to meet her caregiving needs, we would try to reach a reasonable arrangement that balances both the needs of the staff as well as the students.

I hope the Member understands that our schools work as a team and that teachers do not work by themselves. It is important for teachers to have open and early discussions with their school leaders so that arrangements can be made. For example, there are some schools that hire flexible adjunct teachers to cover the duties of the main teachers for certain periods of time so that our teachers who have other urgent needs or caregiving needs will also be able to continue with their teaching careers.

On the Member's suggestion to have arrangements with other agencies, I believe he meant ECDA, we are open to exploring all options. But at the same time, we also respect that parents usually have their own preferences on childcare arrangements; it is not just about whether the childcare centre is near their homes, but sometimes, parents themselves have other considerations on the choice of childcare. So, we do have to be mindful about over-leaning and exerting ourselves on the choices of childcare for our teachers.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE OF MADRASAHs IN LIGHT OF DEVELOPMENTS RELATING TO RECENT POLICE REPORT MADE BY MADRASAH IRSYAD

3 **Dr Wan Rizal** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs whether he can provide an update on MUIS' efforts to strengthen the governance of the madrasahs in light of the recent developments relating to the police report made by Madrasah Irsyad.

The Minister for Social and Family Development and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs (Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M): Mr Speaker, the hon Member has asked for an update on Madrasah Irsyad and its relationship with Irsyad Trust Limited (ITL), a public company limited by guarantee formed in 2006.

Allow me to briefly recap the events that occurred and the actions the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) has taken.

Since the formation of the Joint Madrasah System in 2008, the role of Madrasah Irsyad's Board of Governors (BOG) has been to set strategic direction and oversee the management for the Madrasah. MUIS oversees the appointment of the BOG members. The Madrasah Management Committee (MMC) continued to exist until 2016 to assist the Madrasah in its fundraising efforts.

Up until 2014, the Madrasah carried out international projects that broadly promoted Islamic education and supported capacity building of Islamic schools in our region.

In 2014, the MMC decided that the Madrasah should move its international projects to ITL in order to focus its efforts and resources on strengthening management and improving education outcomes.

Subsequently, MUIS' audits into the Madrasah discovered questionable transactions and activities involving the use of the Madrasah's funds and resources for the activities of ITL. None of these transactions and activities were authorised by the BOG. Some of these transactions and activities may have resulted in the Madrasah suffering financial losses.

For example, the annual audit of the Madrasah's accounts in 2016 found that \$2 million had been transferred from the Madrasah to ITL in 2014 for its international operations, with the endorsement of the MMC, but without the knowledge or approval of the BOG. Following this discovery, MUIS requested ITL to return this \$2 million sum to the Madrasah, which ITL did so in full.

In April 2021, MUIS initiated a further audit on the Madrasah to examine the financial transactions and relationship between the Madrasah and ITL. Based on preliminary findings from this audit, MUIS lodged a Police report in July 2021. Since then, MUIS has been assisting the Police in their investigations into this case, which resulted in the recent charges tendered in court against a Director of ITL.

Earlier this month, the Madrasah filed a civil claim against a Director in ITL and other related parties, to seek an account of their improper use of the Madrasah's funds and resources for ITL's purposes and to recover losses caused to the Madrasah.

As the court case and civil claims are ongoing, I am not able to provide more information at this point. But MUIS will continue to monitor the developments to ensure that there is accountability to the Madrasah and the community.

In recent years, MUIS has put in place measures to strengthen governance across the madrasah sector. The importance of these measures has been reinforced by the problems discovered at Madrasah Irsyad.

MUIS has established the Mosque-Madrasah-Wakaf Shared Services to support the madrasahs in their efforts to manage their finances better and prepare their accounts for audit. This shared financial service improves financial efficiency and governance across the madrasahs.

Madrasahs are required to submit annual updates on their financial audits to MUIS and the BOG. This enables MUIS and the BOG to exercise financial oversight of the madrasahs, address gaps in a more timely manner and to identify and share lessons learnt on financial governance across the madrasah sector.

MUIS requires staff rotation at the leadership level to be more frequent in the madrasahs. This will strengthen governance and staff development.

MUIS has introduced a whistleblowing procedure across the madrasah sector. This encourages a culture of active feedback from madrasah staff on situations or decisions made by the madrasah leaders. Where there is any suspected wrongdoing, this should be reported to MUIS or any relevant law enforcement agency.

MUIS is also piloting the implementation of an IT and Data Policy Manual for the madrasah sector. This will strengthen the madrasahs' data and information security policies and implementation.

Mr Speaker, our madrasahs are vital institutions to develop future religious teachers and scholars for our Muslim community. MUIS will continue to strengthen our madrasahs' efforts to deliver quality education and ensure good governance of the sector, so that we can build a strong cadre of asatizah who exemplify the three "C"s – Competency, Character and Citizenry – and provide religious guidance to our community to thrive as a Community of Success.

Mr Speaker: Dr Wan Rizal.

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Mr Speaker, I thank the Minister for sharing what happened in that timeline, as well as the counter-measures that were taken to prevent similar things from happening in the future. But I do have some questions about the timeline.

It started back in 2014 and it took some time before a report was made. I was just wondering whether this timeline could have been shortened, given the new counter-measures in place? And of course, I also worry about the IT and data capability that the Minister mentioned that they are now implementing and working at. Is there any way we can hasten this because the data is pretty important for us to ensure in the system?

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M: Mr Speaker, MUIS has taken action whenever a discovery is made. A lot of these can come from the internal reporting, but these few discoveries that we have mentioned, including the \$2 million transfer, came after we undertook an audit externally, into the Madrasah as part of the process of ensuring governance and checks.

Whenever an irregularity has been detected internally or externally, MUIS would take action. For example, discovery of the \$2 million transfer was done after an audit in 2016, although it was transacted in 2014 internally by the MMC. Without the audit, we probably would not have discovered it.

In the same way too, MUIS commissioned a special review in 2021 – which is way past the 2016 timeline – to see whether there are even further transactions between the Madrasah and ITL. It is in 2021, arising from the findings of this review that MUIS filed a Police report.

These regular checks that we have to do, even when what seemed to have been settled, must be carried on in any institutions so that we can continue to be accountable to the community.

There is one more question that the Member asked about IT. As I mentioned just now, we do have to upgrade the IT capabilities as well as the governance around IT and data management in the madrasahs and that is a work in progress.

ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS UNDER CONSUMER PROTECTION (FAIR TRADING) ACT FOR GREENWASHING-RELATED ACTIVITIES

4 Mr Leon Perera asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) how often have enforcement actions been taken under the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act for greenwashing-related activities in each of the last five years; and (b) how many of such enforcement actions have been taken against products and services that are not financial services or financial products regulated by MAS.

5 Mr Leon Perera asked the Minister for Trade and Industry whether the Ministry will consider working with the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore to explore expanding the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice to explicitly cover greenwashing in non-financial products and services.

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Minister for Trade and Industry): Mr Speaker, may I have your permission to take Question Nos 4 and 5 in the Order Paper together, please?

Mr Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr Alvin Tan: The Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act, or CPFTA, protects consumers against false or misleading claims, including those related to greenwashing. The Consumers Association of Singapore and the Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore have not received any specific complaints alleging greenwashing.

There are existing guidelines under the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice, developed by the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore, to ensure that advertisers must clearly explain, adequately substantiate and qualify any environmental claim where necessary.

The Government will continue to monitor developments on greenwashing and develop further measures if necessary.

Mr Speaker: Mr Perera.

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied): I thank the Minister of State for his reply. Just two supplementary questions.

One is in relation to the possibility of legislation in the future. There are countries that have legislated to say that when brands make green claims, they must be able to provide supporting documentation to some kind of authority or independent auditor process. So, will the Government consider this in the future, given how important it is to ensure public confidence in the accuracy of green claims when they are made.

Secondly, if I heard the Minister of State correctly, is it fair to say that if there are complaints about greenwashing from members of the public, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other parties, will those complaints be investigated by the Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore (CCCS)? Should those complaints be made to CCCS?

Mr Alvin Tan: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. In fact, the Member had also raised this at the Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI) Committee of Supply (COS) debates and I thought that this was a very important issue that the Government is very much concerned about.

It is an emerging issue that has received growing interest among environmental and consumer protection authorities in many of the overseas jurisdictions, and the Member, in his MCI COS speech, had also outlined some of the different jurisdictions that have taken an interest in it and, in fact, some had also legislated on the issue of environmental claims or greenwashing as well.

While the current scope of the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act (CPFTA) is sufficiently broad to address greenwashing claims by a supplier in a business-to-consumer (B2C) transaction, CCCS is studying developments on greenwashing in other jurisdictions, in fact, to assess if any specific guidance or regulations would be useful in the Singapore context.

On the Member's second question, I would like to say that consumers who encounter greenwashing or misleading environmental claims made by suppliers can approach the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE) for assistance in resolving the dispute.

In egregious cases, CASE may refer the supplier to CCCS for investigation. I thank the Member for his supplementary questions and the Government is studying this very carefully and we will make the necessary moves where necessary.

TRIPARTITE GUIDELINE OR STANDARD ON UNEXPECTED CARE LEAVE

6 Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang asked the Minister for Manpower whether the Ministry will consider (i) upgrading the Tripartite Standard on Unpaid Leave for Unexpected Care Needs to take the form of Tripartite Guidelines and (ii) eventually legislating the Tripartite Standard on Unpaid Leave for Unexpected Care Needs.

7 Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang asked the Minister for Manpower (a) whether the Ministry will consider launching a Tripartite Standard on (i) paid childcare sick leave and (ii) paid parent care leave; and (b) if not, why not.

The Minister of State for Manpower (Ms Gan Siow Huang) (for the Minister for Manpower): Mr Speaker, may I take Question Nos 6 and 7 together?

Mr Speaker: Yes, please.

Ms Gan Siow Huang: Currently, employers are required by legislation to provide various types of leave to support employees' caregiving needs. For instance, besides Maternity and Paternity Leave, employers are also required to provide Childcare and Extended Childcare Leave on an annual basis.

Some employers have also gone beyond these legally mandated provisions to provide additional paid leave, such as Child Sick leave, Parental Care leave and Family Care leave.

To promote such progressive practices, tripartite partners introduced the Tripartite Standard on Work-life Harmony, which encourages employers to provide at least two enhanced types of leave in their companies. Depending on what best meets the needs of the employer and its employees, these can include paid Child Sick leave and paid Parental Care leave, which the Member had asked about.

We will continue to promote workplace practices that strike a good balance in addressing employees' caregiving needs and business needs. This includes encouraging flexible work arrangements (FWAs), which are more sustainable.

Mr Speaker: Mr Louis Ng.

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon): Thank you, Sir. I thank the Minister of State for the reply and for showing concerns, especially for parents who have twins or triplets and pre-term babies. But we have had the Tripartite Standards for quite some time now. So, could I just ask whether there is a timeframe where we are going to review on upgrading these Tripartite Standards into Tripartite Guidelines?

Second, what are the thresholds before we will consider converting it into Guidelines? And I know that this would not affect the majority of companies because, even for the Civil Service, only about 25 officers take this unpaid leave every year for the last few years. So, it has a minimal impact on the majority of companies but a tremendous help that parents of twins and triplets and pre-term babies really need. So, I hope the Government will consider this.

Ms Gan Siow Huang: We share the Member's concerns with supporting employees with caregiving needs, especially those with young children as well as those who have to take care of elderly parents. The Tripartite Standards are voluntary in nature and, basically, what we are trying to do is to enable businesses to be able to support their employees through family-friendly workplace culture and also balancing business needs as well as the employees' caregiving needs.

The Tripartite Standards, basically, give flexibility for employers to provide additional benefits for the employees, where possible to do so. And in a tight labour market, it is actually in the employers' interest to consider how best to meet the needs of their employees in order to attract and to retain them.

At the same time, the Government is also looking at stepping up and enhancing ways in which the community and infrastructure in the public can support employees who have caregiving needs, whether it is childcare facilities or eldercare day care facilities.

Mr Speaker: Mr Louis Ng.

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: Thank you, Sir. I really hope the Minister of State can just share whether we are going to review this. I appreciate that there are all the other programmes in place, but are we going to review this and improve it from a Standard into Guidelines? I am not asking for legislation, but for it to become a Tripartite Guideline instead.

Ms Gan Siow Huang: Well, the difference between Tripartite Standard and Tripartite Guidelines is that a Tripartite Standard is voluntary for companies to consider. Guidelines, on the other hand, will become mandatory for companies to apply, which means that companies that do not comply will be subject to administrative actions by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

So, as I have explained earlier on, the reason why we do not too quickly and easily convert Tripartite Standards into Guidelines is because we also have to be mindful of the impact on businesses and, at the same time, understand that if we want to support employees who have caregiving needs, it is important to promote family workplace culture, FWAs, which will become Guidelines by next year, and, at the same time, look at how else we can support employees with caregiving needs through community support as well as public infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): I thank Minister of State Gan for her response. I am just wondering if we can push it just a little bit more, because, of course, many of our residents – especially mothers, not just mothers of triplets, but working mothers in general – have struggled with this. So, I wonder if the Ministry will consider, not moving to Guidelines for all firms, which I understand – especially for SMEs, it may be difficult to follow through – but perhaps only for the largest firms, to begin with.

Mr Speaker: Minister Tan.

The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng): Thank you, Speaker, for allowing me to respond to both the hon Members of Parliament. We intend to put the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangements up some time next year, in 2024. Members would appreciate the fact that this is a tripartite initiative. So, it involves the Government, the Labour Movement as well as the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF).

So, in moving it forward, we need to get the concurrence and support, not just from a top-down perspective, but also from ground-up. And those guidelines will then be set into motion, it will always be a work-in-progress, to see how we can continue to titrate and calibrate according to the needs of the businesses and the needs of our workers, our local population, as well as also the needs of the employers. I hope this answers and addresses both the Members' concerns.

ADDRESSING POSSIBLE DISAMENITIES SUCH AS INDISCRIMINATE LITTERING AND FEEDING OF WILDLIFE AS LAZARUS ISLAND OPENS TO ECO-TOURISM

The following question stood in the name of **Mr Melvin Yong** –

8 To ask the Minister for Trade and Industry in view of the opening of accommodation in Lazarus Island for eco-tourism from May 2023 (a) how does the Ministry intend to address possible disamenities that may arise, such as indiscriminate littering and visitors feeding wildlife; and (b) whether there will be regular monitoring of the impact to the island's wildlife and its surrounding marine ecosystem.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): Question No 8.

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Minister for Trade and Industry): Sir, the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) has worked with the operator of the short-term eco-accommodations, Big Tiny, to minimise guests' environmental footprint. The scale of the eco-accommodation is small, with a maximum occupancy of 15 adults in five units.

Big Tiny also adopts sustainable practices, such as using solar energy as their main source of power and has in place responsible and appropriate waste management measures. It will also educate its guests by providing pre-visit and in-room materials to remind them of best practices to protect the environment. SDC has worked with and will continue to work with Big Tiny and nature groups to finetune operational best practices. Should visitors or the operator breach regulations, the relevant agencies will take the appropriate enforcement action.

On a broader level, the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) works closely with relevant Government agencies and other stakeholders to safeguard the biodiversity and heritage of our Southern Islands, including Lazarus Island, to preserve their rustic charm and rich habitats. For example, in terms of biodiversity monitoring, the National Parks Board (NParks) is currently working with various stakeholders to compile the Southern Islands Biodiversity Survey. This will cover the terrestrial and marine habitats of all the Southern Islands, including Lazarus Island, and guide its conservation strategies. I want to assure Members of the House that we will continue to monitor and safeguard the biodiversity and heritage of our Southern Islands, which are of utmost importance to us.

GUIDELINES ON USE OF VERNACULAR LANGUAGES FOR WAYFINDING SIGNS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEMS IN HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS AND MRT STATIONS

9 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Communications and Information whether the Government issues guidelines on the use of local vernacular languages in wayfinding signs and public address systems within healthcare institutions and MRT stations to aid elderly Singaporeans.

The Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Communications and Infomation): Sir, Government agencies make their own assessments on when to use the three mother tongue languages (MTLs) to effectively communicate and meet the needs of their stakeholders.

In general, counter and service staff are available in the healthcare institutions to assist elderly Singaporeans who need help with wayfinding. In the case of our MRT stations, key information signages, such as station names, as well as public address announcements on important matters, such as travel advisories, are made using the four official languages.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): I thank the Senior Minister of State for his reply. Can I check if the Government has any intention to publish any guide on wayfinding that can be used by developers and other public institutions, as well as private institutions, to include and mention about how it is important to use the vernacular languages in some instances, especially places where senior citizens are frequenting, like hospitals and MRT stations?

Dr Janil Puthucheary: Sir, the responsibility is for Ministries and Government agencies to assess the operations and functions within their facilities and make an assessment how they choose to rely on MTLs where it is relevant to meet the needs of their stakeholders. This is an assessment for the individual Ministry or agency to make.

PROPOSAL FOR TRANSFER OF INVESTMENTS BOUGHT USING CPF SPECIAL ACCOUNT OR ORDINARY ACCOUNT TO NOMINEE RATHER THAN ESTATE OF DECEASED CPF MEMBER

10 **Mr Vikram Nair** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) why do investments bought using the CPF Special Account or Ordinary Account of a deceased member go to his estate upon death and not to his CPF nominee; and (b) whether the CPF will consider allowing such investments to also go to the nominee rather than the estate.

The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng): The CPF Investment Scheme, or CPFIS, investments are disbursed to the deceased member's estate. Doing so allows the beneficiaries of the estate to decide how best to manage these assets, including the preferred timing for the sale of assets, such as unit trusts and stocks. These decisions should be made by the beneficiaries, as these decisions could affect the value of the CPFIS investments.

CPF monies, on the other hand, under the CPF nomination scheme, can then be disbursed quickly without having to wait for the beneficiaries' decision on the CPFIS investments.

Members are informed upfront, when making their CPF nomination, that the nomination does not cover CPFIS investments. Hence, CPF members who want their CPFIS investments to go to the same beneficiaries as their CPF nominees, should do so through their will.

Mr Speaker: Mr Vikram Nair.

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang): I thank the Minister for his reply. That is a helpful explanation. I think the issue arises particularly with vulnerable families or less educated individuals, and the CPF Nomination Scheme was meant to be an easy way to avoid people having to write wills if their only asset was CPF.

Two areas of complications arise. One is in the event of bankruptcy. So, for example, if an individual is bankrupt, his CPF monies would go to his nominee, which could be the wife. But if it were to go to the estate, it would all go to the creditors. I had a Meet-the-People Session (MPS) case, for example, where a bankrupt had CPF monies which could not be touched by the creditors, which he was hoping to go to the wife, but because they had gone into investments, they went to the creditors.

The second, is again bankruptcy, but where one of the recipients is a bankrupt. In this case, the nominee was the wife, but because the money were in investments, they went to the estate. There was no will, so half of it would go to a child, who happened to be bankrupt and the other half would go to the wife. But then, the creditors then come in to decide how to sell the assets.

Another solution may be to have the assets go to the nominee and then the nominee can decide when to sell because the beneficiary and the estate may be quite different from the nominee.

Dr Tan See Leng: I thank the Member for his suggestion. I think it is something that we could potentially contemplate. But to the Member's first point about members who belong to low-income families, from our understanding, based on the statistics that we have been able to aggregate thus far, the main impact is actually on the Singtel discounted shares. Because, at the particular point in time, the Government took a stand at that time, as far as possible in terms of the growth, for the economy, we wanted to benefit a larger part of a group of Singaporeans.

Today, the Singtel discounted shares are treated as per what you have suggested.

When it comes to managing the investments, I think that it would not be prudent for CPF to manage the timing of the sale of these assets because ostensibly for us, it is really to protect the member and his nominees to provide for financial retirement adequacy, also to help them with the MediSave and also for housing. That was the construct of CPF.

If you try to manage and disburse the investment proceeds and time the sale of the investment that the member has made and you make a wrong timing or you make a wrong a decision to sell or, well, you made a decision to sell but at a wrong timing, it could have adverse impact on the savings.

Because of that, we left it to the beneficiaries according to the will. No, sorry, we left it to the estate to manage. But to the Member's point about some of the other potential improvements to the scheme, I am prepared to take them on board and consider.

RECENT REVISIONS TO MEDISHIELD LIFE COVERAGE AND IMPACT ON OUT-OF-POCKET PAYMENTS FOR CANCER TREATMENT AND DRUGS

11 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health with the recent revisions to MediShield Life coverage (a) which cancer services or drugs are likely to contribute to out-of-pocket expenses for the remaining 10% of cancer patients who are not fully subsidised; (b) what options are available to patients who cannot afford their treatment; and (c) whether the Ministry will consider relaxing restrictions on the use of MediSave funds for certain types of cancers, particularly in cases of late-stage cancer where treatment is a priority.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health): To reiterate, the Cancer Drug List (CDL) conferred negotiating leverage to the Ministry of Health (MOH), to lower the prices of commonly used and effective cancer drugs. Since its implementation, we have brought down CDL drug prices by an average of 30% and over 60% for some drugs. Today, the CDL covers about 90% of Health Science Authority (HSA)-approved cancer drug treatments in Singapore. We will work with pharmaceutical companies to expand the CDL.

For the remaining 10%, many continue to be able to tap on their insurance rider policies, which can cover drugs beyond the CDL. We also advise that patients and their families discuss the suitability of more cost-effective alternatives on the CDL with their doctors. If both are not possible and the patient is seeing a private doctor, the patient can consider transferring to subsidised care under public hospitals, where we will also explore the possibility of using additional MediSave and availing other forms of financial assistance. We are committed to ensuring that no one will be denied of appropriate care due to an inability to pay.

Mr Speaker: Mr Yip.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for her reply. My first question is on cancer services. I wish to ask whether the Ministry will consider allowing more MediSave use for patients who may need services like consults and tests for late-stage cancers. This is because some patients may want to tap on their MediSave instead of burdening their loved ones. Second, how often will the new cap of \$3,600 a year for MediShield Life claim limit for cancer drug services be reviewed to ensure that cancer services remain affordable for Singaporeans?

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: I thank the Member for the questions. The MediSave limit is usually sized to cover the 10% co-insurance of MediShield Life for treatments and the CDL. The current limit is actually more than enough to cover the 10%, so we will not be reviewing this at this juncture. But if the subsidised patient faces financial difficulty, some affordability challenges after the subsidies, after insurance

and after tapping on MediSave, he or she can still apply for financial assistance.

In respect of the question on MediShield Life, we have just done a review of the latest data available and we have raised the services limit quite substantially from \$1,200 to \$3,600. This would cover nine out of 10 subsidised bills in the Public Healthcare Institutions (PHIs).

On top of that, patients with Integrated Shield Plans (IPs) or riders would actually have higher coverage, more than the \$3,600 limit that is set. We will continue to monitor this, and we will continue to monitor the impact and review data and if necessary, we will adjust our policies accordingly.

MEDIFUND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR DIFFERENT MEMBERS OF A HOUSEHOLD

12 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Health whether there are any stipulations that a household already receiving financial support from MediFund for one family member is no longer eligible for such support for other family members.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health): There are no stipulations that a patient cannot qualify for MediFund if any family member is already receiving MediFund support.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): Thank you for the response. Just a very quick follow-up. This was actually conveyed by a resident during my Meet-the-People session (MPS) and I understand that he may have been misinformed. But I am just wondering, is there any kind of threshold limits that MediFund typically considers in terms of the number of family members that can qualify for such support? Because I am thinking not in terms of just a spouse but perhaps other members of the family as well.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: In respect of that, the Ministry of Health (MOH) provides operational guidelines to the MediFund committees and the MediFund Approved Institutions to facilitate their management of MediFund so that there is some sort of consistency in the decision-making. But actually, the MediFund committees have full discretion over the assessment of the applications.

In such situations, what they will do is assess the families' means and ability to pay for the patient's medical bills holistically. They will take into account the different income as well as other Government grants and support provided to the family. So, it is a holistic approach and I believe that is something that will be done on a case-by-case basis.

MENTAL WELL-BEING CIRCLES FORMED UNDER SG MENTAL WELL-BEING NETWORK

13 **Dr Wan Rizal** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) how many mental well-being circles under the SG Mental Well-Being Network have been formed so far; (b) how many members have been recruited and trained; and (c) what are some of the lessons learnt from forming well-being circles in the community.

The Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth): Sir, we recently updated on the Well-being Circles at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY)'s Committee of Supply (COS) debate on 6 March 2023. The Network has set up six Mental Well-Being Circles across Singapore. There are now 400 trained volunteers and around 30 partners across the six Mental Well-Being Circles.

The Well-Being Circles are still relatively new and are trying different approaches and models. While it would be too soon to be definitive about the learning points, I assure the Member that we will gain valuable experience over time and apply the lessons that we have learnt.

Mr Speaker: Dr Wan Rizal.

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Sir, I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I just want to ask, I have seen the good work that MCCY has done through the Mental Well-Being Circles and I am actually quite encouraged and I hope that we can actually push more forward in a shorter time.

One of the questions that I want to ask is about how we can prepare them further when a pandemic comes again because we are currently debating this Motion where we talk about COVID-19, but when a pandemic strikes, we want to make sure that these Well-Being Circles can transform and become an emergency preparedness approach. Are there plans to go into that direction?

Mr Alvin Tan: Sir, I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The purpose of the Mental Well-Being Circles was born out of the Youth Mental Well-Being Network and expanded to the SG Mental Well-Being Network, and the purpose is to raise awareness about mental well-being and mental health issues and also to train peer supporters so that they may be able to support their friends, their families and the community. And thirdly, it is to have a network for them to support one another and if necessary, to refer people who need step-up care to step-up support.

So, I would like to thank the Member for his contributions and also his strong support in his Kolam Ayer Well-Being Circle, and I encourage him and other Members to continue to give us feedback on how to improve this as we go along.

OUTCOMES FROM NEGOTIATIONS ON TREATY ON CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF MARINE BIODIVERSITY OF AREAS BEYOND NATIONAL JURISDICTION

14 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs in respect of the recently concluded landmark Treaty on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (a) what is the Government's assessment of the outcome of the negotiations leading to the agreed terms of the Treaty; (b) what is the Government's assessment of the benefits of the Treaty for Singapore; and (c) how can Singapore and Singaporeans contribute to further the objectives of the Treaty.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (Dr Vivian Balakrishnan): Mr Speaker, I thank Mr Tan for that question and I beg indulgence of the House to give a somewhat detailed answer.

The BBNJ Treaty is an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. There has been significant concern for many years about the degradation of the marine environment and the depletion of resources in the high seas and the deep seabed. This refers to the waters and the seabed beyond the 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of countries, and therefore, it is beyond the jurisdiction of any particular country.

There is an urgent need for collective action to address the urgent threats confronting our oceans, including the issues of climate change and biodiversity loss.

The BBNJ Treaty is thus a historic achievement and a critical boost for global efforts to protect the marine environment. The treaty covers nearly two-thirds of the ocean. It is an important step towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14 – to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development – as well as the global target to protect 30% of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030.

First, the Treaty enables a more holistic regulation of the marine environment in areas beyond national jurisdiction. This has hitherto been fragmented across different regional and sectoral organisations overseeing individual issues such as fisheries management and maritime shipping. It will fill some of these regulatory gaps, it will promote coordination across the different regional and sectoral bodies and provide greater clarity on what is required for the assessment of environmental impacts for activities in these areas.

Second, the Treaty seeks to address some of the inequalities among states in their ability to manage and use the resources of the areas beyond national jurisdiction. It provides for greater and more equitable sharing of the benefits arising from marine scientific research in these areas for all countries and it will boost capacity-building efforts for developing countries to better conserve and to sustainably use their marine biodiversity and to implement this Treaty.

We are proud that a Singaporean, the Ambassador for Oceans and Law of the Sea Issues, Ms Rena Lee, presided over the five Intergovernmental Conference sessions which were held between 2018 and 2023; and that this successfully led to the conclusion of the Treaty negotiations. Rena's able and tireless leadership during this long and arduous process brought countries together towards achieving

a consensus outcome and reaffirmed Singapore's position as a trusted interlocutor and bridge-builder as well as underlying our leading role in developing the international law of the sea. The successful conclusion of the negotiations is also a strong affirmation that multilateralism remains effective and relevant, and that a rules-based international order is needed more than ever before to resolve global issues.

These outcomes are relevant and beneficial to Singapore. By codifying scientific best practices across jurisdictions and giving effect to the principle of open science, the BBNJ Treaty will augment our Institutes of Higher Learning as well as maritime companies' access to deep sea samples, thereby creating new opportunities for our R&D sector.

Through the Treaty, our scientists working with repositories such as the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in NUS and agencies like A*STAR as well as the National Research Foundation (NRF) will find it easier to obtain access to information and to samples of the marine organisms for their research.

Singapore can also contribute to the objectives of the Treaty in a variety of ways. In the immediate term, we can work with other countries and regional and international organisations towards the early ratification and the effective implementation of the Treaty. In the longer term, we can support capacity-building efforts for developing countries by sharing our experience and expertise through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Singapore Cooperation Programme. Singaporeans can contribute to combatting climate change and protecting our own environment and oceans by living sustainably and practising zero-waste lifestyles.

To conclude, the oceans, whether they lie within exclusive economic zones or in the high seas beyond national jurisdiction, are all interconnected. The waters and the marine biodiversity in them move freely across borders. This means that whatever happens in the areas beyond national jurisdiction can and will have an impact on us in Singapore – be it in terms of biodiversity loss, environmental degradation or the ocean-climate nexus. We are therefore privileged and honoured to have been able to play a part in ensuring the conservation and sustainable use of our oceans through the BBNJ Treaty negotiations. We will certainly continue to support this crucial endeavour.

Mr Speaker: Mr Dennis Tan.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang): I thank the Foreign Minister for his detailed reply. May I join the Foreign Minister in also commending Ms Rena Lee for her leadership in her capacity as president of the UN Conference for the BBNJ and her excellent work in facilitating the agreement of many nations for the text for the landmark Treaty on the BBNJ, which I understand is an effort and has taken so many years. I have two supplementary questions.

The first is this. The signing of the Treaty is only the beginning; the devil is in the details. And there are a number of details to agree to, in the coming months, if not longer. As we know in international law, the initial agreement of the Treaty is just a first step. It is important that all countries will also ratify and introduce in their local laws in a short as possible a time, so that we can all start reaping the benefits of the Treaty. So, will the Minister share with the House what he sees as some of the challenges in getting as many countries to sign up and ratify, so that the Treaty can be properly enforced sooner rather than later. This is especially given the competitive nature of the world fisheries and mining industries.

The second supplementary question, how would the Government encourage or even ensure that Singaporean businesses will only source from sustainable fisheries and undersea mining, in compliance with the requirement of this convention?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Mr Tan is absolutely right. The challenge now, having concluded the negotiations on the text, is to get countries to ratify and more importantly, to actually implement. It will require at the domestic level, policies and legislation and programmes to do so. I will not underestimate the effort needed to persuade everyone to come on board. That is why I have dealt with this at some length because, in fact, we need not just within Singapore, but across the world for everyone to understand why the oceans and the marine biodiversity in the high seas and on the sea bed, the natural resources in a sense the natural heritage of all mankind, is important and worthy of protection.

To be honest with you, this requires political support. I am glad that at least in the case of Singapore, I think in this House, I can say that it is unanimous support, for the protection of the environment for dealing with climate change, for conserving marine biodiversity and equally important, a fair and equitable approach to how we extract resources sustainably, in areas both within our own jurisdiction, as well as areas outside.

The point is, I am very grateful for your support, but I am also saying that there will be challenges internationally. What will these challenges be? On a couple of fronts.

Number one, the unequal capacities of countries already causes a challenge. Because there will be some countries who have the technology and therefore have a head start to exploit and gain even sometimes an unfair advantage over others. This is one reason why this treaty is so important because it sets common rules for everyone.

Second, this treaty also ensures that there is a more equitable distribution of the benefits that derive from the extraction and the exploitation of this natural heritage of all of us.

Third, training capacity building, which will also require sharing between countries. And in the case of Singapore, one of the most important programmes that we run on the international front is capacity building; in the sense of uplifting, as many both officials, students, scientists across the board that we can, we will continue to do so.

But I would also say, we do need transparency and which actually brings me to the second point – how do you ensure compliance? Because these are the areas which are beyond jurisdiction. I will not trivialise how difficult it will be to hold people to account.

But I believe that if there is broad-based public support in all countries and we have a system with sufficient transparency, so, you know which companies or which institutions, what they are doing, where and the impact of their activities, I think that transparency will help ensure compliance.

So, again, I just want to say that I am grateful for your interest in this area and for your support and I hope this is the same situation in parliaments all over the world.

REASONS FOR HDB BTO APPLICANTS NOT BOOKING A FLAT WHEN INVITED TO DO SO

15 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for National Development (a) what are the reasons why 40% of HDB BTO applicants do not book a flat when invited to do so at selection exercises; (b) how does the Ministry determine whether the reasons provided for failing to book are legitimate; (c) whether applicants will be required to submit proof under the tightened BTO selection rules; and (d) what measures will be taken to exclude applicants who participate in BTO selection exercises for frivolous reasons.

The Minister of State for National Development (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for National Development): Mr Speaker, applicants are not required to provide or justify their reasons to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) for choosing not to book a flat. The most common reasons shared by applicants who did not book a flat when invited to do so, are as follows: firstly, their preferred units have been taken up; secondly, they have since decided to buy a resale flat; or thirdly, they have changed their minds and want to apply for flats in other sales exercises instead.

While there are different reasons for non-selection, such applicants do crowd out other homebuyers who may have more urgent housing needs. Hence, we have the rules for non-selection. From the August 2023 Build-To-Order (BTO) exercise, first-timers (FTs) with one non-selection count will be considered as second-timers (STs) for a year in the computer ballot; while STs with one non-selection count will not be allowed to participate in sales exercises for a year.

To be fair to applicants who are left with limited choices, HDB will not issue a non-selection count to applicants with 10 or fewer BTO flats, or five or fewer Sale of Balance flats, to choose from when their turn is due. This is regardless of the applicants' reasons for non-selection.

Where there are extenuating circumstances, HDB may exercise flexibility to waive the non-selection count. Each appeal is evaluated on its own merits and appellants will need to provide documentary evidence to HDB to substantiate their case where necessary.

Mr Speaker: Mr Yip.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): I thank the Minister of State for his reply. Just one short supplementary question. For first time BTO applicants who do not choose a flat for valid reasons, like out of budget, will exceptions be made for them to retain their priority status?

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Sir, I thank the Member for the supplementary question. As I shared earlier, when there are extenuating circumstances, HDB may exercise flexibility on a case-by-case basis. So, I will urge the applicant with the circumstance shared by the Member earlier, to appeal with the documentary proof or evidence and we will take a look at it.

AVERAGE WAIT TIME FOR WALK-IN PATIENTS AT POLYCLINICS AND NUMBER OF PATIENTS TURNED AWAY AFTER ALL QUEUE NUMBERS ARE ISSUED

The following question stood in the name of **Mr Saktiandi Supaat** –

16 To ask the Minister for Health (a) what is the current average waiting time for a walk-in patient at a polyclinic; (b) what is the current average number of people who are turned away each day on the basis that there are no more queue numbers issued even if they have arrived within the polyclinic’s opening hours; (c) of which, what proportion is above the age of 55 years old; and (d) if any of the foregoing data is unavailable, whether the Ministry will consider collecting them.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): Question No 16.

The Senior Minister of State for Health (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Health): Sir, the overall median and 95th percentile doctor consultation waiting time for walk-in patients at polyclinics in February 2023 was 17 minutes and 164 minutes respectively. We currently do not track the number of patients turned away from the polyclinics, nor the proportion above 55 years of age.

Given their high volumes, the polyclinics generally operate on an appointment basis to optimise capacity, patient waiting times and manpower allocation. For walk-in patients who are unable to get a same day appointment, the polyclinics will triage based on medical needs. Patients requiring urgent medical attention will be seen by the doctor, whilst non-urgent cases may be advised to seek treatment at a nearby General Practitioner (GP) clinic. Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS) cardholders can receive subsidies for medical care at CHAS GP clinics. Such triaging is generally independent of age.

To meet anticipated healthcare needs, we are developing more polyclinics and are on track to meet our target of 32 polyclinics by 2030.

AVERAGE RESPONSE TIME FOR EMERGENCY VEHICLES

17 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Home Affairs in each of the last three years (a) what is the average response time for emergency vehicles to reach their destinations to attend to emergencies; and (b) what are the common reasons for delays in emergency vehicles sending patients to hospitals.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for Home Affairs): Sir, the median time taken for an emergency ambulance to arrive at the incident location was about seven minutes in 2020, about seven minutes in 2021 and about eight minutes in 2022.

A common reason when there is delay is traffic or weather conditions en route, for example, traffic congestion during peak hours, or heavy downpour affecting road visibility. Also, sometimes, SCDF may have to dispatch emergency vehicles that are further away from the incident location because those from the nearest bases are fully engaged in other incidents.

BTO FLAT APPLICANTS WHO PURCHASED FLATS AS FIANCÉ AND FIANCÉE BUT DO NOT SUBMIT MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE FOR VERIFICATION

18 **Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for National Development (a) in the past 10 years, how many HDB BTO applicants who purchased their flat as fiancé and fiancée, did not submit their marriage certificate when requested for verification after six months of collecting their keys; (b) how many of such applicants have refused to surrender their flats when informed, resulting in HDB taking recovery action; and (c) how many have managed to find a replacement who are eligible as joint applicants to retain the flat as approved by HDB.

The Second Minister for National Development (Ms Indranee Rajah) (for the Minister for National Development): Mr Speaker, Sir, HDB flat owners who purchased a flat under the Fiancé-Fiancée Scheme are required to produce their marriage certificate within three months from taking possession of the flat. The three-month period is generally sufficient as most couples would have ample time after the flat application to plan for their marriage. Should the couple require more time due to unexpected circumstances, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) may grant a further three-month extension and exercise flexibility on a case-by-case basis.

HDB does not track the number of fiancé-fiancée flat applicants who submitted their marriage certificate after six months of taking possession of their flat. Some of these applicants were granted further extensions of time due to extenuating circumstances and were able to submit their marriage certificate subsequently. Couples who do not intend to proceed with their marriage would have to surrender their flat to HDB. In some cases, an exception can be made to have one of the applicants retain the flat with the inclusion of a family member originally listed in the application, with the agreement of the other party. Owners who refuse to regularise their lease will face compulsory acquisition actions by HDB.

As of 31 December 2022, there were 79 couples who have bought their new flats from HDB under the Fiancé-Fiancée Scheme in the last 10 years and have taken possession of their flats for more than six months but have yet to produce their marriage certificate. Of these 79 couples, HDB allowed three of the cases to have one of the applicants retain the flat with the inclusion of a family member originally listed in the flat application and initiated compulsory acquisition actions against two of them. Another five couples have submitted applications to surrender their flats. The remainder are recent cases where many had cited difficulties proceeding with their marriage during the COVID-19 period.

HDB will continue to work with the owners of the remaining outstanding cases to regularise their lease through the submission of marriage certificate, surrender of the flat or via compulsory acquisition actions.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): I thank the Minister for the response. I am wondering if you could just elaborate a little bit on the reason why the stipulation that an original member of the application has to be included. I say this because I have had residents that have made a request because they no longer ended up with the original intended partner, actually try to apply with another new partner – and all the parties involved agreed with the process – but because of course the new partner is not listed in the original application, this was rejected.

Ms Indranee Rajah: Essentially, with a break-up of the fiancé-fiancée relationship, there is a breach of the fundamental eligibility condition of the family nucleus to buy a flat. Hence, the retention of the flat is not allowed and the flat is to be surrendered to HDB. If the flat owners refuse to surrender, then of course HDB will compulsorily acquire the flat.

And then, specific to the question that Assoc Prof Lim raised, the only exception to allow one party to retain the flat is with parents who were originally listed in the application for purchase of the flat as the retaining party with his or her parents would have qualified to buy the flat as a family nucleus even without the couple's marriage. So, that is the idea because with the other family member, they would have qualified on their own even without marriage.

REVISION OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR DISABLED PERSONS SCHEME GIVEN RISING COST OF LIVING

19 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) when was the last revision of the household income eligibility criteria for the Disabled Persons Scheme; and (b) whether the criteria are being evaluated so as to remain relevant amidst inflation and rising costs of living.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social and Family Development (Mr Eric Chua) (for the Minister for Social and Family Development): Mr Speaker, the Disabled Persons Scheme (DPS) exempts eligible Singapore Citizens with permanent disabilities who cannot take public transport from paying premiums for Certificates of Entitlement (COE) and Additional Registration Fees

(ARF) when they purchase a vehicle for work purposes. The household income eligibility criteria for the DPS were last reviewed and revised in 2017.

As we move towards being a car-lite society, we have enhanced the Taxi Subsidy Scheme (TSS) to cater to persons with disabilities who are unable to take public transport. The TSS provides means-tested subsidies to defray the cost of travel via taxis and private hire vehicles to school, work or employment-related training. In 2020, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) increased the TSS qualifying monthly per capita household income from \$2,600 to \$2,800.

In recent years, there have been increasingly more transport options for persons with disabilities who cannot take public transport. For example, all taxis are required to be able to fit foldable wheelchairs in their boot. Taxi and private hire car operators have introduced more wheelchair-accessible vehicles. Several private transport operators catering to persons with disabilities have also entered the market, further enhancing the overall accessibility.

We will continue to monitor and review the transport landscape for persons with disabilities to ensure that transport options remain accessible and affordable.

Mr Speaker: Dr Tan.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for his answer. I have two supplementary questions.

The first question is regarding the existing scheme, the DPS. Do we also consider, as part of the assessment, the upkeep needs of the other dependents within the same household? So, for example, if there are very young children, infants who need care, is that a factor considered when there are appeals?

Secondly, based on the previous income threshold from 2017 which was six years ago, would the Senior Parliamentary Secretary happen to have information on what percentile household income that was in 2017 and how that figure translates into percentile household income in today's setting?

Mr Eric Chua: Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. Actually, to both questions, the short answer is yes.

First one, we do consider holistically the situation and factors within each family. On the second question about numbers, I do not have the exact numbers but we do review, as I mentioned in my main reply, the affordability and accessibility from time to time.

CONTROL OVER MAS ON CHOICE OF MONETARY REGIME OR TOTAL LEVEL OF RESERVES HELD

20 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Prime Minister what is the scope of guidance or control on the choice of monetary regime or on the total level of reserves held, that the Government is able to convey to or exercise on MAS as an independent central bank.

The Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Prime Minister): Sir, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) Act states that MAS is to maintain price stability conducive to sustainable growth of the economy and that it is to conduct monetary policy for this purpose. Within this stated mandate, MAS has full autonomy over the appropriate choice of monetary policy instrument and the formulation of monetary policy.

We have addressed questions on the Official Foreign Reserves (OFR) in this House several times, most recently during the Second Reading Speech on the MAS (Amendment) Bill on 11 January 2022. These covered the purpose of maintaining OFR, how it is accumulated, how it is invested and how much of it is needed. MAS assesses how much OFR is needed for the purpose of implementing its monetary policy, taking reference from internationally accepted measures of reserve adequacy as well as the highly open nature of our economy and financial markets.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am just wondering if I could just clarify. So, my interpretation of what was just shared is that MAS actually does maintain quite a bit of discretion in how it operationalises the various scopes, but that the Government is able to make broad suggestions on just how it goes about operationalising these principles. And if that is the case, would the Minister of State be able to share if this is also the general principle that the Government adheres to for all other independent bodies, such as the Chief Valuer?

Mr Alvin Tan: Sir, I will focus my answer on the MAS. And the structure of the MAS and indeed how MAS conducts its exchange rate monetary policy is not new. In fact, it has been something that is a long-stated policy of the MAS. Many advanced countries have opted for statutory central bank independence, but this has not really fully insulated monetary policy from political interference.

The MAS' model is different. The MAS may not have statutory independence in the way that many central banks do. It is not independent of the Government, but it is independent within the Government. Let me elaborate.

The MAS operates with considerable autonomy with no interference from the rest of the Government, be it in the conduct of monetary policy or supervisory policy. Yet, MAS is part of the broader Singapore Public Service working closely with other Government agencies for the national benefit. And macro-prudential policies are successful in Singapore only because the MAS, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of National Development coordinate and use their respective policy tools in a concerted manner.

If I take a step back, if you look at over five decades of MAS' history, the MAS has built its credibility as a central bank, as a financial supervisor as well as a partner with industry, by learning from the best particularly in the MAS' earlier years, but also where appropriate, doing things in our own way.

So, we do things in our own because our circumstances are very different from many other jurisdictions around the world. We play an outsized role in global financial markets, for example, as a financial centre, and we are also a very small place but a very open economy. And that is why the way that we do things are different. MAS maintains that operational autonomy from Government.

CHANGI AIRPORT TERMINAL 5 SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION MEASURES

21 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Transport (a) what steps have been taken to ensure that the construction of Changi Airport Terminal 5 is in line with sustainability goals; and (b) whether steps are taken to future proof the development of the terminal against climate change.

The Minister for Transport (Mr S Iswaran): Mr Speaker, on the Member's first question, the factsheet entitled "Enhancing Singapore's Connectivity; Securing our Future" which was released by my Ministry on 21 August 2022 includes details on how we are designing Terminal 5 (T5) to be a green and sustainable terminal building.

Changi Airport Group's 2022 Annual Sustainability Report addresses the second question. The Report describes measures that have been taken including the enhancement of the drainage network at Changi Airport, installation of tidal gates and raising the platform level at Changi East to 5.5 metres above mean sea level.

I have also given a written reply to Dr Tan Wu Meng's Parliamentary Question on 13 September 2022 on the mitigating measures that have been taken to protect Changi Airport against the effect of higher temperatures.

We will continue to monitor technological developments and review and enhance the measures for T5 to be green, sustainable and resilient to climate change.

REPORTS OF PROTECTION FROM ONLINE FALSEHOODS AND MANIPULATION ACT OFFENCES RELATED TO COVID-19

22 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Communications and Information in each of the years between 2020 and 2022 (a) how many POFMA reports are received by the various Ministries that relate to COVID-19; and (b) how many of such reports resulted in no further action being taken.

The Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Communications and Information): Sir, between 2020 and 2022, the POFMA Office received over 280 pieces of feedback and enquiries related to COVID-19 issues. This included public feedback to various Government agencies on potential COVID-19 falsehoods that were redirected to the POFMA Office. There were four POFMA cases involving the issuance of seven POFMA directions that were linked to such public feedback.

Mr Speaker: Ms He Ting Ru.

Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang): I thank the Senior Minister of State for the reply. I just have a very quick supplementary question. Just wondered whether what was the assessment of the effectiveness of the POFMA legislation and obviously all the tools available under the POFMA regime given to the Ministries in the various authorities in order to combat these falsehoods that resulted from COVID-19-related misinformation being circulated?

Dr Janil Puthucheary: Sir, in all the cases that I have mentioned where action was taken, the Government was already aware of the falsehoods prior to receiving the feedback and had begun an assessment of the falsehoods. The Government took and continues to treat COVID-19 misinformation very seriously, even if the feedback did not result in a POFMA action. The feedback highlighted gaps and understanding that potentially would deserve attention.

As a result, other than the POFMA direction, the Government has also used public communication and education efforts to provide accurate and timely information relating to COVID-19. This includes providing up-to-date information directly to Singaporeans through various channels such as the Gov.sg WhatsApp channel, which grew to over 1.2 million subscribers during the pandemic.

Some of our polls in 2022 show that three in four members of the public think that the Government has provided sufficient information on COVID-19. A 2021 survey showed that over 86% agreed that these messages helped in their decision to get vaccinated.

Our actions and our concerted efforts to counter COVID-19 misinformation contributed to high levels of public trust, which have allowed us to come together as a country to achieve high vaccination coverage and implement effective COVID-19 measures.

MUIS' USE OF DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA AND ASATIZAH RECOGNITION SCHEME TO COMBAT TREND OF ONLINE RADICALISATION

23 **Dr Shahira Abdullah** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs in respect of youths getting radicalised online (a) how is MUIS utilising its digital platforms to combat this; (b) what is the level of reach and engagement of MUIS' SalamSG TV and MuslimSG to the general public and youths respectively; and (d) whether MUIS will consider supporting mysafespace.sg which connects users to certified asatizahs under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme for personalised and anonymous religious guidance through a chat portal.

The Minister for Social and Family Development and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs (Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M): Mr Speaker, SalamSG TV is a faith-inspired YouTube channel developed by MUIS during the circuit breaker in 2020 and is now part of the SalamSG Movement, a nationwide community movement driven by all mosques in Singapore with the aim of spreading good within and beyond the community. MuslimSG is a one-stop online media platform by MUIS that provides Islamic religious content.

MUIS leverages SalamSG TV and MuslimSG, as well as collaborates with key influencers to promote mainstream, contextualised Islam. This includes disseminating positive and religiously accurate and context-appropriate narratives that inoculate Muslim youths in Singapore against inappropriate, divisive and exclusivist religious content.

SalamSG TV and MuslimSG have achieved substantial reach and engagement, including with the youths. A significant portion of this reach is to youths. For SalamSG TV, 63.2% of its Facebook audience in 2022 were between the ages of 13 and 44 years old, and for MuslimSG, 70.9% of its Facebook audience in 2022 were between the ages of 13 and 44 years old.

The hon Member raised mysafespace.sg, which is a chat portal that connects asatizah to those who wish to seek guidance on religious matters anonymously. This is a ground-up initiative by a group of asatizah and MUIS is not directly involved. However, most of the asatizah on mysafespace.sg are from the Asatizah Youth Network (AYN) which was formed by MUIS to engage youth in our community via social media. MUIS supports the AYN, by funding training in areas, such as developing positive counter-narratives, curating digital content, as well as youth-specific counselling skills.

Parents and families play an important role to inculcate the right values and understanding of our religion. Sites like SalamSG and mysafespace.sg are good resources. But we should not, as parents, delegate our responsibility nor concede our duty of care to our children.

In the meantime, MUIS will continue to support the development of our asatizah, so that they may provide religious guidance to the community, including reaching out through different and innovative ways, such as mysafespace.sg. In 2019, the Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA) was formed to develop a vision for the asatizah of the future. In line with their recommendations to achieve this vision, MUIS remains committed to professionalise the asatizah sector, strengthen our religious institutions and nurture inspiring religious graduates.

Mr Speaker: Dr Shahira Abdullah.

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member): I would to thank the Minister for his reply. I just have two supplementary questions.

The statistics that were given were wide. Is there a smaller breakdown available for the reach of these platforms? And if not, will the Ministry consider collecting such data? Because what we have right now is just for those aged 13 and 44. It is even beyond the youth age range.

Secondly, I agree that mysafesapce.sg is a great ground-up initiative by the asatizah. I am particularly heartened by it because youths at that age do not really like to call the MUIS hotline. They prefer to chat, they prefer to type. It gives them an element of anonymity and a bit more confidence. I was wondering if there is any other way that MUIS or the Ministry would want to support them either to promote or even to help out with their website, because, right now, sometimes, it gets a bit buggy. Are there any plans for this?

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M: On the first question, MUIS uses a particular service which gives this breakdown of their data. At this point of time, this service does not give very micro data that we can further analyse and see how we can understand the data. Right now, we are looking at a broad reach and I think it is generally okay. Unless there are necessary imperatives to spend more to get an even deeper dive, I think we will do with this for now.

For the second question, I accept that the young people may not always want to go to MUIS' website. It is quite frightening sometimes to talk to an ustaz or to be known talking to an ustaz or find out that the ustaz even knows him.

But the irony is that if we endorse a particular site, which is actually a very independent and ground-up initiative, then we also should be mindful that youths think this is a MUIS site. And then, again, we lose the segment that this site, like mysafespace.sg, has gotten, some reach to our youths. And therefore, endorsement is not something we should be doing just automatically.

Support can be given. If useful, MUIS can put that in its SalamSG, for example, to say these are other independent sites that youths could reach out to if they want support. And if there is any need for our asatizah in that space for further support, they should reach out to MUIS and we would be happy to let them thrive and support them.

IMPACT OF WRIT OF ELECTION ON VALIDITY OF APPOINTMENT AS GRASSROOT ADVISER

24 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) whether the appointments of grassroots adviser (GRA) cease from the day the Writ of Election is issued to the day after the results of the General Election are announced; and (b) if not, whether GRAs can continue writing appeal letters to Government agencies on behalf of residents during this period.

The Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai): Sir, Grassroots Advisers, or GRAs, are appointed by the People's Association (PA), a Statutory Board which is under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). They help the PA with its mission to foster social cohesion and also connect with and engage people on Government policies and schemes.

The term of a GRA's appointment is determined by PA and is not tied to the term of Parliament. As with all Government agencies which continue to function after a Writ of Election is issued, GRAs continue to discharge their responsibilities. In this period of time, Government agencies also continue to receive and will duly consider appeals made by members of the public, or those made on their behalf.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): Can I clarify with the Minister whether he means, when he says members of public, does that include the Members of Parliament as well or the former Members of Parliament who are now members of public after the Writ of Election is issued?

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai: Sir, as the Member knows, after the Writ of Elections is issued, Members of Parliament vacate their offices, and so, they are no longer Members of Parliament. So, to that extent, they are not Members of Parliament. Therefore, the appeal, if any is filed by that person, it will be treated as a request made on behalf of another member of public. I hope that clarifies.

EXTENT OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNING AND SIMILAR ACTIVITIES FOLLOWING ISSUANCE OF WRIT OF ELECTION

25 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Prime Minister (a) whether election campaigning is allowed from the day the Writ of Election is issued to Nomination Day; and (b) whether potential candidates for the General Election are allowed to conduct house-to-house visits, or visit markets and coffee shops, to (i) check on residents' well-being or (ii) explicitly canvass for votes while wearing their party uniforms and badges during this period.

The Minister for Education (Mr Chan Chun Sing) (for the Prime Minister): Mr Speaker, Sir, on behalf of Prime Minister, please.

Our election laws primarily regulate campaigning during the campaign period, which commences from the closure of the place of nomination on Nomination Day and ends at the start of the eve of Polling Day. Outside of the campaign period, the election laws do not prohibit political parties and aspiring candidates from conducting activities, such as house-to-house visits, visiting markets and coffee shops to interact with residents, or to explicitly canvass for votes while wearing their party uniforms and badges. This is assuming that these activities comply with the other laws of the land.

However, there are some restrictions during this period. For example, election advertising must comply with the prevailing publishing requirements and non-Singapore Citizens must not publish or display election advertising.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): I thank the Minister for his reply. Can I clarify with him what is the material difference between the periods as far as campaigning is concerned before: one, the Writ of Election is concerned; two, from the time the Writ of Election is concerned until Nomination Day and; thirdly, from Nomination Day until the day before cooling off day?

And are canvassing for votes and general interaction with residents by potential candidates allowed during each of these periods?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Mr Speaker, Sir, in response to the last question by Mr Gerald Giam, I have already stated during my answer just now. Anyone can interact with any residents at any time of the year so long as it complies with the laws of the land.

Second, in answer to the first supplementary question that Mr Gerald Giam asked, what is the difference between the period from the Writ of Election to the nomination, the details can be found in the guidebook that we have published. What are some of the key differences? For example, during the election period, there are rules that governs the electoral advertising, what can be done and what cannot be done, as part of electoral advertising. As to the rest of the activities, Mr Giam can also refer to the election guidebook and the rules that apply to the normal course of activities that all of us conduct on a daily basis.

REASONS FOR LOW TAKE-UP RATE FOR LEASE BUYBACK SCHEME AMONG OWNERS OF LARGER FLATS

26 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for National Development (a) what are the main reasons for the low take-up rate for the Lease Buyback Scheme among owners of larger flats; (b) what are the measures being considered to increase the annual take-up rate beyond 1,500 households; and (c) whether there are any upcoming initiatives to assist homeowners in unlocking the value of their flats for retirement needs.

The Minister of State for National Development (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for National Development): Sir, the Lease Buyback Scheme (LBS) was introduced in March 2009, to help improve the retirement adequacy of elderly flat owners by enabling them to sell a portion of the lease of their HDB flat to the Government and join CPF LIFE. In return, they receive a stream of income in their retirement years, while continuing to live in their flat.

Since then, we have made enhancements to the scheme. When it was first introduced, only owners of 3-room or smaller flats were eligible. The scheme has since been expanded to owners of all flat types, including 5-room and larger flats. In April 2020, the maximum LBS bonus was increased by 50% across all flat types, to \$30,000 for 3-room and smaller flats, \$15,000 for 4-room flats and \$7,500 for 5-room and bigger flats.

There are various reasons why some elderly flat owners may not be keen to take up the LBS. Some may have other sources of income to meet their retirement needs or they have plans to bequeath their homes to their loved ones when they pass on. Others may prefer to take up other monetisation options, such as right-sizing to a smaller flat and applying for the Silver Housing Bonus, or renting out spare rooms or their flat. Our aim is to provide seniors with different options to unlock the value of their flat to supplement their retirement needs, while giving them the autonomy to decide on the best option that suits their needs.

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) reaches out to seniors on these housing monetisation options in various ways. Besides publishing details of these options on the HDB InfoWEB, HDB also works with media outlets to raise awareness of these schemes alongside public talks, seminars and mini exhibitions at local community events. For example, there was a community event, covering housing options for our seniors, at Fengshan Community Club (CC) on 10 March 2023.

Moreover, CPF Board invites members turning 55 and 65 years old to attend a CPF Retirement Planning Service which includes sharing on available housing monetisation options. HDB also works with CPF Board to send out letters on housing monetisation options to these seniors. These letters provide seniors with personalised estimates of the proceeds and additional CPF monthly payouts they can receive if they take up the LBS and information on right-sizing with the Silver Housing Bonus.

Sir, we will continue to explore ways to increase our outreach and communication efforts to seniors on the various housing monetisation options. HDB will continue to review the housing needs of our elderly flat owners to ensure that our housing policies remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs and preferences.

12.00 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. End of Question Time. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Order of the day.

[Pursuant to Standing Order No 22(3), provided that Members had not asked for questions standing in their names to be postponed to a later Sitting day or withdrawn, written answers to questions not reached by the end of Question Time are reproduced in the Appendix.]

SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

(Motion)

Order read for Resumption of Debate on Question [20 March 2023].

"That this House expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the nation's fight against COVID-19; affirms the Government's effort to learn from the experiences of the last three years; and, to that end, endorses Paper Cmd 22 of 2023 on 'Singapore's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for the Next Pandemic'." – [Mr Lawrence Wong].

Question again proposed.

Mr Speaker: Miss Cheng Li Hui.

12.00 pm

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines): Mr Speaker, I was working in the oil and gas industry in 2009 when H1N1 happen. I had about 400 direct workers on the island and totaling about 1,400 direct hire foreign workers in the company.

Many of us do not remember that there was contact tracing then too. We learnt some lessons. When an engineer in another refinery contracted H1N1, the workers that he spoke to the days before had to go into self-isolation. Then, the workers in that dormitory room who were working in my jobsite had to go in as well. Workers who took the same transport from jobsite also went into isolation and it was tough to plan our work.

The ideal situation would be for the workers in the same dormitory to work in the same jobsite. But that is not possible as every week, there will be new hires, resignations, change of jobsites due to work the requirements. HR would see which dormitory had spaces and put workers there. It was not an easy job as sometimes, there may not be enough man-year entitlement and they will send experienced workers back and rehire them when MYE is available, but that dorm spot would be filled by other new hires.

There is probably no ideal practical solution because every situation is unique in its own way and we cannot have systems that can dynamically adjust all the time. However, most businesses will try their best to make things work. They have to because their businesses depend on it.

Some initiatives work only in theory, but in reality, can impose a lot of friction and we may be better off not having some of these solutions in the first place. Hence, businesses must speak up in trade and business dialogues because sometimes, not only are the desired outcomes not achieved, there can be serious unintended consequences.

Thankfully, the H1N1 outbreak was nowhere as extensive or disruptive as COVID-19 was. So right after that period, I rented a brand new 500 pax dormitory in Senoko and also planned the construction of our own dormitory. I was very clear. We needed better conditions for our workers and be prepared for the next virus and even isolation rooms for chicken pox and flu.

For the new dorms that we were building, it was initially for 900 persons, new rules set in when we were submitting, and it was finally approved only for 804. We wanted to factor in the possibility of quarantine by building shared toilets between two rooms, but that would end up building a dormitory for lesser than the 804 persons approved. The sums began not to add up and did not seem to make any business or efficiency sense.

Businesses have to decide how much contingency is needed. The more we did, the more we managed the risks downwards, the higher the cost. Cost pressures for businesses are real. Is it worth spending \$X million for a scenario that may or may not happen?

This is not unlike how we can be sometimes under-insure. It is when we are hit by a major illness that we wished we had purchased the insurance when we could.

Dealing with the pandemic is no different. If we leave it to businesses, their efforts to prepare will be patchy and that is where the Government needs to step in. But there must be discussions with the businesses in order to realise the real impact of these policies. If we are not careful, it can affect our competitiveness vis a vis the region.

With hindsight, it is always easy to critique and say that one should have done this or that. But the reality is every crisis is likely to be different. And what we learnt and put in place in the aftermath, may not be wholly applicable in a new pandemic.

When COVID-19 struck, I was no longer in the process industry but was involved in some work on the ground as a volunteer. I am grateful to the many people who responded to my Facebook call for mask making in March 2020 and we received thousands per week.

On the first day of circuit breaker, I was outside Mustafa Centre, streets empty except for the hundreds queuing for food handouts by charities, hotels and one hawker even provided fresh fruit juices. The workers were stranded as their flights were cancelled and were staying in units above the shophouses in the area.

They had no masks and they did not know where to get them. We gave them care packs with handmade masks. After that, I volunteered with Crisis Relief Alliance as the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) had given each Non-Government Organization (NGO) a list of dormitories to visit. There are many Purpose-Built Dorms, and it is critical to leverage on these NGOs and other volunteer groups to assist MOM and the authorities to visit them, evaluate the conditions, assess the risks and also to ascertain what the needs might be.

For me, being a volunteer was the fastest way to get the masks to the dormitories and even for the dormitories I could not visit, I used the headcount in the spreadsheet and threw bags of required masks over the gates. Many workers gave thumbs up and friendly waves from their windows.

I salute the doctors, nurses, MOM officers and volunteers who went into the dorms in the early days. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and N95s were in shortage, the seriousness of COVID-19 was unclear. There was a lot of fear. Even as we drove from dorm to dorm, PPE and masks could not be taken off for fear of contamination. But there was a strong sense of duty as we moved from room to room to check on workers' mental health and hygiene.

I remember pulling open one huge metal door of a shed to see a COVID-19 case sitting on his bed with heavy equipment all around him. He was all smiles and said he was okay. He said he had to be considerate to the other people in dormitory and he will stay there until there is ambulance available for pick-up. Everyone in all the dorms were super grateful for the 50GB sim card provided by Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA). The workers could watch movies and kept in touch with their friends and loved ones.

I had great empathy for Malaysian workers in dorms as they chose to stay here because of the Movement Control Order (MCO) but were met with circuit breaker. Many of them did not have smartphones. So, even simple things like watching YouTube or ordering GRAB food and other transactions were not available for them. I posted on my Facebook and residents donated food rations at my Tampines Town Council office for them.

In the outreach work, there were so many officials we met on the ground and they were professional in their efforts, and tried to do as much and as quickly as possible. The patience and forbearance of the workers are to be highly commended too. It was clear that the foreign workers were aware of what was happening back in their homes and were glad that they were working in Singapore where they were largely treated fairly and reasonably looked after.

At the local level, I am grateful to our Town Council (TC) staff and workers who helped with all the additional work that was suddenly required. Disinfecting blocks when residents were infected, replenishing hand sanitiser bottles in every lift, enhancing the hygiene regime and many more. They gave residents peace of mind.

Lastly, I want to recognise the People's Association (PA) staff who worked long hours distributing masks, sanitisers, tokens, temporary relief fund applications (TRF) and many more. They were frontliners and were afraid too. They facilitated the first masks distribution without wearing masks nor have sanitisers for the pens that everyone was using to acknowledge collection. Some did not visit their extended families even after circuit breaker because of their exposure to the many relief schemes.

My own sense is that there is much that our Government can and should do in any pandemic. We need to be better, faster and to prepare in "peacetime" before the next outbreak occurs. But having been involved in the work, it is also quite apparent to me that the Government cannot do everything. It is not possible to cater for the surge needs now in anticipation of future pandemics – it would be prohibitively expensive for everyone. We as a society and community need to stand up and take action. NGOs should also come forward. This is how a whole-of-society effort is mobilised to deal with a crisis.

This was seen during COVID-19 and we need to give thanks for these efforts by so many, and we must not also take this for granted. We can and should have table-top exercises to refresh relationships and connections, establish some SOPs and ensure that everyone is on the same page and to perhaps even practise these mock exercises for various plausible pandemics.

To be fair to ourselves, despite the mistakes, inadequacies we see, when you take a few steps back, you would realise that relative to so many other countries, we have done pretty well. Please give ourselves a pat on the back. Most importantly, let us all give a great big shout-out to all our frontline, middle-ground and backroom colleagues who have gone many extra miles in the past few years.

The cycle continues. We must now begin to prepare for the next contingency. Change what we must, tweak what is needed and maintain what continues to make sense.

Mr Speaker: Ms Denise Phua.
12.09 pm

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar): Sir, I fully support the Motion put forth by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance on Singapore’s COVID-19 Response.

Singapore’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, while not perfect, is one of the best in the world. For those of us who have had loved ones suffer or even pass away in other countries due to a lack of access to vaccination and proper healthcare, we can appreciate how well the Singapore Government has fared.

However, I am glad that the White Paper not only highlight what we do well; but also where we fall short and how we can improve in the future.

Today, I wish to focus on how we can better support Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in future pandemics.

First, on the commendable efforts to support the disabled. Whilst the pandemic has affected many, PwDs and their families have been hit harder. Nonetheless, there are commendable sparks of great work being done.

SGEEnable, the main disability hub of Singapore, started a dedicated COVID-19 resource page on its Enabling Guide website. Together with Mediagroup, it facilitated C.A.R.E. or Care initiative to provide cooked meals, financial assistance, respite, and essentials distribution.

The amazing support by Temasek Foundation throughout the pandemic is well known. Additionally, Temasek Trust partnered the five Community Development Councils (CDCs) to launch a \$4 million CDC-Temasek Trust Lifelong Learning Grant to provide learning support in the form of devices and training courses, especially for those affected by COVID.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) also worked closely with the Ministry of Health (MOH), Health Promotion Board (HPB) and the Special Education (SPED) schools, special schools to run school-based vaccination centres for those who are still in schools. It learned from the SARS pandemic and actively included students from SPED schools in its suite of measures to protect them.

Dr Lim Hong Huay and her husband, infectious disease specialist Dr Leong Hoe Nam, Eden School, SuperHero Me, an arts movement, and Lien Foundation, developed an educational resource package to empower children and older PwDs. There are many other commendable efforts in Singapore.

Elsewhere, in other countries, I have been informed by disability volunteers and caregivers about some good practices in the disability space during the pandemic. In one country PwDs were prioritised to be vaccinated with other vulnerables in Phase 2, after the health professionals. PwDs were also earlier included in the home vaccination programme. They can also get vaccination jabs whilst sitting in the familiar car, in car drive-throughs in one country. PwDs were also given priority lanes in the bigger vaccination centres. Those with needs can request for vaccination and use of private Calm Rooms to avoid meltdowns. Such were the best practices I hear from other countries and I think something Singapore can refer to in our future planning.

What can we do to better support PwDs more effectively in future pandemics? I have three suggestions.

Firstly, it is essential to adopt a universal design approach so that the vulnerable including the disabled are included upstream. This should happen at the strategic inter-Ministerial task force level and at the highest operations level. Not downstream. Upstream.

The dedicated Centre for Public Health and the Forward Planning Team announced by Deputy Prime Minister Wong yesterday must include an arm to look into the key vulnerable groups such as the disabled, the young and the elderly.

It is crucial to recognise that the well-being of the vulnerable cannot be solely delegated to just one Ministry or depending on kindness of others, piecemeal stop-gap measures. The voices of the vulnerable should be designed to be heard at the highest level upstream and not downstream.

Secondly, we need to include outreach to the disabled in the mainstream communications channels such as television, newspapers and useful GovTech WhatsApp updates that other residents receive daily. Many individuals are unaware of how to access disability hubs such as SG Enable and there may also be barriers such as language and IT proficiency.

During the pandemic, we have heard of desperate parents who were also worried what the quarantine arrangements of their children would be, should the children get infected.

For adults with disabilities above the age of 18 who need supervision and escort, many of their families do not know where to turn to appeal for special needs measures such as being accompanied by a familiar adult before and during vaccination. Neither was it clear that they have options to be vaccinated either at a centre or at home – not to mention the car drive-throughs that I talk about in another country.

Whenever such cases come to my attention, I had often approached and relied on the kindness of public servants and office bearers such as Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mazam to point me in the right direction. But outreach has to be more systemic and affected parties need to be confident enough to have their needs heard and responded to.

Thirdly, we need to develop a playbook for inclusive pandemic policies and practices at the national level. Besides involving Government agencies, such as MSF and SGE for the disabled, there must be a platform to actively engage and consult with disability agencies and advocates to ensure that the unique needs and perspectives of the disabled, their caregivers and their community are highlighted.

We need to tap on mainstream practices wherever possible and communicate clearly and widely. For instance, in matters, such as applying for caregiver escort and supervision during vaccination and quarantines; and in offering the younger disabled options, such as public community vaccination centres; mobile home-based vaccinations and even, if possible, vehicle drive-through centres.

Set up a dedicated hotline staffed by human beings that is accessible for the major disability groups and their families. Identify and learn from best practices elsewhere. Allow for flexibility where reasonable – at school, at work or at public places – because not all disabilities and support needs are the same.

So, universal design, including the disabled, upstream, not downstream. Include outreach via the mainstream communications platforms. Develop a playbook for inclusive pandemic policies and practices for the future.

In conclusion, Sir, Singapore has done the best it could under the challenging circumstances brought about by COVID-19. Like many others, I feel so blessed to be in Singapore for a time such as this.

With hindsight, let us better include the voices of the disabled and their proxies, such as their families and advocates, so that we can better support persons with disabilities in future pandemics. Let us all work together to ensure that no one, indeed, is left behind.

Mr Speaker: Mr Raj Joshua Thomas.
12.16 pm

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member): Mr Speaker, Sir, the pandemic response was a massive effort by all quarters of Singapore society. Many Members have expressed appreciation to various segments, including our healthcare workers, our private and people sectors, our own citizens doing their part in their own way. In my speech, Sir, I would like to express gratitude to our public servants.

It has often been mentioned in this debate that, with hindsight, everything is clear. With hindsight, it is easy to criticise. And criticism, taken correctly, including self-criticism, lends itself to identifying weaknesses, improving capabilities and doing better in the future. This is what the White Paper does.

But as the hon Minister of State Sun Xueling said yesterday, it is the actions of the men in the arena when he is in the arena, with dust, sweat and blood on his face, that determine the outcome of the battle.

Furthermore, in this battle, the gladiator was blindfolded because we were dealing with an enemy of which little was known.

So, it should not be unexpected that there was a good amount of shifting and adjusting as we understood more, and even some backtracking in some cases.

I thought I should share my experience as a Trade Associations and Chambers (TAC) representative of an essential service during the pandemic who worked with various Government bodies.

The security industry operated throughout the pandemic, with officers being deployed on-site even during the circuit breaker. Our numbers were fairly large, with over 40,000 workers going to their workplace every day.

There were significant measures imposed on these workers as well as their employers, who had to ensure that the proper procedures were implemented on the ground, that personal protection equipment was made available and that they complied with administrative requirements imposed by the Government.

For example, during the circuit breaker, employers had to seek approval from MTI for quotas for the number of workers who could be deployed at site. These had to be sought and updated on a daily basis, with names of workers at site provided. It proved to be an administratively onerous and unwieldy system.

This and other impositions presented an administrative burden on employers – who had to juggle manpower constraints and day-to-day operations that had changed rapidly due to new requirements in access control like temperature taking – with a genuine desire to protect their workers and to comply with Government regulations.

The agencies I worked with, in particular, were Enterprise Singapore, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and at varying levels of staff seniority.

I have several observations working with these Government bodies in respect of an essential service industry deploying a large manpower base.

First, I found that these agencies made considerable effort to reach out to explain new measures, to provide updates and, where necessary, to carry out Zoom briefings. During the circuit breaker, I received updates almost on a daily basis. As a result of all this information coming to my TAC, we were empowered to ourselves send daily updates to our members. These communications involved not only information on the measures to be taken on the ground but also schemes that were concurrently being rolled out, like enterprise financing schemes and support for digital solutions by IMDA.

Second, the officers whom I was liaising with were very responsive.

The White Paper mentioned that ESG received over 200,000 calls in 2020 alone. I understand that ESG officers from all departments and at all seniorities were roped in to man the lines. I will confess, Sir, that probably not an insignificant number of these calls were made by my own TAC staff.

The officers I was liaising with were also easily contactable by phone, WhatsApp messages and Zoom. Furthermore, they were also contactable and working day and night, weekday and weekend.

My third observation was that not only were they contactable, but that they were also working actively to address our concerns and many accommodations were made on the fly.

I mentioned earlier one of the more administratively onerous requirements during the circuit breaker the employers faced – the need to seek approval from MTI for headcount quotas for on-site workers.

Employers had urgently approached my TAC that they had received approvals for headcounts far less than what they had requested for. For example, an employer providing security services and access control at Government quarantine facilities and dormitories had requested for a headcount of 580 but was only granted approval for 268. Another employer that was providing services to foreign embassies' data centres and dormitories requested for a quota of 729 but was granted approval for only 409.

This meant that these companies did not have approval for the headcount they needed to carry out the very measures that had been rolled out and that were required by the Government and that their clients had engaged them for.

Of course, I understood that this portal and the system had been rolled out for all Singapore companies. But for employers on the ground, receiving such a reduced quota was extremely frustrating and shocking. It made it more difficult that helplines could not give them a definitive solution as to how to increase the allocated headcount, other than to submit an appeal through the GoBusiness platform.

Because these quotas were given on a daily basis, employers had literally no time to react or to wait for appeal results. Even worse, some of these appeals resulted in less headcount being approved or just a marginal increase.

To add to these troubles, MOM also rolled out an SGWorkPass app for foreign workers at the same time. Many workers who were approved on the MTI platform appeared not to be approved in the SGWorkPass app at the same time. We raised these issues with MHA and ESG and asked for them to urgently look into it.

The consequence of complying with these quotas was that many sites would be left with no security and many measures, like temperature taking and access control, would not have been fulfilled because the vendors that were supposed to carry these out simply did not have the required number of approved headcount.

Very quickly, MHA informed us and we subsequently informed our members that security officers who were not yet approved on the SGWorkPass app could continue to be deployed while MHA sorted out the backend approvals with MOM. Both MHA and ESG also assured us that security officers could still be deployed while MHA and ESG worked with MTI on the headcount approvals.

All this, Sir, was done on a Sunday – specifically, 3 May 2020. Eventually, my TAC worked with MHA and MTI – even down to the headcounts for individual employers.

These, Sir, are examples of precisely the shifting and adjusting that were being done by our public servants as the situation unfolded, as feedback was coming in and as it became apparent that changes had to be made to some of the Government's requirements.

The security industry, because we have seen the successful effects of our feedback, and I, personally, come out of this pandemic experience with a greater appreciation and respect for our public servants. Public servants, like Mr Dhruv Ang from Enterprise Singapore, who actively reached out and acted as a coordinator for us across various Government agencies. Mr Jonathan Mark Capel from MHA, who swiftly and tirelessly supported our companies and their operational needs. Mr Albert Tsui and Mr Robbie Poo from MTI, who worked with us on the headcount quotas.

Sir, I named these officers who helped us to get through the pandemic because we often look at our Public Service as a faceless, nameless, monolithic organisation. But, Sir, it is made up of individuals, many of whom contributed so much to the pandemic response effort and who have made a real difference.

The hon Member Liang Eng Hwa mentioned yesterday and commended the considerable effort by Government officers to secure vaccines and masks. If we look at the sheer scale of Government intervention, including for businesses and jobs, the effort put in by our Public Service must have been herculean.

From implementing the Jobs Support Scheme, which dispersed almost \$30 billion to tens of thousands of businesses, to more targeted schemes like the Hawkers and Heartlands Go Digital programmes and the Food Delivery Booster Package or efforts to help SMEs with their leases – behind all these initiatives are our public servants who had to conceptualise these schemes, think about the details and what they were trying to address, how to execute them and then actually executing them and adjusting accordingly, of course, under the able leadership of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF). This would have taken tremendous hard work under trying and urgent conditions.

Let us also not forget our diplomats overseas, many of whom were stationed in countries where the pandemic situation was far worse than in Singapore. They remained in these foreign countries to provide assistance to Singaporeans and to help them get back home.

Sir, there are not many countries that can so quickly roll out so many schemes so effectively and have the ability to adjust and change as required. I am strongly of the view, Sir, that one of the things that we should take back from our COVID-19 pandemic experience is the robustness of our Public Service and confidence in its ability to respond and serve in any future crisis. In this regard, I would like to express my gratitude to all our public servants who worked hard and were instrumental in getting us through the pandemic.

Sir, finally, I would also like to commend the hon Leader of the Opposition and the Workers' Party for its position that, in a crisis, it would seek unity of purpose and support the Government of the day's efforts to deal with the crisis, instead of seeking to opportunistically seek political mileage.

This ensures that the Government will be able to focus on dealing with the critical and urgent issues in the crisis without being distracted by political challenges and considerations. It will also help to bring our people together instead of sowing division. The Workers' Party's stance on this is patently responsible and it is the type of politics that we want to see in Singapore.

This is a position that Mr Pritam Singh had expressed at the start of the pandemic and I am heartened that he has repeated it in this debate. It gives me confidence, Sir, and it should give all Singaporeans confidence that, in times of crisis, we will unite as a country, as a society and as a polity.

Mr Speaker: Dr Wan Rizal.

12.28 pm

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Mr Speaker, I applaud Singapore's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as reviewed in the White Paper. In my speech today, I aim to support the White Paper while highlighting a few areas – our healthcare workers, teachers, mental health and asatizahs.

Sir, it is important to take a moment to thank the frontline workers who have been instrumental in our success in mitigating COVID-19. Healthcare workers, in particular, have been on the frontline of this battle, working tirelessly to provide care and support to those who need it most. Their selflessness, dedication, hard work and sacrifice have inspired us all and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

However, there were reports of healthcare workers being subjected to verbal and physical abuse, online and offline, harassment and discrimination due to fear and misinformation surrounding the pandemic. Such abuse is unacceptable and significantly impacts the mental health and well-being of our healthcare workers who were under immense pressure during the pandemic.

Therefore, I am glad that the Tripartite Workgroup for the Prevention of Abuse and Harassment of Healthcare Workers recently shared a set of recommendations that includes a zero-tolerance approach, effective reporting and escalation protocols and a support structure to report abuse and harassment.

I hope the recommendations can be implemented soon and practised as we create a new norm. Let this be a new norm where abuse and harassment have no space in our society.

Sir, the pandemic significantly impacted the education system and our teachers were at the forefront. To me, they are as good as frontliners.

I applaud the Government's stance to keep schools open and ensure that education continues. Our teachers more than rose to the occasion to ensure that learning continued even under tremendous pressure.

They had to quickly adapt to new teaching methods and find ways to engage their students in a challenging and constantly changing environment. They have demonstrated resilience and dedication to their students' education, ensuring that the next generation of leaders can thrive in a post-pandemic world.

During the pandemic, the sudden shift to online learning and the need to adopt new teaching methods became a burden to some teachers, especially when the Singapore Student Learning System (SLS) broke down intermittently. Parents became anxious, and when the system failed, the teachers became anxious and under pressure too.

In that regard, we should consider setting up multiple online learning platforms, similar to SLS but different. Much like food resilience, we now want to have education resilience.

Training for both teachers and students should continue, and we must encourage the usage of Home-Based Learning (HBL) as a new norm, especially for Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs). This will sufficiently prepare our systems and human capabilities, if and when any other pandemic strikes.

Sir, teachers also shared how administrative duties, like attendance and contact tracing, bogged them down. Regardless, they understood the importance and went on to do any other additional jobs and duties. The Government must provide support and resources to teachers to help them navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic.

One resource available are actually the parents. This is where the parent-school relationship becomes important. We could enlist parent volunteers to help with the administrative or additional duties during a pandemic.

Thus, it is important that we begin to continually engage and recruit parents beyond the minimal service hours, get them more involved in activities like school games or events and participate in pandemic scenario exercises.

Sir, the pandemic not only affected physical health but also profoundly impacted the mental health of Singaporeans. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and stress, due to factors like social isolation, economic uncertainties and health-related factors.

I thank the Government for taking steps to address the mental health needs of Singaporeans, such as formation of the Inter-Agency COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce in October 2020 that later developed strategic recommendations for intervention and support.

Sir, the pandemic created barriers to accessing mental health care, with lockdown measures leading to the closure of some facilities and limited availability of services. We must identify ways to ensure such support continues during a high-anxiety period like the pandemic.

First is the formation of what I call a "Mental Health Community Emergency Preparedness Teams" comprised of residents, somewhat like the Community Emergency and Engagement (C2E) committees that we now have in our community.

In terms of emergency, the mental well-being circles must be able to transform, step-up and take on bigger roles. This peer network must also leverage technology to connect residents online, so that the first level of mental health support is provided and remains accessible during a pandemic.

Second is the second is the creation of a central mental health op-centre to be activated only during the pandemic, to allow accessibility and channel to the many available resources that we have in the community. Sir, in Malay, please.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for all Singaporeans.

We have now left the pandemic behind, and we have progressed safely.

In the national struggle against COVID-19, the Malay/Muslim community made some important adjustments.

Our asatizah, led by the Mufti and Muis played an important role in our community.

They calmly and astutely provided much-needed counsel during a difficult and unprecedented period.

Sir, here I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Mufti, the asatizah and Muis for their leadership.

Our religious leaders, after consulting with the Ministry of Health, had proactively provided guidance on how we can make adjustments to our religious life in order to be safe from COVID-19.

These include the closing of mosques before the Circuit Breaker period, the postponement of congregational prayers, the postponement of the Hajj, and being unable to visit our parents and loved ones during Hari Raya celebrations, as well as the limited prayer space in mosques.

I am grateful to the community for being understanding about the challenges at that time, supporting the decisions taken and cooperating with safe management measures to protect Singapore from the Covid-19 outbreak.

Sir, we have emerged from this epidemic, as one Singapore.

As a stronger and more united people, and most importantly, one that is more caring towards each other. We made the necessary adjustments, and showed a strong sense of togetherness, regardless of age, race or religion to overcome this epidemic as one nation.

In closing, I would like to express my deepest gratitude once again to all the those at the front line, including our health workers, teachers and asatizah. With that, I thank you.

Mr Speaker: Mr Edward Chia.

12.36 pm

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui (Holland-Bukit Timah): Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the Motion. The White Paper on the COVID-19 response is a fair assessment of how Singapore performed in its fight against COVID-19 and candidly stated certain areas to be improved, which I will elaborate upon in my speech today.

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the healthcare workers, frontline essential workers and all those who have worked tirelessly to keep our communities safe during these challenging times. Your dedication, sacrifice and unwavering commitment to the well-being of our society have not gone unnoticed, and we extend our heartfelt appreciation to every one of you.

As we reflect on the past few years, it is important to acknowledge the challenges we have faced as a nation. In particular, I would like to address three areas that we could have done more to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

First, the need to build more resilient housing, especially for low-resourced and vulnerable households. Challenges in our housing structures and capabilities, especially in the case of 1- and 2-room flats, became even more apparent during the implementation of the Home Recovery Programme (HRP).

The HRP was made the default mode for managing COVID-19 cases from 15 September 2021. Fully vaccinated individuals aged 12 to 50, with no or mild COVID-19 symptoms were advised to recover at home, without needing to visit a hospital or a community care facility. The transition proved frustrating for many Singaporeans. Some were unable to get through to MOH's hotline for instructions, while others who were not suited for home recovery faced delays in conveyance to recovery facilities.

For our resource-low households, particularly those living in 1- and 2-room flats, these challenges were amplified and experienced more acutely because of their space constraints.

During the Delta wave, our strategy pivoted from "Zero-COVID-19" to "living with COVID-19". With the re-characterisation of the virus as a disease mild enough to recuperate at home, the directive that followed was for infected individuals to self-isolate within the confines of their homes.

However, for those living in 1- and 2-room flats, where there is only one bathroom and multiple dwellers share the same bedroom, self-isolation proved almost inconceivable, and this drastically increased the risk of other household members contracting the virus. Having multiple members of a resource-low household contract COVID-19 leads to greater financial insecurity, as compared to a middle- and higher-resource households.

While their ability to work is compromised, resource-low families often do not have access to work-from-home (WFH) alternatives and rely on a smaller pool of savings to tide them through periods of no work.

As a Member of Parliament of Zhenghua, I have first-hand experience of the challenges faced by such families, especially those living in our public rental flats. I was in constant communication with residents and appealed to the Ministry of Health (MOH) team who did their best, given the situation, to assist them.

The limitations of our present homes in protecting residents in the face of a pandemic, especially in the case of 1- and 2-room flats, justifies a re-think of our minimum housing standards. Taking into account the challenges faced by households living in 1- and 2-room flats due to constraints in living space, what must be done to fortify all housing types to ensure that they are resilient in future pandemics?

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for businesses to work closely with the Government to ensure that essential services are not disrupted. During the pandemic, many businesses in Singapore worked with the Government to manage migrant workers' inflows at dormitories. This helped to ensure that essential services continued to be delivered.

Particularly, associations such as the Dormitory Association of Singapore Limited (DASL) contributed significantly to managing the unprecedented situation in the dormitories. Were there useful lessons learned from these partnerships with DASL and Singapore Contractors Association, and has MOM put in place measures to better prepare for the next pandemic?

It is crucial to work with Trade Associations (TAs) on pandemic response and establish pandemic-related Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs) and communication channels. This way, TAs will be ready with a pandemic response, and there will be a clear line of communication with the Government to ensure the efficient cascading of information both ways.

To tackle the possibility of such similar pandemics where the speed and scale of virus spread becomes unprecedented, is the Government looking to prepare preemptive policy coordination in the present state? Will these be included as one of the workstreams of the dedicated centre for public health and forward planning?

Lastly, I have received feedback from the business community that the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) rolled out during the pandemic to save jobs and spur hiring were, unfortunately, beset with instances of disbursement delays. In particular, the JGI payout Phase 5 has caused some administrative pain for companies. Businesses shared that IRAS conducts random checks to verify employment numbers. These checks involve specific documents, like employment details of certain employees, hours worked, work schedules, pay slips and such reviews take up to six months.

In a particular case, since June 2022, no payouts for Phase 5 onwards have been made although information for those phases have been asked for by IRAS and reviewed. This means that the review has taken close to 10 months. Upon further enquiry, IRAS was not able to provide on the status updates and were not clear on whether the company was eligible for payouts or not. When asked about the delays, IRAS cited manpower shortages as the reason for the longer review, rather than any cause for concerns with the company's documentation.

Sir, businesses continue to be cash flow-driven, and delays in payouts can make or break companies, especially in these cost-inflated times. Can the Government work towards ensuring that the disbursement process is better streamlined and efficient, without compromising on the necessary checks and balances?

This must certainly be challenging for civil servants involved too, so I do understand the operational constraints, so any solution has to include the organisation being adequately resourced.

It is important that these support measures are effective and accessible to businesses when they need it the most. Therefore, I look forward to the review and some proposed pathways to making this better for all.

In conclusion, I have highlighted three important areas of focus in Singapore's response to COVID-19: first, ensure that our homes are resilient in the face of future pandemics and that resource-low households are safeguarded; two, work closely with TAs to prepare for future pandemics; and lastly, expedite the disbursement of Government support for businesses to save jobs and spur hiring.

Mr Speaker: Mr Melvin Yong.

12.44 pm

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas): Mr Speaker, Sir, I stand in support of the Motion. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented crisis that has impacted the entire world. Our lives have been upended and we have had to learn to adapt to a new normal.

Today, I would like to pay a special tribute to our workers in the air, sea and land transport sectors. They have collectively kept Singapore connected, kept Singaporeans moving and ensured that we continued to have access to essential goods and services, right from the very beginning and throughout the pandemic.

Our transport workers showed up to work every day, despite the uncertainties surrounding how deadly and contagious the virus could be. They set aside their fears and kept our airways open, our sea lanes flowing and our buses and trains moving for all of us.

As a transport unionist at the frontline, I have witnessed first-hand how the Government, the unions and our corporations, come together to overcome crisis after crisis, and emerge stronger together. Amidst the many uncertainties throughout the pandemic – new COVID-19 clusters, new virus variants, travel bubbles forming and popping – what was certain for the tripartite partners was that we knew that we had each other's back. Let me elaborate.

I start with aviation. The pandemic severely disrupted the global economy. But the aviation industry, a vital part of global connectivity, had to keep moving.

Despite being at a high risk of contracting the virus, our air crew and those working at our airport worked tirelessly and selflessly to ensure that all flights coming through Singapore remained safe and secure. They worked long hours, sacrificed personal comfort, having to don cumbersome PPEs and put in extra efforts to uphold the highest standards of safety, sanitation and service on board our flights and at the airport. They did so to transport essential supplies and to bring back our loved ones stranded far away when global travel came to a virtual standstill.

One example is Jessica Chua, a stewardess with Scoot, who was among the crew that was deployed on a flight to Wuhan in February 2020 to deliver humanitarian assistance from the Singapore Government and to return over 170 Singaporeans and their family members back home to Singapore.

Soon after, the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic set in and many aviation workers were faced with the sobering prospect of an uncertain future. But the tripartite partners were quick to step in. NTUC worked closely with the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore and SkillsFuture Singapore to launch the Enhanced Training Support Package to help companies retain and reskill their workers instead of retrenching them. The NTUC's Job Security Council also worked closely with the Public Service Division to place more than 4,000 aviation workers on secondary employment in areas, such as healthcare and public transport.

Sir, throughout the pandemic, our aviation workers have shown us what it means to be resilient. During the Ministerial Statement on aviation recovery in October 2020, I had asked the Minister for Transport why was SIA operating flights to countries that Singaporeans were not allowed to travel to. The Minister explained that there were some flights, although the load factor is low, SIA would continue to fly to maintain a minimum connectivity network, to maintain our presence in those markets. So, even though the load factor is low, the Government would support SIA to continue these flights and to mount cargo flights so that our supply chain is not affected.

Sir, it is the foresight of such policy decisions and the resilience of aviation workers like Jessica Chua and many others that Singapore's aviation sector has rebounded as quickly as it has, allowing Changi Airport to regain its crown as the world's best airport at the 2023 World Airport Awards. Singapore Airlines was also named Airline of the Year last month by Air Transport World and ranked top global airline by Fortune magazine in its February issue.

Next, let me extend my appreciation to all the seafarers and port workers who bravely continued their work during the pandemic, often against all odds, to ensure that our supply chains remained operational during the most challenging of times.

When global air passenger demand evaporated almost overnight, the demand for cargo increased exponentially. Unseen and unheard, our maritime workers worked around the clock to ensure that essential goods and services continued to flow into Singapore during the pandemic.

Sir, seafarers and port workers have always played a critical role in global trade and commerce, but the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed just how essential their work really is. Without our maritime workers, we would not have had the medicine, food, fuel and other vital supplies that we needed to navigate the pandemic. Our maritime workers helped to keep our economies running and our communities fed and provisioned, even as the rest of the world was brought to a standstill.

But our seafarers did not have an easy time during the pandemic. They endured unimaginable hardships and uncertainty. They risked infection and severe illness. Many were stuck on board their ships for months due to travel restrictions and border closures, unable to return home to their families and loved ones. Yet, they persevered to keep our global supply chains open.

In response, Singapore's tripartite partners established a world-class floating Crew Facilitation Centre and a \$1 million Singapore Shipping Tripartite Alliance Resilience Fund to facilitate crew changes to take place in Singapore, helping hundreds of thousands of seafarers return home safely. Such efforts were vital in ensuring the safety and welfare of our maritime workers while keeping supply chains open, even during the worst of the pandemic.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank the many land transport workers who have been silently working to keep our country moving during the pandemic, including during the circuit breaker period.

Sir, our bus and rail workers, and our taxi and private hire drivers put their lives on the line every day to provide us with safe transportation services. Every time they interact with passengers, they are exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. Despite taking precautions, such as wearing masks, using sanitisers and maintaining social distancing, they remained at a high risk of exposure. Yet, they persisted in discharging their duties.

The risk of infection is real, which was evident when the highly transmissible new Delta variant started spreading rapidly at our bus interchanges. At its peak in September 2021, we had more than a hundred bus captains down with COVID-19, impacting normal bus services. Non-infected bus captains were worried. Will they get the virus, too, and will they pass it to their family members at home? But instead of staying away, they worked extra hours and stood in for their quarantined colleagues. The tripartite partners also came together to enhance infection control measures at all bus interchanges. The COVID-19 clusters were eventually closed in October that year, slightly less than two months after the first cluster was detected.

Additionally, public transport workers were constantly facing the challenges of enforcing mandatory mask wearing and social distancing policies. They were often subjected to verbal and physical abuse from passengers who simply refused to follow these regulations. It was, therefore, a huge disappointment when the number of abuse cases against our bus captains jumped from 26 cases in 2018, to 50 in 2020.

In quick response, the National Transport Workers' Union rallied the public transport operators and the Land Transport Authority to take a firm stance against abusive passengers. The tripartite partners signed an MOU to provide public transport workers with guaranteed legal support to pursue civil action against their abusers beyond criminal prosecution. The signal was clear and the number of abuse cases

against bus captains fell sharply the following year in 2021.

Sir, we must also not forget the contributions made by our delivery riders. Throughout the pandemic, they were instrumental in ensuring that we could get our food and other basic supplies, even when we were in home quarantine. Many hawkers, too, relied on their services to stay afloat, especially when dining-in was prohibited. To all our delivery riders out there, thank you for bridging the vital last-mile gap, rain or shine.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has been the greatest test that our generation has seen. Many unsung heroes have come together to ensure that we emerge stronger from the pandemic. Today, I place on record our sincere appreciation to the many men and women who work in the transport industry, for keeping Singapore connected and keeping all of us moving even during the darkest of times. May their contributions be remembered by all of us always. Sir, I support the Motion.

Mr Speaker: Senior Minister of State Zaqy Mohamad.

12.56 pm

The Senior Minister of State for Defence and Manpower (Mr Zaqy Mohamad): Mr Speaker, the speeches by Members of the House have allowed us to reflect on our nation's fight against COVID-19 and the lessons to prepare us for the next pandemic.

It was slightly more than three years ago when we first heard about a cluster of severe pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. No one could have imagined the prolonged impact that this would have on the world, our society and our economy.

Being in the Ministry of National Development (MND) and Ministry of Manpower (MOM) at the onset of the pandemic, I witnessed how sectors, like construction, faced the risk of collapse if we did not intervene early to address disruptions to supply and foreign manpower, and business distress due to the pandemic and global border control measures.

I also vividly remember Prime Minister Lee's speech on our commitment to our migrant workers for their role in building Singapore over the years. It was a powerful one – our migrant workers will be paid their salaries and that we will provide medical care and treatment that they need.

It was a bold and inclusive commitment that resonated and was very much appreciated by the workers. Members may recall seeing many videos of thanks from our migrant workers on social media then. During my rounds visiting the dormitories and in meetings, the high commissioners and ambassadors from our migrant workers' home countries conveyed their nations' appreciation for our efforts. Our swift actions and commitment showed Singapore to be a reliable and trusted partner.

Our migrant workers play an important role in building and maintaining Singapore's infrastructure and I would like to reiterate our appreciation for all their contributions to Singapore and their trust, patience and understanding during the pandemic as we worked to keep them safe during COVID-19 and manage the evolving situation.

Through this journey, we all learnt to be adaptable and resilient in overcoming the challenges before us. We rallied together – our people, the Public Service, private companies and civil society – to put the interests of our nation and others before our own and came through as one united people.

In my speech, I will elaborate on managing the impact of COVID-19 on the construction industry; standing up emergency accommodation facilities for migrant workers and supporting their health and well-being; ensuring that SAF maintained a high level of operational readiness; and adapting to adjustments to religious life by the Malay/Muslim community.

Mr Speaker, our Built Environment sector was one of the worst-hit sectors by the pandemic. Almost all construction work came to a halt during the circuit breaker period. Even after work resumed and the dormitories declared cleared of COVID-19, companies had to adjust their operations and adapt to new requirements, such as safe management measures (SMMs) at worksites. Companies faced manpower shortages, as they were unable to bring in new migrant workers due to travel restrictions and border measures. And these led to project delays and significant cost increases to the sector.

Given the unprecedented challenges faced by the Built Environment sector, the Government intervened in a significant way. We introduced a \$1.36 billion Construction Support Package to help companies ease back into work safely after the circuit breaker period, and this came on top of the general support measures for all sectors.

We also provided companies with multiple rounds of Foreign Worker Levy rebates and waivers, as well as wage subsidies via the Jobs Support Scheme. This relieved some of the burden from manpower costs and helped preserve jobs in the sector, including for locals.

We recognised that some companies would be unable to meet their contractual obligations and previously committed timelines, with the work stoppages and delays due to COVID-19.

As such, we introduced the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act, or COTMA, provisions to provide relief for defaulting parties, by putting in place a moratorium, during which legal obligations relating to inability to perform contractual obligations due to COVID-19 could not be enforced. The COTMA also provided a defence against claims for contract breaches, including liquidated damages in such instances. A universal Extension of Time of four months was granted for construction projects, to account for the circuit breaker and time taken to clear the dormitories.

We also recognised the need to ensure that no single party in the Built Environment value chain bore a disproportionate cost burden arising from delays due to the pandemic. Hence, we inserted provisions in the COTMA to facilitate equitable sharing of non-manpower prolongation costs and foreign manpower cost increases between project parties.

We also supported developers and end users, such as home buyers. Developers whose projects faced construction delays could seek relief on the date of delivery of possession. Home buyers who were affected by extended delivery dates could similarly seek reimbursement from the developer, for qualifying expenses.

Our trade associations also played a pivotal role in addressing the acute manpower shortages. The Singapore Contractors Association Limited (SCAL), Association of Singapore Marine Industries (ASMI) and Association of Process Industry (ASPRI) took the lead to pilot a tightened end-to-end process to bring migrant workers into Singapore safely.

This initiative involved integrating the testing of workers at dedicated onboarding facilities in their home countries, with protocols for them to stay safe from infection.

I thank SCAL, ASMI and ASPRI for their herculean effort in coordinating across multiple local and foreign companies in the healthcare and hospitality sectors and working closely with various public sector agencies, to facilitate the safe inflow of workers.

The pilot's success allowed us to scale up further to meet the manpower needs of the Construction, Marine and Process industries, while safeguarding public health and our healthcare capacity.

The lessons learnt and experience gained from these initiatives will help to minimise future manpower disruptions in the next pandemic.

Today, our construction activities are now close to pre-COVID-19 levels. Firm formation and cessation numbers also point to a stable situation. I thank our trade associations and all members of the Built Environment sector for their understanding, support and resilience, which has made this recovery possible.

The strong partnerships that we have forged over the past three years and the can-do spirit to overcome challenges will go a long way in preparing us for the next pandemic. Ultimately, what COVID-19 has taught us is that we need to transform the Built Environment sector towards greater resilience and productivity.

The Minister for Manpower had elaborated on the fight against COVID-19 in the dormitories yesterday and areas where we could do better.

To protect our migrant workers and reduce COVID-19 transmission within the dormitories, we brought together public agencies, private companies and NGOs to identify and stand up emergency accommodation facilities. Put together, they came up with adaptable and innovative solutions, often under tight timelines and resource constraints.

We repurposed a wide range of facilities into safe emergency accommodation facilities. These included cruise ships, floatels, hotels, as well as retrofitted state properties, such as multi-storey carparks, vacant schools and vacant HDB blocks. We also used port land and exhibition spaces, such as the Tanjong Pagar Port and Singapore Expo. We even used a vacant en bloc site, the former Chancery Court condominium offered by Far East Organisation

Moving on to another group of partners, I will always be thankful for the support from our non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in providing care and support for our migrant workers throughout the pandemic.

I recall our many meetings and dormitory visits during the pandemic, where I felt heartened by their tireless efforts, especially during circuit breaker. They came together to forge new partnerships and coordinated efforts on the ground to meet the needs of our migrant workers in different ways.

The Migrant Workers' Centre, for example, quickly kick-started initiatives to distribute masks, hand sanitisers, soap bars, shampoos, dental kits and other key essential items to all migrant workers in the dormitories, including those in smaller factory-converted dormitories and construction temporary quarters (CTQs).

We also had medical volunteers from NGO HealthServe, who helped to supplement the efforts of our medical teams on the ground.

As an inter-racial, inter-religious and inter-cultural organisation, Hope Initiative Alliance (HIA) played an important role in ensuring that the spiritual needs of our workers were met. They organised congregational prayers and religious services for our workers of different faiths in the dormitories and recreation centres. When workers were unable to return home during their festive holidays, HIA helped to spread cheer by distributing festive care packs and meals. Many of their volunteers came from Christian groups, and I remembered them coming at 4.00 am in the morning to deliver breakfast during Ramadan and this was at the height of the pandemic in 2020.

If I had to share all our stories together on the ground, we would be here for quite a while. So, just let me just acknowledge our other NGOs who had made a difference in the lives of our migrant workers and helped as sounding boards for some of our policies and these include the development of the improved dormitory standards over the last three years.

Thank you, COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition (CMSC), Crisis Relief Alliance (CRA), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), It's Raining Raincoats (IRR), My Brother SG and The Salvation Army, for all your support.

Ms Rachel Ong spoke about how we should continue our close working relationship with our NGOs to sustain their outreach within the migrant worker community. The Alliance for Migrant Workers Support (AMWS) was initially set-up as an engagement platform with our NGOs during COVID-19. Moving forward, the AMWS will continue to be an important platform for us to come together to discuss how we can better support our migrant workers, work to improve policies affecting them, as well as to build our capabilities to better coordinate the distribution of resources and respond quickly in the next pandemic.

The Minister for Manpower spoke yesterday on how the Government stood up the Inter-Agency Task Force and brought in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Home Team to manage the COVID-19 situation in the dormitories. Despite the risks involved, we saw the unwavering dedication of these officers, including those deployed as part of the Forward Assurance and Support Teams (FAST). Allow me to share two inspiring examples.

Singapore Police Force (SPF) officer Station Inspector (SI) Sheik Ismail volunteered as a FAST officer at the S11 dormitory@Punggol, which saw the largest COVID-19 cluster. SI Sheik made sure that the workers' needs were met, helping them to talk to their employers about their salaries, ensuring that they stayed connected with their families and assisting them to remit money back home. What struck me was that SI Sheik went beyond the call of duty to lend a listening ear, taking the time to understand their fears and encouraging them to focus on their hopes and dreams.

Corporal (NS) Vinod, a Combat Medic with the 2nd Combat Support Hospital, was deployed to the EXPO Community Care Facility. He supported the operations to plan, monitor and deliver care to affected migrant workers. He shared that his In-Camp Training (ICT) has been "the most meaningful one" for him. He felt a strong commitment to "fight a different kind of war" in a hall filled with thousands of migrant workers with COVID-19.

Against an enemy that threatened to instil fear and destroy our way of life, Singaporeans from all walks of life, the Public Service, private sector, NGOs, volunteers and national servicemen, have indeed come together to "fight a different kind of war", each playing their part through Total Defence.

One of the key lessons from the pandemic is the importance of adaptability and resilience of our infrastructure. The unprecedented scale and prolonged nature of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in overwhelming demand for quarantine housing and temporary accommodations.

Learning from this experience, public sector agencies are working to identify suitable facilities to meet possible crisis scenarios and better safeguard and operationalise sites for emergency needs.

This includes exploring developing dual-use facilities to serve both peacetime and crises functions.

One way to do this is by retrofitting available and suitable state properties to be able to pivot from peacetime to crisis use when necessary.

An example is the Quick-Built Dormitory at Sengkang West. It is currently used for new migrant workers to undergo residential onboarding and medical examination when they first arrived in Singapore. In the event of a pandemic, the Onboard Centre can be quickly converted into a dedicated facility for newly arrived workers to serve their Stay-Home Notice.

Public sector agencies will also explore with private sector owners to potentially utilise a wide variety of private infrastructure for emergency housing. These include chalets, hotels, serviced apartments and exhibition spaces. One such example was how D'Resort@Downtown East was used as a Government Quarantine Facility.

The two new migrant worker dormitories that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) will be operating in partnership with the private sector, will have enhanced liveability and adaptability features for both peacetime and future disease outbreaks. For example, there will be larger recreation spaces, such as multi-purpose and sports courts, which can be repurposed as medical facilities.

We are also looking at strengthening the resilience of key food distribution facilities, such as the Jurong Fishery Port and Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, against future emergencies and pandemics, as raised by Mr Saktiandi Supaat.

The Singapore Food Agency is carrying out upgrades to enhance the security, surveillance and access control systems of our key food supply facilities. This would allow for better contact tracing in the event of a future disease outbreak and support the enforcement of control measures. Businesses should also continue to review and keep their business continuity plans relevant, to ensure supply resiliency at the company level.

Even as we continue to enhance the adaptability of our infrastructure, we need to maintain strong partnerships across the people, the private and the public sector. This will be instrumental to enable us to meet demands for quarantine housing and temporary accommodations in the next pandemic.

Let me take this opportunity to also address some of the matters relating to our workforce and workplaces during COVID-19, which were mentioned in some of the Members' speeches.

One concern was on the necessity of Workforce Vaccination Measures (WVM), raised by Ms Hazel Poa and Mr Yip Hon Weng. At that time, the virus was mutating and new variants which were highly transmissible were emerging, while time was needed to assess whether these new variants also put infected persons at a higher risk of severe disease. And this was when we were still grappling with Omicron, by

the way.

Unvaccinated individuals, especially those who are older, would have put themselves at risk of infection at the workplace. We were concerned that infected unvaccinated individuals could be at risk of severe illness. There could also be significant added strain on our healthcare system.

The Government therefore decided that there was a need to put in place stronger measures at the workplaces to protect vulnerable and at-risk groups. These measures complemented the public health measures in the community, such as the vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS).

In the Advisory on COVID-19 Vaccination at the Workplace, the tripartite partners made it very clear that dismissal is a last resort and employers should try to allow unvaccinated workers to work from home, including through redeployment. Following the lifting of the Workforce Vaccination Measures, Workforce Singapore (WSG) and NTUC's Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) had reached out to and offered employment assistance to such unvaccinated employees. Unvaccinated individuals can also approach WSG or e2i if they require further assistance.

The lifting of the Workforce Vaccination Measures followed the relaxation of the VDS in April 2022. With the full lifting of the VDS in October 2022, if an individual feels that an employer is making vaccination-differentiated requirements without genuine occupational needs to do so, he or she may approach MOM or the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) for assistance. Since October 2022, there has only been a handful of complaints.

For the broader workforce, a key lesson from the pandemic is developing a strong Singapore Core and complementing it with a diverse foreign workforce to ensure the resilience of our businesses and our economy. This was a point that Mr Saktiandi Supaat spoke about as well. Due to border restrictions during the pandemic, the total number of foreign workers fell from about 1.4 million in December 2019 to about 1.2 million in December 2021. However, the number has since recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels, as border restrictions were relaxed and employers tried to catch the upswing of economic recovery.

Even as we strengthen the complementarity of our foreign workforce and continue to attract global talent, international investments and companies, our focus on strengthening the Singapore Core in our workforce will remain.

We have developed Industry Transformation Maps and Jobs Transformation Maps, which include strategies to prepare our workers for higher value-added jobs in each sector.

We have in place an ecosystem of programmes and schemes to prepare workers for jobs of the future such as the Career Conversion Programmes and SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways Programme.

We have also put in place various programmes to increase the global and regional exposure of locals to enable them to take up leadership positions in global firms.

By combining and complementing local and foreign expertise, we can grow the pie for Singapore and provide more good opportunities for all.

Mr Speaker, I spoke earlier about how the SAF contributed to Singapore's fight against COVID-19 in the dormitories. At the same time, more than 7,000 SAF personnel were deployed across operations ranging from contact tracing, call centre operations, logistical support to medical operations.

While our nation grappled with and were fully focused on overcoming COVID-19, Singaporeans can be assured that the SAF kept up our security operations and maintained a high level of operational readiness to keep us safe from external threats. Critical SAF operations such as maritime security, air defence, protection of key installations and counter-terrorism continued round the clock even during the pandemic.

Our servicemen had to train in challenging conditions arising from pandemic restrictions. These conditions tested the SAF's grit, tenacity and resilience. But our people adapted quickly and quickly rose to the challenge.

To minimise infection risk, SAF implemented strict health and safety measures. These included vaccination, cohorting, safe distancing, reduction in training group sizes and COVID-19 testing regimes. Some personnel performing critical operations had to isolate themselves in camps and bases for days to ensure that they were free from infection before they could start their duties. For many, this also meant sacrificing time away from their family and loved ones.

This made celebrations like Mother's Day during the circuit breaker period slightly different for our servicewomen.

Major Doris Sam, for example, an RSAF Air Warfare Officer, was isolated in base with her unit to ensure they were free from infection and could continue to safeguard Singapore's skies. This was the first time she was apart from her two-year-old toddler, Atlas, over a prolonged period. Despite the sacrifices required, Doris, like many fellow sons and daughters of Singapore, stayed true to her mission and continued to defend our home.

With the gradual easing of restrictions, the SAF progressively resumed training, often operating under conditions more strenuous than before the pandemic.

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, the Singapore Navy (RSN) participated in the SAF's first overseas training since the onset of COVID-19. This was for the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), a multinational naval exercise.

The crew of the RSS Supreme embarked on one of their longest sails – 67 consecutive days on board the ship travelling across the Pacific Ocean. No shore leave.

Vaccines were not available at that time, so they were in a COVID-19-safe bubble and had no interactions with anyone else apart from their fellow crewmates. The ship was reconfigured with Intensive Care Unit (ICU) capabilities in the event that someone turned positive. Fortunately, the entire crew tested negative throughout their deployment and successfully completed the exercise.

One of them was Weapons Systems Cluster Chief Military Expert 3 (ME3) Suresh Subramaniam, a father of three. ME3 Suresh told me that he was thankful for his wife's support and assurance on the home front.

The SAF is grateful for the support from spouses and families of our servicemen and women who also shared the belief on the need to uphold high standards of training amidst COVID-19 in the defence of Singapore to ensure our sovereignty and our way of life.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many groups who also kept Singapore going in different ways.

One such group is our public transport workers, as mentioned by Mr Melvin Yong earlier. They braved the virus every day to keep public transport services running. Some workers also volunteered to come back to work on their rest days to cover colleagues who were sick, especially when COVID-19 clusters were emerging among bus captains.

Taxi drivers supported the conveyance of travellers on Stay-Home Notice to their accommodation and COVID-19 positive patients to and from healthcare facilities.

Employers too, played their part. Public transport operators SBS Transit, SMRT, Tower Transit Singapore and Go Ahead Singapore adjusted shifts to ensure that their workers had sufficient rest while minimising impact on commuters.

At the height of the pandemic, platform operators and their workers also provided much-needed services: point-to-point transport, food and goods delivery.

The Government had earlier accepted the recommendations by the Advisory Committee on Platform Workers to strengthen protections for platform workers such as in areas of financial protection in case of work injury and for housing and retirement adequacy.

I echo Ms Janet Ang and Mr Melvin Yong's tribute and thank our public transport workers and operators, platform workers and operators, workers in the air and sea transport sector and many others in our fight against COVID-19. This was a whole-of-society effort, one filled with sacrifice, dedication and duty.

Mr Speaker, moving on to the Malay/Muslim community.

Our Malay/Muslim community too played an important role. The community had to adjust to the closure of mosques and suspension of congregational prayers, which Mr Sharael Taha and Dr Wan Rizal spoke about. While in circuit breaker, the community also had to observe Ramadan and Hari Raya away from their loved ones.

With the month of Ramadan upon us in just two days' time, there is much to be grateful for to be able to observe and pray together without COVID-19 restrictions.

I recognise that it has not been easy for the Malay/Muslim community or the Muslim community in general, including our religious leaders, because of the sacrifices needed over the past three years to battle and to overcome COVID-19. I thank our Malay/Muslim community for making adjustments to their religious and cultural practices and staying united with fellow Singaporeans to keep our country safe. Speaker, I will deliver the next segment in Malay.

(*In Malay*): [*Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).*] For many Muslims, the circuit breaker phase had been a very difficult period.

We could not perform religious practices and obligations such as our congregational Friday prayers.

We also had to suspend prayers and other activities that were typically conducted during Ramadan, such as Terawih prayers at mosques.

But the community quickly adapted — performing their congregational prayers at home with their family.

Muis also introduced online religious resources such as SalamSG TV to support home-based Ramadan activities.

In retaining traditions, the community also turned to online means to convey their well-wishes to family and loved ones for Hari Raya.

In 2020 and 2021, we also had to defer the annual Haj for Singaporean pilgrims.

Singapore was among the first countries to do so, before other countries made similar decisions. This included Saudi Arabia who announced that the Haj would be limited to domestic pilgrims only, in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Many pilgrims were saddened by this decision, especially because of the very long waiting time to perform the Haj.

But the community understood the need to do so as it would not only protect our pilgrims, but those around them as well.

These measures would not have been possible without strong religious leadership of the Mufti, the Fatwa Committee and our asatizah, as well as the strong partnerships within the community.

Our religious leaders were astute in assessing the health risks and adjusting religious practices to the prevailing COVID-19 situation. These were difficult decisions that needed courage during our most trying moments to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the community.

Our religious leadership benefitted from the close partnership with our Muslim healthcare professionals, through the Malay/Muslim COVID-19 Working Group. This Group advised Muis in developing the necessary precautionary measures and communicating the scientific reasons behind them to the general public.

For example, Dr Norhisham Main, the President of the Muslim Healthcare Professionals Association (MHPA), alongside Mufti, explained the closing of mosques and other changes to the community's socio-religious norms from a medical perspective during an interactive online talk show.

Through these adjustments, the community has shown its progressiveness — one that is able to make adjustments to their religious life, without compromising on religious tenets. I am proud that the community played an impactful role through a strong sense of citizenry as displayed in our fight against COVID-19. Such contributions are important, particularly in our multi-cultural, multi-religious society.

I am also heartened that their contributions have been recognised by the international community as well.

Last year, our Fatwa Committee under our Mufti's leadership was conferred the Al-Qarafi Award by the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide under the Dar al-Ifta in Egypt, for their leadership and contributions in guiding the community through the pandemic. This is more than just an award for Mufti and the Fatwa Committee, but also a recognition to the community who responded well to the adjustments that had to be made.

I am glad that the community continues to apply the lessons learnt and good practices from the pandemic. This builds our resilience, which will come in handy as we face future challenges.

For example, many mosques continue to offer multiple Friday prayer sessions. This was initially introduced in response to the reduced size for congregational prayers, but now provides more flexibility on the timing for individuals to perform their prayers.

In a few days, the Muslim community will enter the month of Ramadan. Three years ago, we observed Ramadan during the Circuit Breaker period.

Since then, the community has overcome many things. As we return to normalcy, let's continue to build on the gotong royong spirit that we demonstrated during the pandemic, to build a united and resilient Singapore.

(*In English*): Mr Speaker, in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's national broadcast on 7 June 2020, just as Singapore emerged from the circuit breaker, the Prime Minister addressed Singaporeans that we faced "the crisis of a generation" and also expressed his hope that "an even stronger and better Singapore will emerge from this crisis".

Three years later and on this side of the crisis, I believe that this holds true. We can be heartened by how our people have shown resilience, adaptability and unity throughout the pandemic. I am confident that the lessons we have learnt will put us in good stead for the future and prepare us for the next crisis.

In June 2020, at the start of the pandemic, I began my speech on the Supplementary Budget with a verse from a song by the legendary band, Queen. That verse was, "Your every day is full of sunshine. But into every life, a little rain must fall."

Today, I would like to close this chapter with another verse, this time from another legendary band, The Beatles. It goes this way. You can also imagine Deputy Prime Minister Wong playing his guitar, strumming in the background. "Little darlin', it's been a long, cold, lonely winter. Little darlin', it feels like years since it's been here. Here comes the sun. Here comes the sun, and I say, it's alright." [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Mr Mark Chay.

1.29 pm

Mr Mark Chay (Nominated Member): Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to join this debate on Singapore's COVID-19 response.

Before I start my speech, I would like to take a moment to reflect on those who were lost to the effects of COVID-19. May those close to them find solace and the departed rest in peace.

The world has undoubtedly changed in the past three years. We were forced to embrace technology to connect and transact digitally when we physically could not. We somehow became familiar with the Greek alphabet. We learnt to survive on frozen chickens. And through the pandemic, Singapore faced a formidable challenge and rose to the occasion, displaying a side of the nation that is compassionate and caring for its fellow man.

I would like to speak on three areas from the White Paper on Singapore's response to COVID-19.

First, on support for businesses, workers, and jobs. The Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) helped businesses address the financial challenges of COVID-19. It provided wage subsidies so employers could keep employees on the payroll and retain their jobs even as the commercial sector took a hit.

The JSS also enabled the sports and fitness industry to press pause, re-evaluate and reimagine how sports and fitness businesses should run.

Through the Enterprise Innovation and Capability Development Grant, SportSG provided the sports and fitness industry with a way to incorporate innovative technology into their businesses to remain resilient during this challenging period. It was a necessary step for the industry to take.

The JSS clarified which industries were considered essential and non-essential during the pandemic.

It was apparent that in times of crisis, the sports and fitness industry is non-essential. However, I do believe that the industry has a significant role in Singapore's journey towards living with COVID-19.

The pandemic presented the sports and fitness industry with an opportunity to redefine itself, encompassing not just events production companies but also sports academies, social sports and recreation clubs, fitness clubs, boutique gyms and freelancers. This realisation has been valuable in equipping the industry for success moving forward.

Second, the Multi-Ministry Task force (MTF) has responded proactively to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work is commendable and they have consistently kept Singaporeans updated with the situation. The MTF has taken a data-driven, scientific approach to the ongoing crisis. I especially appreciate the co-chairs and members for diligently using their "head and heart" strategy to make decisions that affect us all. We are incredibly thankful for their hard work and dedication, especially during these trying times.

Third, Singapore strived to ensure that vulnerable groups were supported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous initiatives were put into place, with financial assistance, job retraining, counselling services and additional subsidies being provided by both the Government and NGOs. The collective effort is a testament to our society's dedication to helping those in need during difficult times.

Sir, please let me share some stories of our Team Singapore athletes and their activities during COVID-19.

Former national sprinter, UK Shyam and other athletes initiated a cause to donate laptops to students from lower-income families. With the help of Engineering Good and the Singapore Golf Association, more than 1,000 laptops were collected and \$20,000 was raised.

National tennis player, Shaheed Alam, created "Project Love", which provided meals for migrant workers during Hari Raya through fundraising efforts.

Our Silat athletes, Sheik Ferdous, Sheik Farhan and Nurul Suhaila, started an initiative called "Sayang Sayang Fund".

"HopeFull" is a project spearheaded by golfer Jen Goh that provides resource kits for children and youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. Members of the sporting community took part in monthly engagements with beneficiaries, including virtual interaction sessions and delivery of kits. They also organised fundraising drives as well as packing and distributing food/care packs to vulnerable groups.

Also, 25 Team Singapore athletes collaborated with National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) during the circuit breaker to mentor kids from Crest Secondary School through their Circuit Breaker Buddy programme.

And, of course, Speaker, as President of Singapore National Olympic Council (SNOC) and the SNOC Athletes' Commission participated in the "You'll Never Walk Alone" by ComChest campaign, which raised funds for children at-risk, persons with disabilities, persons with mental conditions, vulnerable seniors and families in need.

Indeed, when our athletes could not compete or train, I am proud that they used their platforms to show resilience in a different way, inspire Singapore and used sports as a force for greater good.

Sir, Singaporeans have shown tremendous strength and resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with the profound economic disruption caused by global lockdowns, Singaporeans took rapid action to contain the virus and protect their fellow citizens. Despite the daunting challenges brought on by COVID-19, Singaporeans have embraced the circuit breaker and other SMMs with courage, resilience and a collective sense of responsibility. From reducing foreign worker density to closing schools and workplaces, citizens across all sectors have come together to prioritise safety for their fellow countrymen and women.

Singaporeans' strength and resilience are remarkable, proving that unity can produce tremendous positive change even amidst a crisis, that people from all walks of life can come together and contribute to the fight against this global crisis. In such times, it is an incredible reminder of what we can do we are united, SG United in solidarity. The lessons learned from this pandemic will help prepare our nation for any crisis in the future. With this knowledge, determination, tenacity and hope for brighter days, Singaporeans are ready to face whatever comes next. And to that, I say, "Majulah Singapura!"

Sir, I would like to commend Opposition Leader Pritam Singh's comments yesterday that the Workers' Party would support and not undermine national efforts in times of crisis. This is deeply encouraging and underscores our responsibility as Parliamentarians to work together for Singapore and Singaporeans.

Sir, at this juncture, I would also like to offer my sincere gratitude to our frontliners, our healthcare professionals and public servants for their courage and devotion over the past three years. They volunteered themselves to be on the front lines while everyone else stayed in the safety of their homes. They persevered through these trying times to save as many lives as possible. They put their own safety at risk to protect us and fought tirelessly, going above and beyond what was required of them.

With that, Speaker, I support this Motion put up by Deputy Prime Minister and the Finance Minister that this House expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the nation's fight against COVID-19, reaffirms the Government's effort to learn from the experiences of the last three years and to that end, endorses Paper Cmd 22 of 2023 on "Singapore's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for the Next Pandemic".

Mr Speaker: Ms Poh Li San.

1.38 pm

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang): Mr Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is known to be the most dangerous pandemic in more than a generation. Together with my fellow Parliamentarians, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all Singaporeans who have stepped forward and done their part to assist Singapore during the crisis.

Our nation's founding father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his team understood the importance of building up substantial national reserves for rainy days. Their vision saved Singapore in more ways than one during the pandemic. For a nation of 5.5 million people, \$72.3 billion was spent to ensure that our economy will come through and survive the pandemic. These reserves provided our Government the ability to work fast and speed up purchases of essential supplies and vaccines. On top of that, Deputy Prime Minister Wong and his team was able to roll out essential assistance schemes to businesses for employers and the self-employed.

Needless to say, it is now time to replenish our reserves, in order for future generations to have that advantage during their rainy days.

This White Paper captures the lessons to be learnt and as a nation, we know must always be better prepared for the next crisis.

Singapore cannot be totally dependent only on a task force to resolve problems during a pandemic. We must look into preparing Singaporeans to manage daily concerns on the ground.

There were many groups of Singaporeans who made significant contributions during the pandemic. I would like to specifically acknowledge the contributions of two groups and at the same time, highlight the realities facing us should we encounter another pandemic.

The outbreak in the migrant worker dormitories during the early months of the pandemic was at a near tipping point, as the virus could have spread rapidly into the rest of our society. Not many are aware that there were about 200,000 migrant workers staying in more than 40 dormitories across the island. Our military and Police services took control, contained and stabilised the situation. The Joint Task Force (JTF) was quickly set up to contain the cases within the migrant worker dormitories. There were no vaccines then and these officers risked their own health and safety to be on ground. Some even contracted COVID-19.

During circuit breaker, some officers had to stay in a hotel for fear of passing the virus to their families.

Our nation depends on the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and Singapore Police Force (SPF) to protect us and to restore order.

Here is the reality. Will we still have these well-trained military and Police personnel during the next pandemic? Attitudes have been more distinct due to the fast-changing times that we live in. Younger Singaporeans are also re-evaluating their priorities. We need to be able to attract good people to join and maintain excellence in our military and Police services. And not to add fuel to fire, we do have an expedited falling birth rate.

The second group of people will be our grassroots network and volunteers. This network was built up over the past five decades. This extensive and close-knitted network was able to help affected residents very quickly. They were responsible for distribution of masks, sanitizers, Trace Together tokens and care packs and so on.

Again, how do we ensure that we are able to continue having such support? How can we strengthen our grassroots networks and volunteerism, especially amongst the younger Singaporeans?

Mr Speaker, I would also like to speak up for three groups of Singaporeans who have disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With no fault of theirs, they have been severely or permanently impacted by the COVID-19 policies and restrictions. I hope to be able to appeal for more assistance to help these Singaporeans.

The mRNA vaccine is a very new technology and a small number of people developed severe reactions as a result of administering it. The first group consist of Singaporeans who suffered permanent injuries or deaths after taking the mRNA vaccines.

A resident residing in Sembawang West constituency lost her husband and brother due to heart attacks soon after they were administered the first dose of mRNA vaccines. Within a short span of time, she and her children had to deal with the sudden grief of losing of two loved ones. Coping with financial difficulties under such sad circumstances is extremely tough.

There were other examples of Singaporeans who suffered severe reactions, such as strokes, severe rash breakouts and so on. They shared their experiences with me during my Meet-the-People Sessions and house visits. It was also reported that a nurse was hospitalised for five months and was handicapped after recovery.

There may not be many such cases and there is not anyone to blame. However, we have to acknowledge what these innocent Singaporeans had to go through, how their families have been permanently affected and how much they had to suffer. Unfortunately, some of them did not receive any Vaccine Injury Financial Assistance Programme (VIFAP) compensation for various reasons cited by MOH. They trusted the vaccines to protect themselves from the COVID-19 virus but unfortunately instead of being protected, they suffered.

I hope the Government will look into ways to assist Singaporeans who had to go through such a painful experience.

The second group will be the workers and companies in the construction sector.

During the outbreak, strict safe-management measures (SMM) were imposed at the worksites. Workers had to be transported everywhere they went. Meal breaks were carefully scheduled and migrant worker dormitories had to be drastically reduced in capacity.

All these regulations changed how construction companies operate and productivity diminished due to the restricted construction work processes. As a result, many construction projects, including various Build-To-Orders (BTOs), were severely delayed.

Many workers left the construction industry during the pandemic. Many who left are not returning. There is now a real shortage of workers. The construction companies had to increase the salaries of workers quite significantly to avoid bigger financial losses arising from delays in project completion. In fact, some large-scale local construction companies, such as Greatearth, could not survive the cost pressures and had to close.

Many local companies are still struggling with the massive financial losses incurred during the pandemic. The rising costs of materials, utilities, fuel and high COE prices for their vehicles are not helping them to gradually recover. I do hope the Government will try to provide even more assistance to the local construction companies during this vital recovery phase.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I declare my interest as an employee working in Changi Airport, and the third group that I would like to mention are workers and companies in the aviation industry.

Changi Airport was a ghost town when the borders were closed. At one point, our air hub's passenger traffic fell to less than 0.5% of pre-COVID-19 traffic.

There used to be some 50,000 staff employed in Changi Airport pre-COVID-19. About one third of the staff lost their jobs or got redeployed to other sectors. During the pandemic, the aircrew suffered significant pay cuts and some had to switch careers – like one airline pilot, Johnny Tan, who had to sell durians instead of being able to fly a plane.

In response to the fluid situation during the pandemic, the border control measures had to change every now and then. Airport staff working in the transit areas had to don PPEs as they faced the highest risks of contracting the virus from arriving passengers. Similarly, aircrew risked their own health and safety, serving passengers who could be COVID-19-positive.

We are now almost back to pre-COVID-19 days but our recovery has a different set of challenges. Over the last 10 months, passenger numbers rebounded from 2% to 80%. Companies are struggling to find staff who can be trained quickly in order to deal with the sudden surge.

With the opening of the Chinese border, manpower demand will further increase. Manpower is a major problem.

In addition, companies operating in Changi Airport will have to deal with the increase in utility cost, fuel cost, salaries, GST, carbon taxes and so on.

Changi is one of our most important strategic assets, and being Skytrax's Best Airport comes with a price. That only means that we have to deliver and confront the challenges facing the aviation sector.

Mr Speaker, no country is immune to the trials and tribulations caused by the pandemic and the rapid changing world. I hope that Singaporeans who have saved us from COVID-19 are celebrated, that we will continue to have such individuals to serve Singapore and that the inadvertent impact and hardship suffered by various groups of Singaporeans will be addressed. I support the Motion.

Mr Speaker: Minister Ong Ye Kung.

1.49 pm

The Minister for Health (Mr Ong Ye Kung): Mr Speaker, Sir, 1,711 – this is the number of people in Singapore who had died of COVID-19 infections as of 31 December 2022 and as reported in the White Paper.

MOH estimated an additional 2,000 deaths over the course of the pandemic – that is above the expected number of deaths based on pre-pandemic trends. These individuals, not recorded in the official death toll for COVID-19, might have died of undiagnosed COVID-19 infections or COVID-19 could have worsened some underlying conditions, leading to their deaths.

All in, over 3,700 deaths, estimated – most of them older, with co-morbidities, underlying illnesses, many unvaccinated, and they are most affected by COVID-19 infections. We will never know the exact number or all the names and the faces of every victim of this pandemic crisis.

Never had Singapore gone through a crisis that inflicted such a heavy toll on the lives of our fellow men and women since Independence. I think nothing even comes close. This is, indeed, the crisis of a generation.

And behind every passing, there were family members, loved ones, doctors and healthcare workers doing their best to comfort them, to save them. At MOH and, I am sure, in this House, we mourn their deaths and extend our deepest condolences to their families.

COVID-19 placed lives and livelihoods in very stark contrast – or, maybe more aptly put – it put in contrast your desire to survive and live vs what is the purpose of living.

This same challenge was faced by every country, every region, which is, how do you navigate out of this dangerous conundrum, regain your normal lives while protecting the lives of your people as much as possible?

Every country and region faced this challenge. And every one took their own or its own path – some by choice, others forced by circumstances.

I would say how each country or region fared in this COVID-19 common challenge, essentially, boils down to the following three judgement calls.

First, whether through our decisions and, in the early stages of the pandemic, we effectively made hospitals the singular defence against the virus. Here, past experiences mattered.

Many countries in Europe or the Western Hemisphere – the Americas – deal routinely with influenza, including very severe winter seasons. The influenza playbook – they used that and it was proven to be inadequate for COVID-19. So, the virus spread widely, hospitals effectively became their singular defence, which became overwhelmed, leading to many deaths.

On the other hand, places like Singapore, South Korea, China, we had seen "ghosts" before. We had seen SARS and MERS. We had the processes and capabilities in place and then we moved quickly to contain our initial outbreaks with stringent border measures, testing and isolation of cases, tracing and quarantining of individuals.

So, we used our entire public health arsenal and we succeeded in preventing our hospitals from being overwhelmed, especially in the initial stages of the pandemic before there were vaccinations.

If there was one thing the Prime Minister constantly reminded the MTF chairs, it was this golden instruction – protect our hospital capacity – and we took it all very seriously.

Because when the entire weight of the country's health rests on hospitals, even if that was not the intention, it will not just be COVID-19 patients that die, but everyone who needs urgent medical attention can die.

In many countries, this was what happened. Doctors had to turn away patients who were very ill and they were all just waiting along the corridors. And when a hospital bed or ventilator became available, the doctor had the heart-wrenching task of deciding – who do I save?

This judgement call – the careful husbandry of our hospital beds before the great majority of our population was vaccinated – is the primary reason why Singapore kept our COVID-19 mortality rate low.

The second judgement call has to deal with vaccination coverage. Most countries rolled out national vaccination programmes and they achieved varying levels of coverage and then resilience.

Those, if Members remember, were confusing times, because the vaccines were new and anti-vaxxers were out in full force, spreading falsehoods and half-truths to persuade people to avoid vaccinations.

I know of friends who do not want to take the vaccines. But I think it is one thing to have a personal preference and quite another to make it into a public campaign because that affects other lives.

I had to exercise my authority under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) when I judged that a circulating falsehood was misleading people into avoiding vaccines. The law was designed for such occasions, especially when lives are at stake.

It is worth stating in this House again that the weight of global evidence clearly shows that COVID-19 vaccines are effective and safe. Our latest MOH data shows that during the Omicron waves of 2022, vaccines lowered the probability of severe disease and deaths for the elderly by more than five times.

Do COVID-19 vaccinations have side effects? Definitely, they do. Dr Lim Wee Kiak, my colleague, always says, if a medicine has effects, it can have side effects. A medicine without side effects has no effect.

We were clear and transparent and published the incidence of side effects every quarter. The incidence of severe adverse effects for the vaccines has been low – typically, five to seven per 100,000 – and a great majority recover on their own, without even going to the hospital. So, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Fortunately, the great majority of Singaporeans and the public trusted our recommendations to take the vaccines. We achieved over 90% vaccine coverage and I thank the Workers' Party for supporting this very pivotal national effort to vaccinate our population.

This is our collective judgement, as a people, to achieve high vaccination coverage. And this is the other big reason why we could minimise the number of deaths due to COVID-19.

Then came the third judgement call – the tricky one – which is, having achieved high population immunity, when should we open up?

For many countries in Europe and America, after the virus had spread widely, with many people infected and many deaths, their population immunity was actually high and they could afford to open up early. So, in the course of the pandemic, many people also urged MOH and MTF – can you quickly open up like other countries in the West, in Europe, in the Western Hemisphere?

The desire is understandable, but they overlooked the key difference between us and them. They paid the price in human lives, which we refused to pay.

We, along with a small handful of countries, managed the situation tightly, contained the spread of the virus and used the time to vaccinate as many people as possible.

Then came a time to open up and you had to switch from one set of rules to another. You had to switch playbooks – from Queen to The Beatles, from a zero COVID-19 policy to something closer to managing a bad influenza season. This was a major psychological leap for doctors, MOH and society.

Countries adopted different timetables to this reopening. I think Australia probably went first. They took the first step, followed by Singapore. China only recently opened up.

Looking back, in all three decisive moments of judgement, I think we, collectively, made the right calls.

Despite this, COVID-19 has been a humbling experience. We have a duty to learn from the crisis and ensure that those whose lives were lost to COVID-19 did not pass in vain.

And it will not be in vain. We have translated the trials and tribulations of the pandemic into six areas of improvements, to better prepare Singapore for the next pandemic.

Sir, for the rest of my speech, I will go through each of these areas. The White Paper had mentioned them briefly but I will elaborate.

First, we will strengthen our hospital capacity.

Our healthcare system was severely tested during the pandemic. At one point, we were monitoring bed availability, capacity, caseloads almost by the hour, to detect any signs of imminent collapse.

Fortunately, we had the SMMs in place; we had high coverage of vaccinations, which protected our hospitals.

At that time, many questions were asked, including in this House: why did we not plan for more hospital capacity in anticipation of the pandemic crisis? At that time, I was asked: if we did, we could have relaxed the SMMs.

This would not be a realistic course of action. To illustrate, even with vaccinations and SMMs, at the peak of the Delta wave in 2021, we had almost 1,300 patients hospitalised, 140 in ICU.

If we had relaxed the SMMs, the number, I think, would have easily doubled, probably tripled.

This is equivalent to three or four full general hospitals set aside as spare capacity during peacetime, waiting for a surge and then be deployed. So, it is just not realistic to set aside so much spare capacity.

So, we should not size the healthcare system to take on the full brunt of the next pandemic. This pandemic has taught us that true resilience must not come from just adequate infrastructure, but also from our social resilience – our collective behaviour.

That said, with delays in our infrastructure development due to COVID-19 and rising hospital workload post-crisis, our healthcare system today is less resilient than ideal.

Dr Wan Rizal and Mr Gerald Giam raised concerns in this area, which I agree with, especially the stress that it is giving our healthcare workers.

Our public hospital bed occupancy has risen, from a pre-COVID level of 87.6% in 2019, to 93.1% in 2022. It has gone up by almost six percentage points.

This is largely driven by patients staying longer in hospitals. From an average of 6.1 days in 2019, to seven days in 2022. So, that increase alone explained for all the increases in occupancy.

And why is that so? Because we are seeing more older patients with complex conditions and they need to stay longer in hospitals. So, the percentage of senior patients aged 65 and above has risen from 39% in 2019 to 43% now, that is, 2022.

Many of them are frail and with co-morbidities and we also found an increasing number being hospitalised because of other viral infections, not COVID-19 but other viral infections, respiratory illnesses, including pneumonia.

We cannot rule out that this could be after-effects of being infected with COVID-19 for some, or it could be a rebound of other forms of infections post-crisis and, during the crisis, suppressed. Once masks are removed, we go back to DORSCON Green, they rebounded. It may also simply be a result of our population ageing very rapidly.

As I have explained to this House, MOH is doing many things to address this. I will not repeat them today and this includes the recent announcement to strongly protect our healthcare workers against abuse and harassment.

However, a post-crisis initiative, which I have yet to explain, is the Transitional Care Facilities (TCFs).

TCFs are for medically stable patients from public hospitals waiting for long-term care arrangements, such as going to a nursing home or going for home care. During the pandemic, we set up 500 TCF beds across five sites operated by five private sector healthcare providers.

The TCFs have proven to be very useful. They are very well utilised and it is as good as adding 500 more beds to our acute hospitals.

We have, therefore, decided that TCFs will become a medium or even long-term feature of our healthcare system. We will retain the current facilities, including continuing to use Changi Expo Hall 9 primarily as a TCF. We have about 200 beds there. And I thank MTI for sacrificing some exhibition space for MOH.

Today, we do not have a TCF in the West and we will start one there in the next few months, in close proximity to the Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

We will also continue to expand the community and step-down care sector, such as community hospitals and nursing homes.

Now, let me move to the second area of improvement, which is, we will boost our pandemic preparedness and response. This means having the capability to quickly understand what is this virus or pathogen we are dealing with and then what actions to take.

When dealing with any infectious disease, we, generally, need to understand six key characteristics in order to formulate the right response. COVID-19 really helped us boil down to these six important characteristics.

One, how it spreads – for example, between persons in close proximity or is it airborne through aerosol.

Two, the length of its incubation and infection periods.

Three, R or reproduction number, which is a measure of its infectiousness.

Four, how deadly it is.

Five, who are the vulnerable groups? For example, is it seniors, children or both? Spanish flu, for example, affects young children especially.

And six, how to treat and prevent it.

Without good answers to these six basic questions, we will be fighting in the dark and, most likely, end up fighting the last war. As Dr Tan Wu Meng and Mr Yip Hon Weng have pointed out, we need strong public health scientific and research capabilities to quickly assess these key characteristics.

That is the objective of PREPARE. It stands for the Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response that I launched in November last year. This is our national epidemic R&D plan and a major initiative arising from the crisis.

It will also strengthen our international pandemic research partnerships – to build a network of partners and allies to play our part in strengthening global surveillance of emerging pathogens.

We will leverage GISAID. GISAID played an instrumental role during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a global non-profit platform for open sharing of genomic data of viral pathogens and, today, it is the world's largest repository of SARS-CoV-2 sequences.

Singapore will work closely with GISAID, and they have established a base here in collaboration with A*STAR.

After we understand the characteristics of a dangerous pathogen, what do we do with the information?

Having gone through SARS, H1N1 and the various phases of COVID-19, we have developed a range of responses. The characteristics of the pathogen will determine our response.

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong mentioned this briefly in his opening speech yesterday but let me elaborate a little. Mr Speaker, Sir, can I show a chart on the screen please?

Mr Speaker: Please do. [A slide is shown to hon Members. Please refer to [Annex 1](#).]

Mr Ong Ye Kung: We can plot pathogens on a graph. In this chart, the horizontal axis measures transmissibility and the vertical axis measures severity. It is a simplified way of measuring the six characteristics that I spoke about.

So, Members will notice at the top right-hand corner what looks like a durian or explosion, that is Disease X – the disaster that we dread, where the pathogen has high transmissibility and high severity and is deadly.

And if you move to the left, you will notice the red dot, that is SARS, with high mortality but low transmissibility. So, when you encounter something like that, it favours a strict containment approach – with extensive contact tracing, chase down, isolate every case, until the virus is eventually wiped out, which we did.

As for COVID-19 which is the blue dot, you will notice there is a blue dot near the red dot connoting SARS called COVID-19 wildtype, that is the initial COVID-19. When it first appeared, the wildtype strain is slightly southwest from SARS. This is why in the early phases of the pandemic we treated it like SARS and adopted a zero-COVID-19 policy.

But over time, COVID-19 mutated. As it mutated, it became Delta, became Omicron BA.1, now we got XBB, XBB1.5, 1.9. They are constantly moving to the right, meaning they are more transmissible. But, with vaccination, we do not just let them move to the right, we also make them move down and suppress the severity of these strains. So, you see the blue dots now moving down closer to the green dot where influenza is. So, overall, with vaccinations, later variants are closer to where influenza is on the vertical axis, which is why we are then able to open up and move towards living with the virus.

So, using this framework, what happens when a new pathogen of concern emerges in future?

We may have to respond quickly with appropriate border and domestic SMM measures, to minimise infections and to buy time.

Then, with good science and the local and global capabilities I just described, we hope to quickly ascertain key characteristics of the pathogen, where it lies on the graph, and then determine the right responses. Concerted efforts to develop and secure effective vaccines and therapeutics will proceed in parallel.

Third area of improvement, which is, MOH will restructure to strengthen our organisation. This is something we also did, in the wake of SARS outbreak in 2003.

MOH put in place a pandemic preparedness plan involving the primary care sector, which evolved into today's Public Health Preparedness Clinics (PHPC) Scheme.

Polyclinics and PHPCs served as our first line of defence, to test and treat COVID-19 cases, they support home recovery, they also administered vaccinations and helped in surveillance efforts. So, contrary to what Mr Leon Perera said, our family doctors actually have been and will continue to make an immense contribution during the pandemic and for healthcare in future.

We set up the National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL). It conducts laboratory surveillance of infectious diseases and aids in outbreak investigations.

When COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan, it was the scientists from NPHL who designed the PCR test for COVID-19, two days after the scientists in China shared the genome sequencing with the world.

We established the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), which opened its facilities in 2019 and it provides high standard of infectious disease clinical management.

These organisational enhancements after SARS built up capabilities that helped us respond to COVID-19. Given what we have learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, we should, once again, review our organisation structure to better prepare ourselves for the next pandemic.

The one big lesson this time is that we need to rely on a wide repertoire of responses. As I explained in the chart earlier, each pathogen has unique characteristics needing different responses. In fact, COVID-19 shifted around the chart, requiring us to change playbooks along the way.

Specifically, for a severe but less transmissible disease like SARS, we need an individual-centric approach, comprising testing, isolation, tracing, quarantining, that is precise, accurate and as error-free as possible.

For less severe but highly transmissible pathogens like the Delta or Omicron variant, it becomes almost impossible to contact-trace and isolate, especially as the disease increases and spreads exponentially. It is also of no use insisting on gold-standard accuracy and precision.

Instead, we need to manage the exponential growth of infected persons, through population-wide interventions: mask wearing, ART tests in the community, self-testing, self-quarantine for those who are exposed and home recovery for those with milder symptoms.

The individual-centric clinical approach versus the population-based public health approach, they are actually not mutually exclusive. In fact, they complement one another and we adopted both during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. We should institutionalise both sets of capabilities for the long term and be able to deploy both with flexibility and dexterity in future pandemics.

To do so, we will set up a new Communicable Diseases Agency, or CDA, under the Ministry of Health (MOH). It will oversee disease preparedness, prevention and control, surveillance, risk assessment and outbreak response. This new agency will consolidate the relevant public health functions that today reside in MOH, National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) as well as the Health Promotion Board. The National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL) is a critical national resource and will be transferred to the CDA.

The CDA will maintain oversight of the clinical facilities in NCID. Many countries, such as South Korea, UK and US, they have similar set ups. They, too, after the COVID-19 crisis, are also reviewing their organisational set-up.

In addition, MOH will separately retain a permanent Crisis Strategy and Operations Group, or CSOG, in the Ministry. CSOG was established during the pandemic and grew steadily as the pandemic progressed. It is the machinery behind all the pandemic-related operations that we are familiar with – contact tracing, home quarantine, conveyancing to isolation facilities, testing, vaccinations and home recovery. All this, coordinated and implemented by CSOG in MOH.

CSOG was staffed by officers from various Ministries, contract staff, and also staff from industries affected by COVID-19. For example, we had quite a number of SIA pilots as well as cabin crew working in CSOG. Most of these staff have returned to their industries. As Ms Poh Li San said, it has rebounded from 2% to 80%. We lost all of them. We are sad to see them go, but we are happy that they are gone too because they are going back to their industries. So, the operations have scaled down greatly.

Nevertheless, we will keep a permanent CSOG force to maintain surge readiness for a mid-sized outbreak as well as other health emergencies. And this includes preparing healthcare institutions to be crisis ready. In peacetime, when there is no emergency, they help us operationalise Healthier SG, as the skillsets turn out to be fairly similar. It is not surprising, because they are both are public health focused.

In addition, we will set up a Healthcare Reserve Force, made up of ex-healthcare workers and volunteers. We will train and equip them to reinforce our operations during larger surges and they will complement the existing pool of SG Healthcare Corps volunteers.

Finally, we will change the title of DMS. Instead of the Director of Medical Services, he will be called the Director-General of Health, which more accurately describes his role as the main overseer of both clinical and public health of Singaporeans. This will take place after the changes to the Healthcare Services Act come into effect later this year. This House has already approved the changes.

With these changes, MOH will be organised to place greater emphasis on both clinical services and public health. They require different instincts, considerations, capabilities and skillsets. Both are important and critical, and will be institutionalised and built up within MOH.

Let me now address a question that relate to public health measures, specifically, on the issue of masking. Mr Gerald Giam suggested that the Government was not forthright with the people, that was what I heard. That during the initial stages of the pandemic, we did not impose masking requirements, not because of public health reasons, but because we did not have enough mask supplies.

This is incorrect. In the initial stages of the pandemic, there was no clear understanding of the characteristics of the COVID-19 virus. We, therefore, aligned our policy to World Health Organization (WHO)'s recommendations, and WHO, even up to March 2020, maintained that, and I quote: "a medical mask is not required for people who are not sick, as there is no evidence of its usefulness in protecting them."

The risk of shortage of masks for healthcare workers would put their lives in danger, because they are in the frontline. Is it a serious concern? It was, but it was not the basis of the prevailing public policy on masking. We aligned our policy with WHO. We reviewed and changed our masking policy in April 2020, that was also when WHO changed its' guidelines once the evidence on how the virus spreads became clearer. Particularly, there was now clear evidence that there was asymptomatic transmission via aerosol.

Nevertheless, as acknowledged in the White Paper, the whole issue of masking is one area where our decisions could have been better. But no question that during this period, the Government was totally forthright with the people and told the people what we knew.

The fourth area of improvement is to update our laws. The Infectious Diseases Act, or IDA, is the principal legislation for the prevention and control of infectious diseases. It empowers MOH to take various public health actions for disease outbreaks, such as contact tracing, isolation of infected persons, testing of contacts or the disinfection of premises and so on.

The IDA also provides for the Minister for Health to declare a public health emergency in very grave public health situations. And that will activate extensive powers for the Minister, such as controlling the movements and gatherings of people and imposing curfews.

While COVID-19 was a crisis and a serious threat, we did not declare a public health emergency. We wanted to restrict group sizes, but not to control movements of people. We were not planning to impose curfews or invoke the Requisition of Resources Act to marshal resources.

In other words, the emergency powers under IDA were too blunt and heavy, compared to the public health measures and SMMs we needed at that time. So, instead, Parliament enacted Part 7 of the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act, or CTMA, to provide us temporary, complementary powers to IDA.

This ad hoc legislation allowed us to deploy a broad range of tools to tackle COVID-19 at multiple layers, without declaring a public health emergency and this House just extended Part 7 of CTMA for another year.

Ideally, we should review and amend IDA. As it stands now, IDA envisages only two worlds of public health: peacetime or public health emergency, with no gradations in between. COVID-19 taught us that in a prolonged pandemic, we can go through different phases. So, IDA must be amended to deal with a wider range of scenarios. It needs to be more future proof. Once the amendments are tabled and if passed by the House, we can and we intend to rescind Part 7 of CTMA.

We will put forth the full proposal to the House later this year. Just to share some preliminary thinking, we envisage four public health situational tiers under the amended IDA.

The first tier is Baseline, which is a peacetime state. The second tier is Outbreak Management, where a pathogen of concern is detected and measures may need to be implemented urgently to manage disease outbreaks. And these include contact tracing and quarantine, testing, border controls and masking. And these will buy us time to understand the characteristics of the pathogen, the six characteristics that I mentioned.

The third tier is Public Health Threat, where more stringent, widespread and longer-term control measures and restrictions are needed. These include various SMMs and restrictions, up to and including a circuit breaker-like imposition.

And then finally, the highest tier is Public Health Emergency, where very stringent measures, such as curfews and requisition of public health assets and manpower, may be effected.

When these changes come into effect, we can also use these four situational tiers to replace the current DORSCON colour coding. I think it is more intuitive to tell the public that there is an outbreak, a threat, or an emergency, as oppose to colours. And the law spells out what measures could take place under each situational state.

Will this, therefore, prevent the panic buying that we saw during COVID-19 when we changed DORSCON to Yellow and Orange? Some are already shaking your head. Indeed, not on its own. You just change colours to descriptors; there is no reason why panic will just disappear.

Whether a people panic during a crisis depends a lot on the information they are getting and whether they know what to do, to protect themselves and then contribute towards societal resilience. If people listen to rumours, they do not know what to do, then most likely they will rush to supermarkets and stock up on toilet paper and instant noodles – and Mr Seah Kian Peng will have a problem again.

Mr Speaker: Order. Leader.

TIME LIMIT FOR MINISTERS' SPEECHES
(Suspension of Standing Orders)

2.27 pm

The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah): Mr Speaker, may I seek your consent and the general assent of Members present to move that the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) to remove the time limit in respect of Minister Ong Ye Kung's speech – and I suppose for good measure, Minister Gan Kim Yong's as well.

Mr Speaker: I give my consent. Does the Leader of the House have the general assent of the hon Members present to so move?

Hon Members indicated assent.

With the consent of Mr Speaker and the general assent of Members present, question put and agreed to.

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) in respect of Minister Ong Ye Kung and Minister Gan Kim Yong's speeches. – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE
(Motion)

Debate resumed.

Mr Speaker: Minister Ong.

2.28 pm

Mr Ong Ye Kung: Thank you. I believe that with the experience of SARS, H1N1 and now COVID-19, the Government knows much better what measures are necessary and appropriate, and the people of Singapore understand much better what to do during a pandemic crisis. With that, there is a lower chance of having a panic.

The fifth area of improvement, we need to ensure that we have early access to efficacious vaccines for future pandemics. Without sufficient doses of vaccines, our mass vaccination strategy would have been a non-starter. So, what if we are willing to take the vaccines if there are no supplies? But securing vaccines is an art in itself, at best, an inexact science.

This is where judgement I spoke about at the start of the speech, made all the difference. How the vaccine procurement decisions were made in the early stages of the pandemic, is an important story to be told in this House and we shall do it today. Spoiler alert, this story has a happy ending, as noted by Mr Liang Eng Hwa.

Despite our small size and despite the worldwide shortage, Singapore was the first country in Asia to obtain COVID-19 vaccines, enough for all our people. But we also paid a price. So, here was what happened.

During the early phase of the pandemic, we set up an inter-agency workgroup chaired by the Head of Civil Service and comprising senior officials from agencies, such as Prime Minister's Office (PMO), MOH, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), Economy Development Board (EDB) and Health Sciences Authority (HSA), to develop our vaccine procurement approach.

Once they were formed, they immediately faced two challenges. First, COVID-19 was a new virus. Although several vaccines were concurrently being developed at that time, nobody knew which one would work. So, which one to buy?

Second, every country was clamouring for vaccines and there was limited manufacturing capacity to meet that demand. As a small market, we lack negotiating power. That has always been so. This would normally push us down the priority queue for delivery. The situation was worsened by supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic. But time was of essence. So, how to secure assured and early deliveries for vaccines?

On the first question of what to buy, the workgroup recommended a portfolio approach. Do not put all our bets on one vaccine but buy a selected number of vaccines across different technological platforms. This includes both mRNA and non-mRNA vaccines.

To identify the most promising candidates, the workgroup was advised by a panel of experts from the research institutes, hospitals and industry.

Since we did not know which vaccine candidate would work and we had to buy several types – if one does not work, we must make sure the other one had enough volume to cover our population. Therefore, we needed to over-procure such that the combined volumes of all the vaccine candidates more than cover the population of Singapore.

On the question of how to secure assured and early delivery, we leveraged our relationships with the pharmaceutical companies and entered into advance purchase agreements with fixed delivery schedules and quantities. That made them bite and we entered into the agreements.

Then, to ensure quality and safety, all selected vaccine candidates were reviewed by HSA thoroughly before being authorised for emergency use in Singapore. The Expert Committee on COVID-19 Vaccination (EC19V) provided a second layer of independent review and gave recommendations on how to optimise the use of the vaccines.

The first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines arrived in late 2020, Singapore being the first country in Asia to receive them. We rolled out the National Vaccination Programme shortly after from December 2020 – again, one of the first few countries in the world to do so. I think only after the UK, US and maybe, Israel.

The Moderna vaccine was added to the National Vaccination Programme in March 2021, Sinovac and Novavax in October 2021 and February 2022 respectively.

While the mRNA vaccines were found to be highly effective in protecting against severe COVID-19 infections, around the middle of 2021, we faced two new concerns.

First, there were early indications that vaccine protection could wane over time, especially amongst the elderly. So, boosters would be needed. We therefore procured additional vaccine doses to administer boosters to the whole population.

The second concern came up. New COVID-19 variants were emerging. There was a real possibility that one or more might break through vaccine protection and cause new major infection waves, causing many deaths or many cases of severe illnesses.

Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech therefore developed new bivalent vaccines that provide better coverage against the newer virus strains. In September 2022, we took the decision to make a clean switch to these new bivalent vaccines. The monovalent ones had to be stored away.

Looking back, today, if we can go back in time, given the uncertainties, the high stakes, what we knew, what we did not know and the challenges we faced, I think we would have done things the same way.

Because we secured safe and efficacious vaccines, delivered when we needed them most, Singaporeans took them with confidence, even with relief. I was relieved. When they arrived, I can take the vaccine and we were one of the first in the world. We built up our population immunity and achieved DORSCON Green today.

But there is a price to be paid. Because we deliberately over-procured to mitigate the uncertainty of selected vaccine candidate not working and the possibility of supply chains being disrupted, there would be spare vaccine stock, which will expire.

Some months ago, MOH was asked by the media how many of our vaccines had expired. We could only reply that about 10% of our stock had expired because of confidentiality agreements that we have entered into with vaccine suppliers.

I would have preferred to be more transparent and forthcoming with the information. We have since discussed with the vaccine suppliers and they have agreed we can reveal the total value of the expired vaccines so long as we do not give further breakdowns of quantity that enable people to guesstimate or estimate the cost of each dose, which is what they are sensitive about.

So, these are the numbers. To date, expired vaccines are about 15% of the doses we ordered, with a total value of S\$140 million. In the coming months, this is likely to rise to close to 25%, as more vaccines expire. After that, it should stabilise.

We had tried to donate our spare vaccines, but there have been no takers because there has been an over-supply of vaccines in the world. Manufacturers have ramped up their production capacity and demand has been going down as the pandemic stabilises. There are reports estimating that expired vaccines globally could range up to 500 million doses or more.

The expiry of unused vaccines was an insurance premium – the price we were prepared to pay to stave off the risk of catastrophic consequences.

What are these consequences? Let me illustrate.

Before vaccines were available, we had to resort to a circuit breaker in April 2020 to contain the pandemic. The two-month circuit breaker cost us around \$11 billion in terms of GDP loss. We spent close to another \$60 billion over two financial years to cushion the hardship for businesses and workers, not to mention all the heartaches and difficulties families had to go through.

Without vaccines, we would certainly have to resort to further circuit breakers during the Delta and Omicron waves in late 2021 and throughout 2022. But we did not have to; because the vaccines, we got them early and they protected us.

More importantly, our approach averted many deaths due to COVID-19 infections and protected Singaporeans against that catastrophic consequence.

Let me now address a few questions regarding vaccines posed by Members yesterday.

Ms Hazel Poa thought that MOH favoured mRNA over other non-mRNA vaccines in our regulatory approval. Actually, she is mistaken. Several non-mRNA vaccines could not secure HSA's approval because of insufficient data on safety and efficacy, and we cannot compromise on our standards.

Ms Hazel Poa and Mr Yip Hon Weng also asked if vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS) were too harsh on the unvaccinated.

In a pandemic, measures can be harsh. The circuit breaker was harsh on everyone. The relevant question is whether from a public health perspective, the measures are necessary and justified. We need to be mindful that while everyone should make their own medical choices, in a pandemic, individual actions affect not just yourself but also others around you.

When the vast majority chose to take the vaccine, they not only protected themselves but also their loved ones; they raised our collective resilience. As for those who did not take the vaccine, they do not just put themselves in danger and at risk, they also put others around them, including their colleagues at their workplaces, at risk. Hence, VDS was needed as a public health measure.

But we understand the hardship some of them have to go through. Some of them are allergic to the vaccine. Therefore, the moment we can step down VDS, we did so.

More importantly, we must continue to be prepared in case a dangerous variant of concern emerges.

So, this is our vaccine strategy going into the future.

First, MOH will maintain and periodically refresh an adequate stock of COVID-19 vaccines to allow continued protection of the elderly and vulnerable as needed and to facilitate a rapid response should there be a major or more severe pandemic wave.

Second, we will maintain a network of vaccination centres – primary care clinics, polyclinics and a baseline footprint of five to 10 Joint Testing and Vaccination Centres – even during DORSCON Green. With this, we will be able to administer a booster to all persons aged 50 and above and the medically vulnerable within three weeks, if necessary.

Third, we are negotiating agreements to secure early access to vaccines against other pathogens with pandemic potential. These might include new influenza and other respiratory viruses.

Fourth, we will invest in vaccine research and development like the PREPARE programme I spoke about earlier. One of our objectives is to establish how to quickly develop a working vaccine based on either the mRNA or protein-subunit platform and bring it to clinical trials locally.

Fifth, through the EDB's efforts, we will be anchoring six vaccine manufacturing plants in Singapore. In response to Dr Tan Wu Meng, EDB will continue to engage other vaccine manufacturers to invest in Singapore, grow our biomedical sector capabilities and cement our position as a pharmaceutical hub of Asia.

Finally, we will continue to do our part to strengthen global health security and support fair and equitable access to vaccines. There is now a global effort to develop safe, effective vaccines within 100 days of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern being declared. MOH is actively contributing to that effort.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I will conclude with the last lesson – and that is to recognise that a crisis forces us to do or try new things. What we thought was not possible to do or would have taken years to implement were accomplished in a matter of months because we were pushed by the crisis.

We were stretched and when released, will not rebound back to the old equilibrium. We will reach a new equilibrium.

For example, today, we are in a new era of flexible work arrangements. Our schools built up strong digital capabilities and all secondary school students today have their own learning devices because of COVID-19. I am sure Changi Airport will rebound to a new level of capability, post-crisis.

In healthcare, the changes are even more profound. During the crisis, public and private healthcare providers became connected by the same IT network. Everyone downloaded and got familiarised with healthcare apps. As pointed out by Ms Ng Ling Ling, telehealth became the norm. We became converts of preventive care as we became conscious of hygiene, got used to diagnostic tests, wearing masks and vaccinating routinely.

This is really what sparked Healthier SG. It is a strategy born out of crisis and will profoundly change the landscape for healthcare in Singapore.

The chapter on COVID-19 is a thick one in the story of Singapore, one with high drama, dark days, personal tragedy as well as bright spots and many high points of courage, collective will and resourcefulness. The story featured so many men and women who fought to keep Singapore safe. I cannot name everyone but they are reflected today in the stories of some of their brethren.

Dr Tan Chee Keat at Ng Teng Fong Hospital, who was part of the team to develop a negative pressure isolation chamber used to intubate infectious COVID-19 patients and helped keep her team safe during dangerous procedures.

Dr Annitha Annathurai, who personally oversaw the set-up of medical operations at the S11 dormitory and helped calm and assure the migrant workers there that they would be taken care of.

Mr Salman Imtiaz, a volunteer with the SG Healthcare Corps, who helped as a vaccinator with Raffles Medical Group while pursuing his undergraduate studies.

Ms Christine Joy Cordevilla Solacito, Senior Staff Nurse at Singapore General Hospital (SGH), who used her experience with MERS and Ebola to handle early COVID-19-positive patients from Wuhan, when she cared for ICU patients, administered chemotherapy in the isolation ward and delivered babies for the COVID-19-positive pregnant mothers.

Dr Wong Jiayi from Minmed Group, who became a father three times over during the pandemic – one pair is a twin [*Laughter*]. But he stayed his post, leading vaccination centres, a regional swab centre, mobile vaccination teams and home recovery operations.

Captain Lee Jia Wei, who volunteered to care for migrant workers being isolated at Singapore Expo and, to protect his family, did not go home for 60 days and stayed at Changi Expo.

Ms Sandra Goh, a lead stewardess with Singapore Airlines, who was furloughed when borders closed, switched to become a Care Ambassador at a hospital and now she is a manager at the Specialist Outpatient Clinics at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH). She told me she could transfer her skills from cabin to ward.

Mr Mahmod bin Mohd Yahya and Mr Humam Sufi bin Mohamed Ali, they are a driver-medical pair from Ambulance Medical Services Pte Ltd, who at the height of the pandemic, they worked 14-hour days for several weeks, making up to 16 trips a day to ferry patients to and from COVID-19 care facilities.

Mr Toh Guan Ru, one of my community volunteers, who, between ITE and polytechnic, requested to work for MOH and handle home recovery cases. And when he discovered that he did not qualify for the COVID-19 Resilience Medal because his stint was slightly short, he says, "It's okay. I am just proud that I was able to help."

I sincerely thank all of them and the hundreds of thousands who contributed.

We write the story to record suffering and sacrifice but also the strengths and remarkable commitment on the part of so many to successfully overcome the crisis. We write to remember but also to learn. If we do, then, in the next chapter, our hospitals and healthcare systems will be better, our laws more complete, our vaccines and medical supplies more secure. And so, we write our next chapter, not knowing whether the world will dawn bright or dark, hostile or friendly, but confident in ourselves that Singapore has become stronger through this crisis and we can stand taller to meet the next one. [*Applause*.]

Mr Speaker: Minister Gan.

2.48 pm

The Minister for Trade and Industry (Mr Gan Kim Yong): Mr Speaker, let me thank Members for their comments and suggestions on the After Action Review. Members' support during the COVID-19 pandemic played a critical role in rallying fellow Singaporeans to battle against this crisis of a generation together as a nation.

Many Members have also spoken about the unprecedented challenges the pandemic had brought and its impact on the economy and businesses.

Indeed, the world economy ground to a halt in 2020 and the Singapore economy contracted by 3.9%, our worst recession since Independence. Many businesses were affected by the pandemic.

First, they had to implement the various safe management measures, or what we now know as SMMs. Food and beverage (F&B) services, for example, had to observe the dining-in rules, from two to four to zero, to four to two and many changes, and implement the TraceTogether SafeEntry system, or TTSE – many of you have forgotten what they mean. And coupled with a weaker demand, their revenues fell as a result. Some businesses were also affected as their workers fell ill or had to be isolated. Some workers were stranded overseas and could not return to work because the borders were closed.

On the other hand, those in our essential services sectors, such as those producing food and water, electricity and operating public transport, had to keep their operations going to meet the daily needs of Singaporeans even during the circuit breaker, braving the risk of COVID-19 infections.

Some businesses had to quickly pivot to new business models and new markets and embark on transformation and training to improve productivity and stay competitive.

Beyond coping with the pandemic, the private sector also contributed to our fight against COVID-19. They worked in the background to secure life-saving essential supplies, operated the critical facilities or provided services for those infected with COVID-19. People-public-private partnerships played a critical role in helping us overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, I will elaborate on three key challenges that impacted our businesses, how we worked with industry partners to overcome them together and the lessons we learnt.

First, securing essential supplies and strengthening our supply chain resilience; second, preserving Singapore's hub status and safely reopening our borders; and, finally, working with our industries to chart our road to recovery.

One of the earliest challenges we faced was securing essential supplies and strengthening our supply chain resilience. When countries across the world locked down their economies and closed their borders, production and transport lines were severely disrupted during a time when global demand for essential goods actually surged.

Mask supplies was a good example. Mr Gerald Giam asked why we did not have sufficient stockpiles of masks and local production capacity. Prior to the pandemic, masks were rarely worn outside of the clinical environment, even during SARS. Our national stockpile of masks was, therefore, maintained at a level that would be sufficient for the healthcare sector's needs. To supplement our stockpile, Singapore companies produced masks overseas as it is more cost-effective to do so.

Therefore, when we decided to require every one to wear a mask whenever they left their homes, we had a problem. We were faced with an unprecedented situation where every one in Singapore and around the world was suddenly looking for masks for daily use. In Singapore's case, we were looking at a utilisation rate of more than five million masks each day, around the number required by the public healthcare system for one month. That is 30 times more than our usual consumption.

We worked very quickly with the private sector, such as ST Logistics, to source for additional mask supplies from around the world. At the same time, we worked with industry partners, such as ST Engineering, to quickly set up surgical mask production capabilities here. The first batch of made-in-Singapore surgical masks was produced in February 2020. ST Engineering also stood up capabilities to produce the melt-down polypropylene filters in Singapore from January 2021. This made us less reliant on imports of this critical material and enhanced the resilience of our local mask manufacturing capabilities.

Various homegrown textile and apparel companies, such as Ghim Li Group and Ramatex, also stepped forward to help produce reusable masks. Many of us would remember the masks with a Merlion logo in your 2020 National Day Parade pack, and that was from Ramatex. A*STAR and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) also lent their expertise to develop reusable masks that were more effective at reducing COVID-19 transmission, but also more breathable and comfortable.

Besides ramping up our mask production, we also worked with various partners to distribute masks island-wide. The Government started distributing masks to all Singapore residents from as early as February 2020, with the support of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and grassroots volunteers from the People's Association (PA). Temasek Foundation funded and led more of these distributions thereafter. Many of you would be familiar with the Temasek Foundation StayMasked vending machines installed across the island. They distributed a total of more than 31 million reusable masks to Singapore residents by the end of 2021.

Besides masks, many Singapore companies also supported our efforts to keep our supplies of food and other essential items flowing by maintaining our supply lines. As we know, Singapore imports more than 90% of our food from overseas. We worked with our shipping lines, such as the Pacific International Lines, to deploy ships to ports in the region and beyond, at times at our request, to bring food supplies to Singapore.

When Malaysia issued a Movement Control Order in January 2020 and closed the land links with Singapore, we introduced strict "bubble-wrapping" arrangements for Malaysian cross-border delivery workers to prevent cross-infection with locals when they deliver their supplies to Singapore.

We also worked with importers to diversify our import sources. During the pandemic, we secured new import arrangements for eggs, frozen vegetables and frozen chicken from Poland, red sea shrimps from Saudi Arabia, dried fruits from Uzbekistan and tomatoes from Türkiye.

We also established the Singapore-New Zealand Airfreight Project, or SNAP in short, in April 2020 to provide a secure, two-way "air bridge" to carry almost 140 metric tons of food supplies to Singapore and medical supplies back to New Zealand. Sixteen local food importers participated in this project and cargo flights by Singapore Airlines and Air New Zealand flew these food supplies to Singapore.

Once supplies were brought in from abroad, many Singapore companies also played a part in managing our local distribution network from warehousing to retail shops. PSA International stepped up warehousing capacity to ensure we had sufficient space for our upsized stockpiles of essential goods.

Supermarkets, such as NTUC Fairprice, Sheng Siong and Dairy Farm International Retail Group, also worked very hard to keep our shelves well stocked. For example, frontliners at Sheng Siong, Mr Sivakumar and Mdm Lee Cheng Hui, were involved in these efforts. At the height of the pandemic, they worked overtime every day alongside their colleagues to replenish shelves as fast as possible and patiently explained the SMMs to their anxious customers. Mdm Lee also offered Mr Sivakumar the spare room at her home to stay in when borders closed and he could not commute daily in and out of Singapore.

Mr Seah Kian Peng, in his capacity as Chief Executive Officer of NTUC Fairprice, also went out of his way to assure Singaporeans that we had enough supplies and that panic buying was not necessary. Many Members in this House did so, too, including Mr Speaker himself.

Much work also went on behind-the-scenes to ensure that our shelves are restocked regularly. Trucks ferrying supplies from warehouses were coming into some supermarkets twice as frequently, at six to eight times a day.

The Government has employed a combination of strategies to enhance our supply chain resilience: first, diversification of imports; second, enhancing our local manufacturing capability; and finally, stockpiling. We have been doing this since before the pandemic. As Dr Tan Wu Meng, Mr Gerald Giam, Mr Liang Eng Hwa and Mr Saktiandi Supaat mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has only reinforced the importance of these strategies.

The Minister for Health, Mr Ong Ye Kung, earlier explained how we worked with commercial players to secure vaccines and how we will review regulatory levers to improve our response to future public health crises. And as mentioned by Mr Saktiandi Supaat, these initiatives do come at a cost. We will work with the industry and our trade partners to find cost-effective solutions.

I would also like to encourage Singaporeans to support our diversification strategy by trying different sources of supplies, different brands when you go about doing your daily shopping.

Strengthening our supply chain resilience not only helps us meet our domestic needs but also helps Singapore strengthen our status as a business and trading hub.

Instead of resorting to protectionist measures during the pandemic, we continued to allow our manufacturers and distribution centres based locally to export goods to meet their obligations to their customers.

I join Mr Melvin Yong in thanking our transport workers, including our maritime workers. And, indeed, because of their dedication, our ports remained open 24/7 amidst disruptions at major transport hubs elsewhere. Singapore played a critical role in ensuring that global supply chains continued to function. We remained the world's largest transshipment hub and our ports continued to rank first in various international maritime indices and rankings. This was due to the efforts of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, the maritime industry, and tripartite partners who worked closely together to keep our ports open while facilitating crew changes safely. PSA Singapore handled record numbers of container throughput in 2021 and 2022.

However, people flows were significantly disrupted due to border restrictions overseas and here. These were complex decisions that had to be made urgently and we took a risk-based and calibrated approach to manage our borders.

At the beginning, we took some time before deciding to close our borders. This was an unprecedented decision that we did not take lightly. As a small and open economy, our connectivity is our lifeline. Border closures are also highly disruptive to businesses, travellers and families. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we could have erred on the side of caution and tightened border measures earlier when there were signs of virus spreading across borders, even if there had not been any large infection clusters here.

As the pandemic persisted, we often had to adjust our plans, sometimes at short notice, to respond to new variants of concern and new COVID-19 waves that emerged overseas. The multiple delays in the launch of the Singapore-Hong Kong air travel bubble was a notable example. Thereafter, we decided not to call it a travel bubble anymore, because it kept bursting. *[Laughter.]*

One key concern we had in mind when we made decisions on border restrictions was ensuring that workers, especially those in essential services, could still enter Singapore, while managing the potential risks of COVID-19 transmission.

When Malaysia introduced their Movement Control Order, a sizeable group of Malaysian workers who normally cross the border daily were faced with the dilemma of either staying in Singapore for work and be separated from their families, or potentially giving up their jobs and returning home. Businesses were also affected, with many at risk of critical manpower shortages.

We worked with our businesses to introduce several measures, such as the Periodic Commuting Arrangement and Reciprocal Green Lane, to address this problem. We also coordinated closely with our Malaysian counterparts to ensure the implementation was as smooth as possible.

There were also other times when we erred too much on the side of caution, which created disruption and uncertainty for businesses and workers.

For example, when we experienced spikes in local infections, we temporarily suspended the entry of foreigners and Long-Term Pass (LTP) holders, including work pass holders, into Singapore. This was to minimise the number of imported cases to avoid over-loading our healthcare system.

But, as highlighted by Ms Janet Ang, these restrictions created significant difficulties for the LTP holders, some of whom endured prolonged family separation and disruption to their work. This also affected our global reputation as a hub and open economy and strained the manpower situation of our businesses and services.

As we learnt more from experience and understood more about the virus, we were able to strike a better balance and find ways to safely reopen our border.

We unilaterally opened to general travellers in late 2020, but we did so gradually, for a handful of very low-risk countries. We regularly updated this list of countries, taking into account COVID-19 transmission trends.

When more than 75% of the Singapore population was fully vaccinated, we decided to pilot Vaccinated Travel Lanes in September 2021. This allowed for a larger number of travellers to enter Singapore, as long as they were fully vaccinated.

I would like to thank Singaporeans, Singapore residents and businesses for adjusting to the frequent changes in our border restrictions, and for accommodating the inconveniences and uncertainties caused.

These reopening efforts were also supported by our home-grown COVID-19 testing capabilities. The Diagnostics Development Hub worked closely with local medical technology firms MiRXES and Advanced Medtech Holdings to develop and scale-up FORTITUDE and RESOLUTE 2.0 COVID-19 test kits, which were also used to test incoming travellers.

Today, we have fully opened our borders. Passenger traffic through Changi Airport is expected to recover to pre-COVID-19 levels by 2024 and we are also making good progress on our long-term infrastructure projects such as Changi T5 and Tuas Port.

Ms Poh Li San raised the need to support our aviation companies and workers as they continue on the road to recovery. Since the start of the pandemic, the Government has provided close to \$2.5 billion of support towards the aviation sector's recovery. With the continued support of our industry partners and workers, I am confident that our status as a hub will grow from strength to strength.

The final challenge I want to touch on today is how we worked with our industries to chart the road to recovery. When the pandemic struck, almost every sector of our economy was affected.

Through the eight COVID-19 Budgets, the Government provided more than \$72 billion of support for businesses and workers and these include:

- (a) Enhancements to the Enterprise Financing Scheme and the introduction of the Temporary Bridging Loan Scheme, which helped small and medium enterprises address their cashflow difficulties;
- (b) Enhancements to capability development grants like the Enterprise Development Grant, Market Readiness Assistance and Productivity Solutions Grant, which helped businesses transform and enhance their competitive edge in preparation for recovery;
- (c) Wage support for employers to help them retain their local workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Job Support Scheme; and
- (d) Support measures for businesses affected by the SMMs, such as the Rental Support Scheme and Small Business Recovery Grant. We also provided grant support to businesses, such as the nightlife establishments, to pivot to other business activities.

The Emerging Stronger Taskforce was set up to chart out our long-term response to the structural shifts in our economy arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The taskforce worked with partners from businesses, Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs), unions, Institutes of Higher Learning and the Government to form nine Singapore Together Alliances for Action (AfAs). These AfAs prototyped ideas to address industry challenges and the successful ones were then implemented across the industry.

One of the Singapore Together AfAs focused on Enabling Safe and Innovative Visitor Experiences.

The AfA was co-chaired by Ms Kwee Wei-Lin, President of the Singapore Hotel Association and Mr Lee Seow Hiang, Chief Executive Officer of Changi Airport Group. It was supported by the Singapore Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and the suppliers of the National Association of Travel Agents Singapore, or NATAS.

The AfA's mandate was to pilot prototype arrangements for the safe resumption of large-scale international business events, design of safe itineraries for business and MICE travellers, and deployment of digital enablers to facilitate a safe and seamless journey for visitors.

These prototypes were piloted at TravelRevive in November 2020 and Geo Connect Asia in March 2021 – the first international travel roadshows to take place physically in Asia Pacific during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Learnings from these pilots were then incorporated into more than 550 events subsequently under the Safe Business Events Framework and other strategically important events such as the Singapore Airshow and the Singapore International Water Week.

Although the tourism sector was hard-hit by the pandemic, the efforts of the AfA and other industry partners helped the sector bounce back quickly from the pandemic when international travelling resumed. Notably, we also brought back the Formula 1 night race in 2022, which attracted more than 300,000 participants. This was the largest turnout since we first hosted the race in 2008.

As earlier mentioned by Ms Janet Ang, another scheme that gave the sector a boost during the COVID-19 pandemic was the SingapoREdiscover Voucher (SRV) scheme.

More than 450 hotels, attractions and tour providers benefited from this SRV scheme. Many of these merchants seized the opportunity to adapt their products for the domestic market and boosted their revenues amidst this challenging period. I am sure many Members and your residents have enjoyed the SRVs.

Other segments of our economy that were particularly affected by COVID-19 were our heartland enterprises, retail and F&B sectors. They were the worst-hit by SMMs imposed on business operations.

As Mr Seah Kian Peng and Ms He Ting Ru mentioned, the multiple changes and granular differentiations in SMMs for business operations caused uncertainty and disruption for their operations.

During the various phases of restrictions and reopening, some SMMs were overly calibrated. This made them difficult to operationalise and caused confusion to businesses and members of the public.

As we learnt more from experience and received feedback from industry partners, we simplified our SMMs in the later stages of the pandemic, striking a balance between mitigating the risk of infection, and providing certainty and clarity to businesses and consumers.

For example, we simplified our SMMs into five core parameters: group size, mask wearing, workplace requirements, safe distancing and capacity. This allowed us to calibrate and communicate our SMMs more easily and clearly.

Therefore, one important lesson we learnt – keep it simple, especially during a crisis.

I am glad that despite these disruptions, many of our businesses showed resilience amidst adversity. Many heartland enterprises accelerated their digitalisation efforts, as their physical storefronts and workplaces were closed. This helped them overcome the constraints of the SMMs and grow their businesses.

To date, I am happy to say that around 93% of our heartland enterprises have adopted e-payment solutions, which is almost 40% more than before the pandemic. Over two-thirds now have online presence, about 30% more. I am glad to hear from Mr Shawn Huang and other Members in this House about how digitalisation has benefited heartland enterprises in your constituencies.

We should thank the business advisors from the Heartland Enterprise Centre Singapore and the digital ambassadors from IMDA's SG Digital Office for their hard work. Together, they conducted over 66,000 ground engagements with heartland enterprises on e-payment and online presence solutions under the Heartlands Go Digital programme.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat asked how we will sustain the momentum of these digitalisation efforts. Digitalisation is a journey without end. We will launch a third phase of the Heartlands Go Digital programme later this year. This will tap on the expertise of new partners from the private sector and Institutes of Higher Learning to help heartland enterprises develop capabilities in digital marketing and visual merchandising.

Even though the worst of the pandemic is behind us, the Government will continue to work with our businesses as you progress along this journey of transformation.

Sir, let me conclude. The key lesson we learnt from the pandemic was that there will always be unexpected challenges that will surprise us. We do not know when the next pandemic will happen, or what future crises may be like. But the one thing we can be confident of and rely upon is the Singapore Spirit – working together, trusting one another and looking out for each other like family.

We witnessed this Singapore Spirit, when staff from Scoot, Raffles Medical Group and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) risked their own personal safety to evacuate Singaporeans from Wuhan when the crisis first emerged.

When we face the worst crisis, we will see the best in Singaporeans. It is precisely this Singapore Spirit that will see us through future challenges that may come our way.

Many people also worked tirelessly behind the scenes to contribute towards our COVID-19 efforts, even taking up functions and responsibilities they were unfamiliar with.

A total of about 10,000 individuals and teams from the people, public, healthcare and private sectors will receive the National Awards (COVID-19), in recognition of their contributions to our COVID-19 efforts.

The Meritorious Service Medal (COVID-19) was also awarded to three individuals whose unwavering commitment and exemplary leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic helped us safeguard lives and livelihoods and chart our road to recovery. They are Prof Kenneth Mak, Director of Medical Services at the Ministry of Health (MOH). He is a familiar face to many Singaporeans due to his professional and calming presence at the Multi-Ministry Task Force's press conferences. He led the efforts of the professional healthcare team in managing the crisis.

Mr Pang Kin Keong, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), who chaired the Homefront Crisis Executive Group to execute our responses to the pandemic, and he and his team of dedicated public servants helped navigate Singapore safely through the storm.

Mr Tan Chong Meng, Lead for the Community Care Facilities (CCF) Taskforce, Temasek COVID-19 Workgroup, co-chairman of the Emerging Stronger Taskforce and Group CEO, PSA International. He coordinated many private sector efforts including the setting up of the CCFs and keeping our supply lines open.

However, in the end, it is not just individual efforts, but the whole society coming together that ensured that we would prevail. The best example that illustrates the importance of such people-public-private partnerships is the setting up of the CCFs, where different parties came together quickly and worked together under a tight timeline, with very limited resources, to overcome unknown challenges and achieve a common mission.

Companies, like PSA International, Surbana Jurong, SingEx, Certis Cisco, ST Engineering, Parkway Pantai, Sheares Healthcare, Woodlands Health Campus and Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) worked as a team to set up the first 960 beds within record time at the Singapore Expo, which eventually expanded to around 8,000 beds.

RWS involved all its business units to also set up and run other CCFs and recruited over 2,000 volunteers to ensure smooth operations. This benefitted more than 34,000 COVID-19 patients.

These companies and volunteers may not have worked with each other before. They have not met each other but they came together nonetheless, each offering their expertise and resources to ensure the smooth set-up and operation of our CCFs.

Mr Edward Chia, Ms Janet Ang and Mr Raj Joshua Thomas highlighted the importance of strong collaboration between the TACs and the Government in times of crisis. Indeed, we have built strong partnerships through regular engagements and collaboration between TACs and Government agencies over the years.

During the pandemic, this rapport allowed us to come together very quickly, alongside industry partners, to resolve the challenges we faced. For example, the Singapore Hotel Association and the Singapore Tourism Board worked closely with over 90 hotels across the island to urgently transform hotels into Government isolation facilities.

The Singapore Business Federation worked together with Enterprise Singapore, other TACs, landlords and tenant representatives on a Code of Conduct for Leasing of Retail Premises. This established industry norms on tenancy practices and terms, which helped resolve rising tensions between landlords and retail tenants regarding Rental Agreements.

Finally, let me extend our appreciation to all businesses and TACs for their contributions towards our COVID-19 efforts. Our partnership played an important role in a crisis and we need to continue to strengthen this partnership even in the absence of a crisis.

I would also like to join my colleagues in thanking all our frontline workers stationed at our supermarkets and warehouses, at our air and sea ports, our care facilities and other essential services, for your dedication and sacrifices, which has helped us overcome this crisis of a generation and put us on a strong foundation for recovery. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I propose to take a break now. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 3.40 pm.

Sitting accordingly suspended

at 3.19 pm until 3.40 pm.

Sitting resumed at 3.40 pm.

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

(Motion)

Debate resumed.

Mr Speaker: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

3.40 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (Mr Lawrence Wong): Mr Speaker, I thank all Members who have spoken and shared your views on Singapore's response to COVID-19 and on this Motion.

We have also received feedback from the public on the White Paper. Many Singaporeans agreed with the broad observations and lessons and gave us further ideas on how we can strengthen our defences against future pandemics.

We take all of the feedback and suggestions seriously and we will study them carefully. In their speeches, my colleagues have shared several specific moves that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) have made and will soon be undertaking. Our work will not end with this debate. We will continue to consider additional inputs, put our plans into action and adjust them along the way. This is an ongoing, multi-year effort and commitment to learn and to improve.

The points raised by Members can be summarised into three broad themes: first, preparing for the next pandemic; second, ensuring effectiveness of our spending; and third, upholding solidarity and trust. Let me address each of these in turn.

First, as I highlighted in my opening remarks yesterday, the purpose of the White Paper and this debate, is for us to learn, improve and be better prepared for the next pandemic.

I am glad that the Leader of the Opposition Mr Pritam Singh agrees with this and supports the Motion. I do note, though, that Mr Pritam Singh, in supporting the Motion said and I quote, "he supports the Motion to the extent it expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the fight against COVID-19 and affirms the Government's efforts to learn from the lessons of the last three years."

I may be mistaken and if so, please pardon me. But this suggests that it is a qualified support; "to the extent" suggests it is a qualified support. I am not sure why there is a need for such qualification because after all, Mr Pritam Singh himself did highlight the need for us to set aside politics, to close ranks and to uphold unity of purpose in a crisis which I fully agree with. So, I would urge Mr Pritam Singh and the Workers' Party to give us their full and unreserved support so that we can truly demonstrate unity of purpose in dealing with and learning from this pandemic.

Perhaps, Mr Pritam Singh had held back his full support because of the questions he asked about the report prepared by Mr Peter Ho. So, let me explain.

The Government had asked Mr Peter Ho in late 2021 to undertake a review of our COVID-19 experience from the start of the pandemic until August 2021 and to draw lessons from this. At that time, we had envisaged it as an interim or mid-term review, because we were not clear when we would be able to fully transition to endemic COVID-19.

In parallel, various Government agencies embarked on their own After-Action Reviews (AARs). These focused on the policy and operational decisions within their respective domains. Mr Peter Ho knew about these reviews and he decided to focus his efforts on the key strategic lessons for the Government, so as to minimise duplication and to complement the agency AARs.

By the time Mr Peter Ho's report was completed, we also had further experiences with the fast-changing COVID-19 threat, including the implementation of the Home Recovery Programme and our responses to the Omicron variant in late 2021. By then, we were also clearer about the way out of the pandemic, because the situation had stabilised and we could envisage a full transition to endemic COVID-19.

There was therefore a need to pull together the findings from Mr Peter Ho's interim report and the agency AARs, as well as the lessons from our more recent experiences, into a consolidated report that would fully reflect all that had transpired over the last three years and provide a fuller synthesis of all our learnings.

And that is why PMO, the Prime Minister's Office was tasked to put together this consolidated report, which the Government decided to release as a White Paper. Some may ask, "if that is the case, why can't you release Mr Ho's findings and if it is deemed sensitive, why not have it redacted, with the non-sensitive portions released?"

But that is precisely what we have done. Whatever is relevant and fit for release, we have incorporated into this White Paper and the White Paper is in fact more comprehensive than what Mr Ho's review has set out to cover, because it includes information from the agencies' AARs as well as learnings from our experience after August 2021.

The White Paper will not be the final word on our COVID-19 response. I am sure academics and experts will continue to undertake more detailed studies, like the one mentioned by Mr Leon Perera on our H1N1 pandemic response. Incidentally, that study was done by MOH public health officials. They decided to publish their findings in an academic journal.

We welcome all academics and experts to do their own detailed assessments of our COVID-19 response and to put out their findings. They may have a different conclusion and view from the Government on specific issues like wearing of masks, border measures or SMMs and that is perfectly okay.

In fact, we welcome the diverse perspectives, because this will help us challenge our own assumptions and learn and improve.

Members generally agreed with the broad thrusts of the White Paper and offered many useful suggestions to strengthen our capabilities and support frameworks. Clearly, there is much work to be done across all domains.

In healthcare, we need to build up our primary care and hospital capacities, our vaccination capabilities, as well as our public health expertise – as several Members highlighted, including Mr Leon Perera, Dr Tan Wu Meng, Mr Mark Chay, amongst others. In economic resilience, as Mr Shawn Huang, Mr Seah Kian Peng, Mr Melvin Yong and Mr Saktiandi Supaat said, we need to invest in alternatives like local production, diversify our import sources and strengthen the robustness of our infrastructure and transport links. I would also like to assure Ms Janet Ang, Mr Raj Joshua Thomas and Mr Desmond Choo, that we will continue to harness the strength of our tripartite model, our trade associations and industry partners in all of these efforts.

We need to do more to improve public communications, including frontline crisis management communications as suggested by Ms Jessica Tan and Ms He Ting Ru. We also need to do more to look out for and care for the more vulnerable amongst us, including our migrant workers and to address mental wellness issues, especially for our youths; something which many Members, including Ms Ng Ling Ling, Mr Edward Chia, Mr Yip Hon Weng, Mr Gan Thiam Poh, Ms He Ting Ru, Mr Louis Ng and Miss Rachel Ong all made reference to.

We recognise that the Government cannot do all of this work alone. We will need to work more closely with the people and private sectors. We will go beyond the usual corporate and tripartite partners, to involve other stakeholders including community groups and NGOs. We will involve our partners not just in execution and implementation, but also in upstream planning and emergency preparedness. So, we will follow-up on all of these systematically, in order to strengthen our crisis management muscles – something that Ms Poh Li San and Miss Cheng Li Hui highlighted in their speeches.

I also agree with all Members that this work is of great urgency. Around the world, the risk of animal viruses spilling over to humans continues to rise – due to population growth, urbanisation and increasing proximity to animals. Climate change has exacerbated these problems by generating more habitat loss, forcing wildlife to migrate out of their usual patterns and come into contact with new species and more people.

In other words, disease spillovers and outbreaks are inevitable. Just in the summer of 2021 alone, when we were all focusing on and grappling with COVID-19, the WHO received alerts on more than 5,000 new outbreaks around the world, few of which made global headlines, because most spillovers lead to smaller clusters of disease that quickly die out. But every now and again, we encounter a pathogen that becomes a pandemic, causing global chaos.

The urgent global task therefore is to reduce the spillovers and, importantly, to prevent any such spillovers from turning into pandemics. This is where early detection is of utmost importance. And that is why there is a crucial need for an enhanced global surveillance system especially in potential hotspots around the world.

With early knowledge of the characteristics of the new pathogen, along the dimensions that Minister Ong shared just now, and if we know this before the virus reaches our shores, we will be able to buy precious time to decide on our posture and measures.

That is why Singapore is plugging fully into the global network of international pandemic research and we are working hand-in-hand with the global community to improve our collective pandemic response. Singapore was a co-chair of the Friends of the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, which helped countries in need secure access to COVID-19 vaccines.

The G20 recently set up a Global Health Security Financial Intermediary Fund, or what is now called The Pandemic Fund, to ensure more reliable financing for future pandemics. Singapore was one of the founding contributors to the Fund, and we continue to shape initiatives through our membership of the G20 Joint Health and Financing Taskforce.

As Minister Ong shared just now, we will continue to leverage GISAID to keep up to date with genome sequencing of pathogens with pandemic potential, and we are a part of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) to keep up to date with vaccine developments. We also have professionals and specialists from our scientific community who represent us on technical platforms at the WHO and other international bodies. So, we are doing everything we can to be better prepared, not just within Singapore, but also internationally.

Next, let me touch on the overall effectiveness of spending in enabling Singapore to get through this pandemic. Ms Hazel Poa had asked about this. At the macro level, governments around the world grappled with the twin challenges of lives and livelihoods. And Sir, with your permission, may I display some slides on the screens?

Mr Speaker: Please do. *[Slides were shown to hon Members.]*

Mr Lawrence Wong: In terms of lives, as of 31 December 2022, our mortality rate for COVID-19 was around 300 deaths per million. We mourn every death and express our deepest condolences to their families and loved ones, but what we have in Singapore is much lower compared to other countries with five or even 10 times mortality rate. *[Please refer to [Annex 2](#).]*

The key reason for this is that we did not allow our hospitals to be overwhelmed, as Minister Ong had explained just now. That was always our key objective throughout this crisis and so, we made full use of the tools at our disposal – whether it was vaccinations and boosters, border measures and SMMs – to achieve this goal. This is on mortality rate. It is not excess mortality, but just looking at mortality from COVID-19, as one measure.

In terms of livelihoods, our economy recovered quickly to pre-COVID-19 levels by 2021. Our employment rates today are even higher than pre-COVID-19. Our recovery – it is very hard to put this out into a picture, so, I do not have a chart for this – but our recovery was faster compared to many other economies. And you can use different indicators to track these, but it is quite clear our recovery was faster compared to many others.

These are, of course, not comprehensive outcome indicators. But I think most would agree that they are among the more important ones. How much did we spend compared to other countries to achieve these outcomes? As I mentioned yesterday, we had budgeted more than \$100 billion and we eventually spent \$72.3 billion over FY2020 and FY2021, which is equivalent to about 15% of our FY2020 GDP, which you see on this chart. *[Please refer to [Annex 3](#).]*

So, we mounted a strong response. What did other countries do? It is not so easy to get actual data from other countries but they IMF has some estimates, so we put out what the IMF has estimated for the different countries. And, clearly, we are not the lowest, in terms of this chart, with the sampling of countries. But certainly, we are not excessive either, and they are many countries like the US, UK, Japan and Germany, which put out much larger fiscal packages.

So, for the amount of public funds spent, we achieved relatively good outcomes compared to other countries.

There were other achievements, beyond those I have highlighted that were not so easily quantifiable but no less important. For example, we kept schools physically open and education going for our students. We minimised disruptions to in-person learning, particularly for younger students, and mitigated the potential loss in learning outcomes due to the switch to home-based learning. This was not the case in many other places, where lengthy school closures had long-term scarring effects in terms of human capital development, particularly for students from less advantaged backgrounds.

We kept businesses afloat and local unemployment rates low through the Jobs Support Scheme and other financing support. This helped to preserve firm capabilities and allowed businesses to bounce back quickly when the worst of the crisis was over. And through the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, we also helped those who were in between jobs transit to growth sectors and fresh graduates maintain their skills and human capital while waiting for the economy to pick up.

We kept supply chains open throughout the crisis, and continued to service the world as a trans-shipment hub for air and sea cargo. Even at the height of the pandemic when many countries, including Singapore, were short of supplies, we never imposed export controls. Vaccines came through our airport, we had cold chain facilities, so we facilitated the shipment of vaccines to the rest of the region. This not only enabled supplies to keep flowing to and through Singapore, but also boosted our reputation as a reliable and trusted node in the global network.

So, on the whole, when you look at all of these outcomes and what we had spent, on the whole, compared to other countries, we have achieved good value for the monies we spent – to stave off the most severe downsides of COVID-19 and to mitigate long-term economic and social scarring.

The resources we deployed enabled us to buy insurance and options, sometimes at substantial cost, like what we did when we moved quickly to secure advance commitments for the vaccine supplies.

Not every insurance option will pay off. But, in the end we have to judge whether it is worthwhile to pay a bit more, so that we can be in a stronger position to deal with the crisis and head off potentially very costly downside scenarios. And when you look at what we have achieved overall in this crisis in the last three years, I am convinced that, on the whole, it is money well spent.

Beyond the macro picture, we can, of course, drill down into specific areas of spending. This is being done through the various on-going reviews and audits and I am sure through these processes, we will pick up areas where we could have done better.

But I should acknowledge and give credit to all our public officers who worked hard round the clock to administer and implement the various schemes. There may have been occasional lapses in their work, but I hope Members understand that all our officers were working under crisis and emergency scenarios. Where there were lapses or mistakes, I have every confidence that our Ministries and agencies will learn from them and will do better the next time.

More than 80% of the Government spending went directly to beneficiaries, as I have mentioned, to keep businesses going, preserve jobs for Singaporeans and help those who were hard-hit by the pandemic, especially the vulnerable. Ms Poa had asked whether we could have been more discriminating in the support we had extended to businesses or for example, to recover payments from businesses that were profitable.

We significantly expanded the Jobs Support Scheme during the circuit breaker. At that time, everyone was worried, businesses were very worried over whether they could survive, and how they may retain and pay their workers. That is why the JSS was designed to be across the board and automatically disbursed, so that businesses, especially the SMEs, could receive the much-needed support quickly.

And, indeed, the timely cashflow enabled firms to retain their local employees and capabilities, and to bounce back from the crisis once demand recovered. As soon as we could, we started to tier the JSS support – different levels of support for different industries and, eventually, phase out the JSS support.

MOF had earlier published a study on the impact of our key COVID-19 measures. Our estimates show that 165,000 jobs were saved in 2020 as a result of JSS. Behind this aggregate number are real Singaporeans and their families. And I am glad we helped these workers to stay employed, earn their keep and support their households through the crisis.

Sir, at every point, we tried our best, to help fellow Singaporeans retain their livelihoods and live their lives with as much normalcy as possible, under the shadow of the pandemic.

Mr Gerald Giam asked about Temasek’s involvement in our efforts to fight COVID-19. As I had explained earlier, more than 80% of Government’s spending went directly to beneficiaries. Another 10% was for grants to medical providers and the remaining 10% was procurement with third parties. So, talking first about Government spending, this was the breakdown.

Out of the 10% of procurement, most of it in fact went to non-Temasek entities. For example, most of MOH’s partners in the COVID Treatment Facilities and Vaccination Centres were non-Temasek entities. Temasek’s entities were involved in very specific operations, for example, in the swift setting up of the COVID-19 facility, the community care facility at the Expo. And that was invaluable, because it helped us to get through the very difficult situation we faced with the dormitory outbreak.

Then, what about the resources that Temasek itself spent on COVID-19, for example, the distribution of test kits and masks? The resources for this come from the portion of its positive Wealth Added returns that Temasek would typically set aside for community initiatives in the Temasek Foundation. This is part of Temasek’s CSR – to do good and give back to society. It is something which we encourage of all companies in Singapore to be good corporate citizens.

Over the last three years, because we were fighting a crisis, Temasek redirected a significant proportion of these community funds to support the fight against COVID-19. This is a decision that Temasek and its Board made independently of the Government and there is no draw on Past Reserves from such spending.

Temasek’s community initiatives do not in any way detract from its mandate, which is to deliver long-term sustainable returns. Temasek and its portfolio companies operate independently as commercial entities. But like all commercial entities, we welcome them to do their part in a crisis, where it really should be all hands on deck.

Tapping on Temasek’s capabilities, as well as that of the broader private and people sectors, is just one way we have harnessed our whole-of-nation resources to help bring our society and economy back to normality. This is not a form of dependence or over-reliance by the Government which Mr Giam seems to suggest, but really a manifestation of Singapore’s distinct and unique strength.

In fact, many other countries struggled to galvanise their private sector to contribute to pandemic-fighting efforts. In contrast, we were able to harness public and private resources to fight the crisis. We worked closely with all stakeholders to ramp up vital services and to make up for shortfalls.

And that is what good governance is about. It is about how well we organise ourselves and marshal resources across the public, people and private sectors, and how we mount responses and deliver the best outcomes for Singapore and Singaporeans

In the end, dealing with a national crisis requires a whole-of-nation approach. And so we hope that partners from all segments of society can come together again in any future crisis, and we welcome the expertise and contributions from all companies and organisations, whether they are Temasek-linked or not.

Finally, no matter the shape and form the next virus will take, there is one element that is crucial in shaping our response – and that is trust.

Singaporeans trusted the Government to make the right decisions, and to act in the best interest of Singapore and Singaporeans. The Government did not take this trust for granted. We were open and honest throughout the crisis. We shared information candidly even when things did not go well, and even when we did not have complete information. This was essential so that Singaporeans could continue placing their trust in the Government.

Equally, if not more important, the trust amongst Singaporeans has been strengthened. This is not the case in many other places where trust amongst their citizens had been declining, even before COVID-19, and may even be at historic lows today, post-crisis. And hence, during the pandemic, it was hard for these governments to implement tough COVID measures – after all, if trust is low then people may say: why should I comply with your measures because if my neighbours or friends are not complying, then why should I do so?

You can see this is what has happened in many other places where there is little trust, public health becomes politicised and individualised, and the countries’ pandemic response is quickly compromised and impaired.

Fortunately, social capital and trust have been high in Singapore over the decades, and the silver lining in this terrible crisis is that social capital and trust have increased. A post-COVID-19 survey commissioned by the Ministry of Communications and Information showed that social capital grew over the course of the pandemic. Most notably, trust amongst citizens strengthened. More than seven in 10 Singapore residents felt that their relationships with their neighbours and friends remained the same or became stronger during the pandemic. A similar proportion of respondents were confident that the Government would know do what to do in a future pandemic and that Singaporeans would help one another tide through the next crisis together.

We are heartened by these survey results. This trust is extremely precious, and we will work assiduously to preserve and strengthen it, so that Singapore will always remain a high-trust society.

Mr Speaker, I shared in my remarks yesterday that it is important we approach the lessons from our COVID-19 experience with the right attitude and mindset. Lessons learnt should never be hard-coded into doctrine. Lessons should not be blindly applied from one crisis to another, because while there may be similarities, there will also be differences.

The key is to have the flexibility and wisdom to adapt and devise solutions that are fit for purpose and fit for the situation at hand.

Indeed, through this COVID-19 experience, we have expanded our toolkit to manage disease outbreaks and pandemics. For example, look at border measures, we now have a wider range of measures to apply at the borders. We can impose Not-to-Land (NTL) which is the most stringent; we can allow travellers to enter Singapore subject to tests and the test can be pre-departure tests or on-arrival tests; we can allow them to come in subject to both tests and quarantine requirements, and the quarantine can be done at home or in dedicated facilities; and if it is done at home, we have improved the system now so that we have electronic tagging and remote monitoring, it is quite effective.

So, just thinking about the kinds of border measures we have from SARS to now, we have really expanded our toolkit considerably.

For SMMs, we have identified the five key parameters which are important: group sizes, mask wearing, workplace requirements, safe distancing and capacity limits.

So, hopefully, if we ever have to do this again, it will not be as confusing and complex as was the case these last three years. But by tweaking and adjusting these five parameters, we will be able to manage transmission risks, depending on the severity of the threat.

So, be it surveillance, border measures, SMMs, testing or vaccine development, we now have a wider range of policy options and measures to tackle the next pandemic. And with our enhanced capabilities in detection, surveillance, identification of threat which we are doing, not just by ourselves but hand-in-hand with international partners, we will be in a much better position to protect ourselves and deal with the next pandemic if and when it comes.

We will not stop here. We will continue working hard to expand our toolkit and to build up our capabilities because, ultimately, that is the best way for us to honour the dedication and sacrifices that everyone had made to fight the pandemic these past three years. And that is why we acknowledge with humility the learnings and points of improvement as a country, a people and a government. We pledge to keep on doing better and be better prepared if and when the next pandemic strikes.

At the same time, we are grateful and thankful for all the positives that we have seen and experienced these past three years: the dedication of our healthcare and other frontline workers, the acts of kindness within our communities, and the solidarity and trust of our people.

Sir, we know the road ahead of us will always be unpredictable. We have focused in this debate on pandemic threats but there will be other challenges. Sometimes, it almost feels like the next crisis is just around the corner. We have got uncertainty now in the global economy and financial market, we have got geopolitical tensions, super-power rivalry in Asia, climate change and the list goes on. There is no guaranteed formula to navigate these challenges.

But if Singapore and Singaporeans take all what we have been through these past three years to heart, we will be able to overcome any challenges that come our way and prevail as one united people. Mr Speaker, I beg to move. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Clarifications. Mr Pritam Singh.

4.12 pm

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister for the round-up speech on the Motion.

Just a quick point on the matter I brought up in my speech. As I mentioned, COVID-19 was, indeed, an unprecedented crisis and it would not be realistic to expect no mistakes or missteps by the Government.

That said, I maintain the position that we do not know what we do not know. We do not know what is stated in Mr Ho's report and the AARs from the respective Ministries. And it would be important in my view for Singaporeans to consider the details and the breadth of perspectives secured from all who participated in the various AARs. I hope this information can be made available to the public at some point. But this difference of opinion does not overshadow the Workers' Party's support for the Motion.

Mr Lawrence Wong: Sir, I already explained just now Mr Peter Ho's report focused on lessons for Singapore in crisis management. It included details like the internal workings of the Government, our crisis management structures, and these internal workings and crisis management structures are not just to deal with a pandemic. The same structures are used for dealing with external security threats and that is why we are unable to publish that part of the report for national security reasons. I am sure everyone understands that.

Then, there are other parts of his report which went into commercial sensitivities. For example, how we leveraged on different partners, scrambled to get essential supplies and managed our supply chains. Those had some commercial sensitivities and we cannot reveal them.

If we redact all of these sensitive materials, we will essentially end up with the lessons for the Government which are already in the White Paper. In fact, it will be a subset of the White Paper because as I explained just now, the White Paper goes beyond Mr Ho's report. It covers the lessons from the agencies' After Action Reviews and it also covers the lessons learned after August 2021. So, it is a fuller synthesis of all the lessons that we have learned from the last three years.

So, I hope everyone understands and can see that we have been upfront in doing this. We have maintained this approach in dealing with the crisis throughout the last three years and we continue to do so in the White Paper, which covers the lessons for the Government.

By all means, there can be debate on the lessons, on the recommendations. By all means, disagree with the lessons and the recommendations. Have your own view. We have happy to hear the differences in views and to be better prepared. But I think it is quite uncalled for to suggest that there has been any withholding of information by the Government in putting together this report. I hope that Mr Pritam Singh and the Workers' Party will live up to the ideals that he called for in upholding national unity when we deal with and learn from this pandemic.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yeap Song (Aljunied): Mr Speaker, I have just one clarification for Minister Ong. In July 2021, I asked if the Government could develop a COVID-19 risk index that aggregates indicators to provide guidance to policy-makers on decisions to ease or tighten safe management measures. Minister Ong replied then that it would not be wise to define a definitive threshold for full reopening and that it would not be very useful to devise an index to guide our public health actions.

However, just now, Minister Ong just announced that four public health situational tiers will be introduced as part of an amended Infectious Diseases Act (IDA). Will objective thresholds and matrixes be used to decide which situational tier we are in and how does that differ from a risk index that relies on factors such as the number of daily infections, hospital capacity and vaccination rates?

Mr Ong Ye Kung: Sir, Mr Giam actually raised two separate issues. I think most of our clinicians and public health experts will continue to maintain the view that an index, somehow, you put different ingredients into it, you will come up – viola! – with one number and use that to decide your policy; that would tie our hands.

As we learned during COVID-19, it is so fluid. It keeps changing. There are so many facets. You need the flexibility to decide what best to do.

Having said that, a separate issue is what I mentioned just now, in reviewing the IDA, Even today, DORSCON, you have different tiers. That is quite different from an index.

In different tiers, you have a range of options, a range of public health options. So, when you have a pathogen that is dangerous, you first decide which tier you are at; and within that tier, what the range of options are, and then from the range of options, you mix and match, depending on the characteristics of the pathogen. If it proves to be insufficient, then you upgrade and you explain to people why you need to upgrade my situational tier.

I think this is a lot more flexible. There is a framework, but the framework is not equal to an index.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim: Thank you, Speaker. I, likewise, have a clarification as well as a question for Minister Ong. I believe that the Minister shared that we were among the first to pursue vaccines, just after the UK, US and Israel – is what I believe he said.

Of course, not to take away from the hard and undeniably difficult work of the expert group on procurement, I believe our first vaccination occurred on 30 December 2020. It was a nurse, I believe – a frontliner nurse.

Based on a quick search, at that time, actually, a large number of developed and emerging economies had already commenced their vaccination programmes, many with mRNA vaccines. Switzerland did so on 23 December; Spain, 27 December; Hungary, 26 December; Canada; 14 December; Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on 17, 22 and 14 December. Even developing countries like Mexico, Costa Rica and Serbia, all rolled out before 30 December.

So, just to clarify, did our vaccination programme commence substantially after we procured and if so, why the delay?

To follow up on that, my question is that if there was a relatively slower roll-out in the first months of the National Vaccination Programme in January, February, March and so on, was that due to a lack of vaccine supply? If so, why was this a constraint if we had already secured the stock via advance purchase agreements?

Mr Ong Ye Kung: Thank you for pointing that out. I think I stated wrongly. We are the first in Asia. You see, in Europe, they have the European Union (EU). In America, Pfizer is an American company. They are big markets. They are at the front of the queue. The Global South is very far down in the queue. Asia, too.

But due to the reasons and the decisions we made, we leveraged relationships with the pharmaceutical companies, particularly EDB, we were able to be higher up the queue, outside of the EU, outside of the Americas. I think we were still very fast, from that perspective.

The Member seems to suggest there is a gap between procurement and roll-out. As I mentioned just now, we got our first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines late in the year – I forgot which month, could be September or so – and then we rolled out in December.

The first batch was not very much. It was 20,000, 30,000. Then, weeks later, more came. When we had sufficient volume – during that time, we had to set up a whole new machinery to handle the vaccine.

Remember, mRNA vaccines need an ultra-cold chain. You have to maintain minus 70°C, all the way to the vaccination centre. Once you open it, it has a limited lifespan. Within days, it is gone. So, within those days, you accept appointments and jab it into the arms of people. Which also explains why – one of the questions that Mr Leon Perera raised yesterday – did we not use General Practitioners (GPs) at that point. That is one reason – because of the ultra-cold chain and the logistical challenges. So, we had to set up dedicated vaccination facilities and then push it out.

There is no reason for us to delay. Absolutely no reason. We were racing against time. We had danger at our doorstep. At the earliest possible juncture, we delivered the vaccines safely, efficiently, quickly to the arms of our people.

Mr Speaker: Ms Hazel Poa.

Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for showing us the comparison with other countries in terms of how our budget measures have benefited Singapore. But I think here, we are not just comparing with other countries, but we also want to compare with ourselves – how we want to make sure that we deal with this better in the future as compared to now.

So, it is in that spirit that I ask whether a review on each of the budget measures has been done or are they ongoing. Specifically, in future responses, does the Government still feel that giving grants to profitable companies is the way to go?

Mr Lawrence Wong: Sir, we have been reviewing. We published, as I mentioned just now, a paper looking at the impact of our COVID-19 measures. Ms Poa may have seen it. If not, I will encourage her to look at the detailed studies which highlighted the outcomes we have achieved from our measures, including the Jobs Support Scheme.

So, that has already been done. We will continue to review and we will continue to improve because we do want to do better.

On the specific point that Ms Poa raised, which is, can we put in place a criterion to give out help that will not allow for some recovery of payments to profitable companies, I would put it this way.

First of all, to do it ex post is not the right thing to do. That means, we will only wait until you know the results later on. Then, there will be a lot of uncertainty for companies. If you want to do that, you have to do it a priori – upfront. Then, later on, if it exceeds a threshold, yes, you can claw back.

In principle, in theory, yes, you can think of it like that. That is, in theory, possible. But I think in practice, it is not so straightforward. It is administratively going to be quite complex. It may lead to gaming by companies. How do you set the right threshold upfront? It is not so straightforward either. Companies will start to game. Businesses will start to game. All may try to operate below the threshold.

So, while what she has highlighted is something that in theory can work, I think there are administrative complexities. But from MOF's perspective, we will continue to study and review because our interest is to continually make sure that we achieve value for money in what we spend.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: A bit of supplementary information for Assoc Prof Jamus Lim. He mentioned several countries that rolled out their vaccination programmes earlier than us. I should point out that many of them used non-mRNA vaccines – AstraZeneca and others. So, we probably need some time to compile the data, then we know where we stand. But we were one of the first in Asia.

Mr Speaker: Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim: Just a very quick clarification. Those countries that I did mention all had mRNA vaccines. There were indeed other countries that had non-mRNA vaccines, but I did not cite those.

Question put, and agreed to.

Resolved,

"That this House expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the nation's fight against COVID-19; affirms the Government's effort to learn from the experiences of the last three years; and, to that end, endorses Paper Cmd 22 of 2023 on 'Singapore's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for the Next Pandemic'."

TIME LIMIT FOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS' SPEECH

(Suspension of Standing Orders)

4.26 pm

The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah): Mr Speaker, may I seek your consent and the general assent of Members present to move that the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) to remove the time limit in respect of the Minister of State Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim's speech.

Mr Speaker: I give my consent. Does the Leader of the House have the general assent of the hon Members present to so move?

Hon Members indicated assent.

With the consent of Mr Speaker and the general assent of Members present, question put and agreed to.

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) in respect of Minister of State Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim's speech." – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

SECOND READING BILLS
MISUSE OF DRUGS (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr Speaker: Minister of State Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim.

4.27 pm

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for Home Affairs): Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Minister for Home Affairs, I beg to move, "That the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill be now read a Second time".

Sir, the Bill is linked to the next Bill on the Order Paper, the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill. May I propose that the debates on both Bills take place together?

Mr Speaker: Please proceed.

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Sir, we will still have the formal Second Reading of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill to comply with the procedural requirements.

The Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill also contains two other sets of amendments not related to the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill – one set led by the Ministry of Law (MinLaw) and the other by the Ministry of Finance (MOF).

I will explain the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), MinLaw and MOF's amendments in my opening speech. I will address questions pertaining to the amendments led by MHA and MinLaw. The Second Minister for Finance, Ms Indranee Rajah, will address questions pertaining to MOF's amendments.

Sir, the global drug situation is worsening. Illicit drug supply, drug abuse and the potency of some narcotic drugs are reaching unprecedented levels.

The 2022 World Drug Report published by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that young people abuse drugs more than adults. The UNODC also found that in many countries, the levels of drug abuse among the youth have reached record levels.

The number of deaths worldwide associated with drug abuse increased by 17.5% between 2009 and 2019, reaching about half a million deaths in 2019.

Drugs cause great harm to individuals, families and the society. Many countries around the world have given up on this fight because drug trafficking and use have become so prevalent. They cannot stem the tide. For these countries, the only practical approach is to reduce the harm.

In Singapore, our situation is different. Our tough laws have kept the drug situation here relatively under control. We must continue to keep drugs at bay, to prevent the harms from overwhelming us. To this end, we continually review and refine our laws and policies to keep pace with the evolving drug landscape and local trends.

Mr Speaker, in this Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill, we will introduce two key amendments to address emerging trends in the local drug situation. We will be introducing a legislative framework to deal with psychoactive substances. We will also be introducing a tiered punishment framework for the drug possession offence.

Over the last few years, we have seen the rise of a new threat in the drug landscape. New psychoactive substances, or NPS for short, are synthetically-produced substances which mimic the effects of traditional controlled drugs, such as cocaine, heroin and cannabis. Around the world, NPS are proliferating at an unprecedented rate, from just 166 NPS detected in 2009 to 1,150 in 2022, a seven-fold increase in slightly over a decade.

Locally, the number of NPS abusers arrested increased from an average of three abusers per year between 2014 and 2017, to an average of 235 per year from 2018 to 2022. NPS are harmful, and their abuse has been linked to adverse physical and psychological reactions and also overdose deaths. These substances are no less harmful than controlled drugs and are similar in effect. NPS are often clandestinely manufactured. The UNODC has reported that NPS users are frequently hospitalised with severe intoxication.

In Singapore, there have been at least four NPS-related deaths since 2016. Because the psychoactive effect that NPS causes is similar to that of a controlled drug, its abuse will also lead to acts of crime and violence. Members will remember some recent cases within Singapore where drug abusers acted violently, such as the LSD abuser who killed his mother and grandmother in 2019, or the meth abuser who attacked two other diners with a knife in a restaurant in 2022 because his food was not ready. We have not seen similar incidents arising from NPS abuse yet. We should nip the NPS problem in the bud.

Currently, we manage NPS in the following way. Once we detect an NPS, we will list its molecular structure in the Fifth Schedule of MDA. Section 58A of MDA allows for such listing up to a year. During this one-year period, the Central Narcotics Bureau, or CNB, can seize the substance to prevent its proliferation. CNB will use this time to conduct industry consultations to determine if the substance has any legitimate uses.

During this one year, CNB cannot take any prosecutorial action against a person trafficking in the substance. If there are no legitimate uses, its molecular structure will subsequently be listed in the First Schedule of MDA as a controlled drug. Only when it is listed in the First Schedule can a person who is found trafficking, manufacturing, importing, exporting or possessing such NPS be prosecuted.

The limitation of the current approach is that we will always be playing catch-up with the syndicates. The ease in modifying the molecular structure of NPS to create new variants means that traffickers can easily overcome our laws by switching to new, unlisted NPS. In fact, drug suppliers are known to tailor the molecular structure of NPS according to what is not yet controlled through legislation. We need to put in place a more proactive approach.

We studied the drug legislation in the UK and Australia and adopted parts of them to develop our own unique framework to tackle NPS. We are proposing a new legislative framework to deal with the NPS threat based on their capacity to produce a psychoactive effect, rather than their molecular structure. This allows CNB to take enforcement action against potentially dangerous and potent NPS, and not have to wait until their molecular structure has been identified and listed in MDA.

The new framework criminalises the manufacture, import and export, traffic, possession and consumption of all psychoactive substances. The first limb of the definition of a psychoactive substance, as inserted by clause 2, is a substance or product which is capable of producing a psychoactive effect if consumed. NPS, in this Bill, will be referred to generally as "psychoactive substances".

"Psychoactive effect" is defined to mean the stimulation or depression, whether directly or indirectly, of the individual's central nervous system, affecting the individual's mental functioning or emotional state.

The first limb of the definition of psychoactive substance is broad and may cover substances that are already regulated under other legislation or those with legitimate uses. Therefore, we have created a new Fifth Schedule of "Excluded Substances", which will not be considered as, nor regulated as psychoactive substances, as reflected under the second limb of the definition of psychoactive substance.

The new Fifth Schedule will list substances that have the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on an individual, but with legitimate uses, or those which are already regulated under other legislation, such as caffeine, alcohol, food, tobacco and any medicinal product.

I explained the method of temporary listing earlier. The existing Fifth Schedule used to temporarily list NPS will be repealed since there is no longer a need for temporary listing. To be clear, there is no change to the existing regime for controlled drugs. All controlled drugs listed in the First Schedule will continue to be regulated in the same way as before. That is why controlled drugs are also listed as excluded substances in the new Fifth Schedule.

The punishment framework for these new offences relating to psychoactive substances will take reference from that for Class C controlled drugs, but, generally, with fines, in place of caning. The proposed definition of "psychoactive substances" covers a broad scope of substances with different levels of psychoactivity and, because they are novel, their potential harms may not be as well-documented as those of controlled drugs. This approach, therefore, balances the need for deterrence against the uncertainty over the universe of psychoactive substances, with varying levels of potential harm.

Once the molecular structure of a specific psychoactive substance is identified and industry consultation has been conducted to determine that the substance has no legitimate use, we will list the substance in the First Schedule as a controlled drug. This substance will, at that point, no longer be treated as a psychoactive substance, as defined in the MDA.

In 2019, we introduced offences to criminalise acts of contamination that contribute to the spread of drug abuse and child endangerment through exposure to drugs. Clause 7 introduces the same contamination and child endangerment offences for psychoactive substances. The punishments will be the same as the offences where Class C controlled drugs are involved, including caning. We propose for caning to be retained for contamination offences, to better protect vulnerable members of society.

Repeat offenders with antecedents of the same nature, whether for psychoactive substances or controlled drugs, will be liable for higher punishments. For example, if an offender has an antecedent for trafficking in a controlled drug and is now convicted of trafficking in a psychoactive substance, he will be considered a repeat offender and will be subject to enhanced punishment.

I will now speak about issues relating to the element of knowledge for offences concerning psychoactive substances. The MDA currently contains statutory presumptions relating to controlled drugs which, when invoked, shift the burden of proof to the accused person to prove otherwise on a balance of probabilities, for example, that he did not have knowledge of the nature of the drug found in his possession. Clauses 10 to 14 extend these presumptions to psychoactive substances.

Clause 15 introduces a new section 22A which provides that for the purpose of proving that the substance in question is a psychoactive substance, it is sufficient for the prosecution to prove that the substance has the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on an individual if consumed. An accused person who claims that the psychoactive substance is an excluded substance, bears the burden of proving this claim on a balance of probabilities.

For the new offences criminalising the manufacture, import and export, traffic and possession of psychoactive substances introduced in clause 7, it is a defence for the accused person to prove on a balance of probabilities that he dealt with the substance for a legitimate purpose, other than human consumption. The burden for proving this defence, likewise, falls on the accused person.

For example, if a person is arrested with a substance found to be capable of producing a psychoactive effect, and claims that he intended to use the substance as a cleaning chemical, he would need to produce evidence to show that he intended to use the psychoactive substance in his possession for cleaning, and not for human consumption.

This is fair, as there is a wide range of substances that have the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on a person if consumed, with an equally wide range of uses for these substances. The person dealing in the substance would know best what the substance is and the intended use of the substance, if it truly has a legitimate purpose other than for abuse.

In addition, clause 15 inserts a new section 22B, which provides that "knowledge that a substance is a psychoactive substance" is established, for the purposes of offences concerning psychoactive substances, if the person knew the substance had the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on an individual when consumed and did not know, or have reason to believe, that the substance is an excluded substance.

For avoidance of doubt, section 22B provides that the person need not have known the exact name or molecular structure of the substance, in order for his knowledge of the psychoactive substance to be established.

Next, we are amending section 16. Scientific certificates issued under section 16 may be used as proof of the matters contained within relating to controlled drugs, unless the contrary is proved. Clause 9 extends the effect of section 16 to apply to certificates relating to psychoactive substances. Operationally, the Home Team Science and Technology Agency (HTX), will be conducting the relevant tests on seized substances during investigations into an offence relating to psychoactive substances. As such, clause 9 also amends section 16 to allow HTX analysts to sign certificates issued under section 16.

Sir, we will also amend the MDA to extend the existing powers of law enforcement officers in respect of controlled drugs, to apply equally to psychoactive substances. Clauses 16, 17 and 18 extend officers' powers of search, seizure and arrest to apply in relation to psychoactive substances. Clause 19 amends section 27 to allow for the forfeiture of any psychoactive substance seized under the MDA. Clauses 21, 22 and 23 amend sections 31, 31A and 31B to extend officers' powers to collect urine specimens, hair specimens and oral fluids in cases of suspected psychoactive substance abuse.

Where appropriate, abusers of psychoactive substances may be subjected to treatment and rehabilitation, similar to abusers of controlled drugs. Clause 2(b) expands the definition of "drug addict" to include a person who is addicted to a psychoactive substance. This allows the Director of Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) to subject him to supervision, or treatment and rehabilitation, which includes committal to the Drug Rehabilitation Centre, DRC.

We will also amend Article 9(6)(b) of the Constitution. Article 9(6)(b) ensures that laws relating to the misuse of drugs, such as the MDA, that authorise the arrest and detention of any person for the purpose of treatment and rehabilitation, are valid under the Constitution. We propose to include psychoactive substances into this clause, to ensure the constitutional validity of the Director of CNB's proposed powers to commit persons who have abused psychoactive substances to detention for treatment and rehabilitation.

The Bill will make consequential and related amendments to nine other Acts. These are technical amendments needed to align these Acts with the new legislative framework for NPS, such as to update the enforcement powers in those Acts to also cover psychoactive substances.

I will now move on to explain the second key amendment in the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill. In recent years, CNB has seen the modus operandi of syndicates shift towards dealing in larger quantities of drugs per transaction. For example, in September 2022, there was a large seizure of 13 kilogrammes of drugs, which had included 8 kilogrammes of cannabis, as well as a seizure of 18 kilogrammes of heroin in May 2022. These were exceptionally large seizures, amounting to millions of dollars in street value.

The current punishments for possession offences are not differentiated by the type of drugs involved and are not tiered based on the quantity of the drugs. It therefore does not sufficiently account for the greater harms that could be caused by a person in possession of larger quantities of drugs. Persons who are willing to risk being in possession of such large quantities of drugs contribute significantly to fuelling the local drug market and feeding local drug demand. We need a more deterrent sentencing regime.

MHA therefore proposes to increase punishments, which will include caning, for the possession of selected controlled drugs above certain weight thresholds. Clause 34 amends the Second Schedule to increase the penalties for the offence of the unauthorised possession of certain quantities of selected drugs. The drugs for which this amendment will apply are cannabis, cannabis mixture, cannabis resin, cocaine, diamorphine, methamphetamine, morphine and opium. We scoped the new framework to these eight drugs based on our assessment that they have the highest potential to cause serious harms in our local context.

Currently, the maximum punishment for possession of any controlled drug, regardless of weight, is 10 years' imprisonment, or a fine of up to \$20,000, or both. The Bill proposes to tier the penalties according to the quantity of the controlled drug.

In the proposed enhanced punishment framework, for the lowest tier, the punishment is a maximum of 10 years' imprisonment or a fine of up to \$20,000, or both. For the middle tier, the minimum mandatory sentence will be 10 years' imprisonment and five strokes of the cane, while the maximum is set at 20 years' imprisonment and 10 strokes of the cane. For the highest tier, the minimum mandatory sentence will be 20 years' imprisonment and 10 strokes of the cane, while the maximum is set at 30 years' imprisonment and 15 strokes of the cane.

I would like to emphasise that this new punishment framework does not affect the policy change that was announced in Parliament in 2019 when we last amended the MDA. Since 2019, we have been diverting "pure" drug abusers to DRC for treatment and rehabilitation, instead of prosecuting them. The Minister for Home Affairs had explained then that "pure" abusers referred to drug abusers who did not commit any other offences besides drug consumption, but who may face other less serious, related drug offences, such as possession of drug-taking utensils or small quantities of drugs.

However, drug abusers found with large amounts of drugs in their possession would not be considered "pure" drug abusers and would not be considered for diversion to the DRC. There is thus no change to the approach we take for "pure" drug abusers.

For persons in possession of large quantities of drugs, CNB will continue to conduct thorough investigations to determine if the drugs were meant for trafficking, their own consumption or otherwise. Depending on the facts of the case, CNB will make its recommendations to Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) on the appropriate charges, for example, whether for trafficking or simply possession. The amendments to the punishment framework do not affect this investigation and prosecution process and will only affect the eventual sentence faced by a person who is convicted of a possession offence.

The Bill will also make some technical amendments.

The current definition of "article liable to seizure" in section 2 includes any money, thing, controlled equipment, controlled material, or anything that contains evidence of an offence. This may not apply intuitively to things that "constitute" and do not "contain" evidence of an offence, like jewellery. Clause 2 amends the definition to include the word "constitute". This will align with the language used for a similar provision relating to seizure of evidence in the Criminal Procedure Code 2010, or CPC.

Next, section 11 of the MDA makes it an offence for an owner, tenant, occupier or person in charge of any place or premises to permit that place to be used for drug consumption or trafficking. Clause 3 amends section 11 to clarify that such a person only commits an offence if the drug consumption mentioned in section 11(a) is in contravention of section 8(b) for being unauthorised, which constitutes the drug consumption offence.

Next, section 11C criminalises introducing a person whom he knows is a drug trafficker to another person. Clause 5 amends section 11C to clarify that a person, A, only commits a section 11C offence if A knows or has reason to believe that B intends to procure a controlled drug and the possession of the controlled drug by B or any person B passes it to, would not be authorised under the Act.

Likewise, person A would only be liable for the section 11C offence if he knows or has reason to believe that B intends, without any authorisation under the Act, to smoke, administer or consume the controlled drug.

To illustrate, if someone offers to introduce his friend to a person whom he knows is a drug trafficker, he will only be liable for a section 11C offence if he knows or believes that this friend intends to buy drugs from this trafficker for unauthorised consumption.

We will also make amendments to sections 24, 25 and 26 to clarify that an officer may make seizures based on reasonable suspicion. Clauses 16, 17 and 18 make these amendments respectively. The current sections 24, 25 and 26, if read literally, seem to suggest that CNB can only seize any drug, substance or article which is confirmed to be a controlled drug or substance, article liable to seizure, drug specified in the Fifth Schedule or substance containing any drug specified in that Schedule.

In practice, it is not possible for CNB to only seize such drugs, substances or articles after confirmation of their nature, since this can only be confirmed after the drug, substance or article has undergone scientific analysis, after seizure.

Likewise, section 24 suggests that officers can only seize or detain any vehicle which has been confirmed to be used in the commission of or in connection with an offence under the MDA. However, it is not always conclusive at first instance if a vehicle is linked to the offence and further investigations after seizure are often needed. So, these are operational matters, and we want to make it consistent and practical.

These amendments align the position in the MDA with the powers of investigation provided for under the CPC that are conferred on CNB officers when investigating drug offences, which enables seizure based on suspicion.

Another set of amendments pertains to the provisions concerning drug abusers charged under the Singapore Armed Forces Act 1972, or the SAF Act. These amendments aim to clarify the policy intent for provisions in the MDA concerning enhanced punishments and supervision for drug abusers convicted under the SAF Act and improve consistency between both regimes.

Currently, SAF servicemen caught for drug consumption may be charged under section 26 of the SAF Act or section 34 of the SAF Act. Section 34 of the SAF Act may also be used to charge SAF servicemen for drug possession.

Clause 25 amends section 33 of the MDA to clarify that only previous convictions for drug consumption under section 34 of the SAF Act and not for drug possession, will count towards enhanced punishment for drug consumption under the MDA.

Similarly, clause 26 clarifies that only antecedents for drug consumption under section 34 of the SAF Act will count towards long-term imprisonment under section 33A of the MDA for the repeat consumption of specified drugs.

Separately, section 58(1)(q) currently allows the Minister for Home Affairs to make regulations in respect of the supervision and aftercare of persons convicted of an offence under section 34 of the SAF Act. However, there is no similar provision for the Minister to make regulations in respect of persons convicted of an offence under section 26 of the SAF Act. Clause 30 amends section 58(1)(q) to include those convicted under section 26 of the SAF Act for drug consumption.

Since there is a separate rehabilitation regime implemented by the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) for drug abusers convicted under section 26 of the SAF Act, such offenders would generally not be placed under CNB's supervision. Nonetheless, this amendment will enable the making of regulations to provide CNB with the discretion to do so on a case-by-case basis if both CNB and MINDEF assess that the individual would benefit from undergoing CNB's supervision regime in addition to MINDEF's.

Section 58(1)(q) is further amended to make clear that Minister's powers to make regulations providing for the supervision and aftercare of persons convicted under section 34 of the SAF Act relate only to those convicted under the section for drug consumption and not for drug possession.

We will also make amendments to broaden the scope of the recall provision under section 31(1A) of the MDA. Currently, section 31(1A) allows the Director of CNB to recall any former drug abuser to report for a urine test, throughout the person's life, to ensure that the person is no longer a drug addict. Clause 21 amends the definition of "relevant person" and "relevant time" in section 31 to include persons convicted under section 26 of the SAF Act for the consumption of a controlled drug or psychoactive substance.

We will also amend section 31 so that a person who has been convicted under section 34 of the SAF Act for an offence involving consumption of a controlled drug or psychoactive substance can be subjected to the recall provision, even if he had not previously undergone CNB's supervision. In short, with these amendments, the Director of CNB will be able to recall and subject any person who has been convicted for drug consumption under the SAF Act to a urine test. Mr Speaker, please allow me to speak in Malay.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Mr Speaker, the proposed amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act, or MDA, will help us to stay ahead of the changing drug landscape.

There are two key amendments.

First, we will be changing the approach toward controlling psychoactive substances, so that we can act quicker against them.

Second, we will increase the punishment for possession of large quantities of selected controlled drugs.

Let me first speak on New Psychoactive Substances, or NPS.

NPS are a challenge to law enforcement agencies around the world, as drug syndicates are able to quickly alter the molecular structure of NPS to create new variants and hence evade the law.

Currently, we manage NPS in the following ways.

Once we detect an NPS, we will list its molecular structure in the Fifth Schedule of the MDA. The MDA allows for such listing up to a year. During this one-year period, the Central Narcotics Bureau, CNB, can seize the substance to prevent its proliferation. CNB will use this time to conduct industry consultations to determine if the substance has any legitimate uses. During this one year period, CNB cannot take any prosecutorial action against a person trafficking in the substance.

If there are no legitimate uses, the molecular structure of this substance will subsequently be listed in the First Schedule to the MDA as a controlled drug. Only when it is listed in the First Schedule, can a person who is found trafficking, manufacturing, importing, exporting or possessing such NPS, be prosecuted.

The failing of the current approach is that we will always be playing catch-up with the syndicates. The ease in modifying the molecular structure of NPS to create new variants means that traffickers can easily overcome our laws by switching to new, unlisted NPS. Indeed, drug suppliers are known to tailor the molecular structure of NPS according to what is not yet controlled through legislation.

Hence, we are proposing a new legislative framework to deal with the NPS threat based on their capacity to produce a psychoactive effect, rather than their molecular structure. This allows CNB to take enforcement action against potentially dangerous and potent NPS, and not have to wait until their molecular structure has been identified and listed in the MDA.

The second key amendment is to increase and tier punishments for possessing large quantities of selected controlled drugs.

The new punishment framework will apply to morphine, diamorphine, opium, cocaine, cannabis, cannabis resin, cannabis mixture and methamphetamine. These are drugs which we assess to be the most dangerous and harmful in Singapore's context.

With these changes to our laws, we can be more effective in our fight against drugs, and in keeping our society free from drugs.

(In English): In addition to the amendment related to treatment and rehabilitation for abusers of psychoactive substances, there are two other amendments to the Constitution made through the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill.

Technical amendments are made to clauses (4) and (6)(b) of Article 46, replacing the word "leave" with "permission". This is consistent with the same amendment made in other Acts by the Courts (Civil and Criminal Justice) Reform Act 2021. There is no change to the meaning of the provisions.

Secondly, an amendment is proposed to introduce a legal mechanism to reduce the balance of the Contingencies Fund. Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had, during the Budget Statement in February, said that the Government will introduce a mechanism to reduce the balance of the Contingencies Funds. The objective is to maintain discipline in how the Government manages its finances.

Currently, there is a combined balance of \$16 billion in the Contingencies Funds. In May 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, MOF raised the Contingencies Funds balance from \$3 billion to \$16 billion to enable the Government to meet urgent and unforeseen spending needs arising from the fast-evolving pandemic. This was done by appropriating moneys from the Consolidated Fund through the Second Supplementary Supply (FY2020) Bill.

However, there is no legal mechanism today to effect a reduction of the balances to ensure fiscal discipline as we return to normalcy.

Clause 4 of the Bill amends Article 148C to permit the Finance Minister to reduce the balance of a Contingencies Fund, if he is satisfied, after proper inquiry, that the sum to be withdrawn from the Fund is in excess of what is likely necessary to meet an urgent and unforeseen need for expenditure.

The Minister is also required to present to Parliament a report of every reduction as soon as practicable after it is made. This will keep Members informed of the balance of the Contingencies Funds.

The transfer of sums from a Contingencies Fund to the Consolidated or Development Fund does not provide the Government with additional budget for spending. The Government will need to run a balanced Budget over its term. Any expenditure from the Consolidated Fund or Development Fund must be met by revenues raised and included in a Supply Bill that is presented to Parliament for approval. Such spending remains subject to the Reserves Protection Framework.

As we return to normalcy following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is timely and prudent to reduce the Contingencies Funds balance. The amendments proposed in this Bill will provide the mechanism for us to do so and ensures greater fiscal discipline while preserving the nimbleness to deal with urgent and unforeseen needs. After the Bill is passed, MOF intends to reduce the Contingencies Funds balance from \$16 billion to \$6 billion and will submit a report to Parliament when that transfer has been made. Mr Speaker, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Mr Speaker: Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim.

5.09 pm

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang): Mr Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of these amendment Bills.

Sir, I will be focusing my speech on two areas, maintaining vigilance by keeping up to date with new psychoactive substances (NPS), taking a tougher stance for large amounts of drugs in possession and to protect vulnerable groups.

NPS have become a global phenomenon with 139 countries according to the UNODC. As at December 2022, more than 1,182 substances have been reported. NPS are just as addictive and mimic the effects of controlled substances such as cannabis, cocaine and heroin.

NPS is proliferating at an unprecedented rate and poses a challenge for law enforcement worldwide. According to the UNODC Commission on Narcotic Drugs, "[T]he largest number of [NPS] are spread across three regions: Asia, Europe and North America."

In Singapore, there has been an increase in the number of NPS abusers arrested, from average of three per year in the 2014 to 2017 period to 235 per year in the 2018 to 2022 period. NPS are one of the three most abused types of drugs since 2018 and NPS overtook cannabis in 2019 as the second-most commonly abused type of drugs among new abusers.

Listing NPS as controlled drugs is a challenge in all jurisdictions because we need to keep up with the fast pace of development of NPS. In order for the substances to be listed in the First Schedule of the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), the relevant scientific analysis on the chemical structure and necessary industry consultations have to be done to determine whether or not there is a legitimate use for such substances and if there is no such legitimate use, the NPS will be listed. This means that during the interim period when the NPS is unlisted, enforcement and prosecutorial actions cannot be taken against those who deal in those substances.

Moreover, the lag time allows NPS manufacturers time to develop alternative substances or deliberately alter the chemical structures to circumvent our drug control legislation. We thus need our legislation to be flexible enough to adapt to NPS in a timely manner. Hence, I welcome the proposed framework which will regulate such substances based on their capacity to produce a psychoactive effect rather than its chemical structure.

I do have two clarifications: one, on the defence for legitimate use; second, the other on the presumptions of possession and knowledge of NPS.

The Bill provides a defence if the psychoactive substance is intended to be used for a legitimate purpose other than for human consumption. Under the new sections 11F to 11P, the person must have the intention or reasons to believe such a legitimate purpose in various scenarios including where an accused believed that the other party had intended to manufacture the psychoactive substance for a legitimate purpose.

May I ask what are the current or future plans of the Ministry and CNB working in concert with other agencies to regulate the use or manufacture of psychoactive substances for research, teaching or other legitimate use with reference to accepted standards and expectations? For instance, a person who breaches such regulations or falls short of certain standards should not be allowed to avail himself of this defence of legitimate purpose.

Next, on presumptions. A person who has control or custody of anything containing psychoactive substances or keys to a place where such psychoactive substances are found under the new section 18A will be presumed to have had those psychoactive substances in his or her possession.

This then triggers separate presumptions of knowledge in the new section 18A(2) read with the new section 22B, namely two separate presumptions: firstly, that person is presumed to have known that the substance has the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on an individual if consumed and secondly, the person is presumed as not believing nor having any reason to believe that the psychoactive substance is an excluded substance. These are two separate presumptions of knowledge based on an initial presumption of possession.

Hence, may I ask what are the safeguards in place to protect innocent landlords or organisations running shelters from being prosecuted under these presumptions of these sections? What due diligence is one expected to do and conduct in such circumstances? Sir, in Malay, please.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] New Psychoactive Substances have become widespread all over the world and they mimic the effects of drugs such as marijuana, opium and heroin. NPS poses new challenges for us. Due to its variable chemical structure, detecting NPS becomes increasingly difficult.

In Singapore, the number of NPS drug users has increased. This legislative framework updates the list of NPS and how new NPS can be detected in the future.

Apart from NPS, drugs such as marijuana and methamphetamine are dangerous and threaten the peace and security of our society. 15 grams of diamorphine alone is enough to satisfy the addiction of 180 people for a week. Imagine how many families and children will be affected by one case alone.

We must always be vigilant and determined in eradicating drugs in our society.

(In English): Sir, I welcome this Bill's proposed increased punishments, including caning, for the possession of selected controlled drugs above certain weight thresholds. This toughens our stance against drug abuse and makes clear the already tough sentencing guidelines laid down by our courts since the case of Lai Teck Guan by Chief Justice Menon.

The sentencing must be commensurate to the harm that a large quantities of drugs that they pose.

Some may argue that weight of a drug alone is not an accurate factor to determine the level of harm posed, and one should refer to the potency of addiction instead. However until and unless there is a reliable technology to determine such potency accurately and independently, weight remains a useful barometer.

This tough stance against drugs is needed to protect the vulnerable groups in our society.

Recently, last month, it was reported that CNB arrested a 32-year-old woman for drug offences. She was with her two-month-old infant. In June last year, a nine-month-old baby was found with his drug abuser mother in dire living conditions. CNB officers providef childcare necessities and milk powder for the baby. These are sad and tragic cases, and I am glad that Singapore adopts a strong stance to protect our vulnerable groups and, hopefully, prevent such cases in future.

The new section 11N sends such a signal. It makes it an offence for exposing a child to any psychoactive substance or paraphernalia. I agree with this.

Sir, another major concern is the softening attitudes among the young towards drugs in particular, cannabis, including the prevalence of drug abuse depiction in popular culture. According to CNB, 26% of all drug abusers arrested were below 30 years old. Out of all the new abusers arrested, half of them were aged below 30. The number of youth abusers below 20 years old caught abusing cannabis has also increased threefold since 2021.

This Bill makes it a specific offence for anyone causing or procuring a young person to commit any offence relating to psychoactive substances, under the new section 11Q. This is the correct move to make.

In addition, we need to be wary of the prevalence of the vaping culture trend worldwide.

While nicotine is commonly consumed through vaping, these cigarettes can also be used as a way to deliver other controlled drugs, such as methamphetamine and heroin. In fact, vaping has become a common way of inhaling cannabis. In Canada, 29% of cannabis-using individuals aged 15 years and older indicated that vaping is their preferred method for cannabis use. There is a strong link and risk between vaping use and drug abuse.

Although it is already illegal here, we need to step up on enforcement and education on the harms of vaping. Vaping instruments also come in various shapes and forms. Some are even small and discrete, making it difficult to detect.

Hence, can the Minister of State please share the strategy and actions that MHA will be taking in concert with HSA or other agencies against vaping?

Sir, in closing, I would like to share a story about a young professional I knew who unfortunately fell into drugs after a bout of personal difficulties and mental health issues. He was introduced to drugs by people who knew of his precarious emotional state and took advantage of him to lure him into addiction. Once hooked, he had to pay through his nose sometimes four or five times higher than the drug's street value in order to avoid being detected or recognised. He has since served his time and rehabilitated himself. He now volunteers in the Anti-Drug Abuse Advocacy A3 Network with NCADA and CNB. As a young and successful professional, he may not fit the mould of a stereotypical drug abuser.

His story shows that our fight against drug abuse must be made on behalf of every segment of our society – our youth, our children, our workers – and we face battlefronts everywhere – our schools, our workplaces, our homes.

Drug traffickers drive addiction to feed their greed for profits at the expense of families and communities. They will continue to introduce new drugs and new ways to circumvent our laws and influence our people but just as they are relentless in their ways, we must similarly be tireless in our vigilance to protect the minds and safety of our people, steward the future and potential of our youths. In this fight against drugs, we cannot let them win. Sir, I support the Bills.

Mr Speaker: Ms Sylvia Lim.

5.22 pm

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied): Mr Speaker, I will first speak on the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill before moving on to the Constitution.

Sir, the MDA Bill has two purposes – first, to regulate psychoactive substances, and second, to increase the punishments for possession of larger quantities of certain controlled drugs. I shall touch on both these areas.

First, on new psychoactive substances

Sir, the Workers' Party is aware of the increasing threat posed by new psychoactive substances (NPS). There has been rapid development of new synthetic substances with narcotic or psychotropic effects. These effects are reportedly similar to those of drugs such as cocaine and cannabis. Most of these substances also carry a risk of addiction.

As these new substances may fall outside the ambit of existing drug laws, those taking them are able to get “legal highs”, which accounts for their demand. There is a vast array of new substances, with some more harmful than others. To assist governments to decide which substances to regulate, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has been sharing toxicology information with laboratories and governments, highlighting the substances deemed more harmful to individual and social health.

Sir, we have had decades of experience with the abuse of controlled drugs. We have seen families whose lives have been upended by drug addiction, with cross-generational effects such as absent parents and young children growing up in institutional care. We owe it to Singaporeans to minimise such scenarios.

In view of the evidence of the harms caused by NPS, the Workers' Party supports the rationale for regulating NPS in Singapore. This includes providing a regime for the supervision, treatment and rehabilitation of NPS abusers, without charging them in court.

That said, I would like to seek two clarifications on the new framework to regulate NPS.

First, a question on NPS coverage. Out of the thousands of psychoactive substances, how will the Ministry decide which ones to regulate? Besides the UNODC advice, are there other forms of reference? Do we have our own scientific analyses?

My second query relates to the listing of NPS as controlled drugs. NPS are currently listed in the First Schedule to the Act. The Minister of State earlier stated the Ministry's concern that due to the rapid emergence of new substances, there will be a time lag of about one year before these substances are listed as prohibited. During this interim, law enforcement and prosecution agencies are currently powerless to act.

Hence, the Ministry is introducing this Bill to enable agencies to act on a more general definition of what counts as a psychoactive substance.

Can the Ministry confirm that it is the intention to list every NPS of interest in the First Schedule to the MDA? Put another way, how will we handle cases where someone is investigated for an NPS offence, based on the general broad definition, but the substance concerned is eventually found after industry consultation to have a legitimate use?

It is good for the Minister of State to explain this because I think earlier in his Second Reading speech, he mentioned that if such a legitimate use were to be determined, then such a substance would not be listed in the Schedule to the Act. So, some clarity on this would be quite necessary.

Next, I move to the second thrust of the Bill to increase the punishments for unauthorised possession of larger quantities of certain controlled drugs. There are eight drugs in question: cannabis, cannabis mixture, cannabis resin, cocaine, diamorphine, methamphetamine, morphine and opium.

As to why this change is being tabled, the Ministry has stated that the Central Narcotics Bureau have observed that abusers were purchasing larger quantities of drugs, which would have “significantly contributed to the local drug demand situation”.

These amendments deal with drug possession. The changes will separate the punishments into three tiers, depending on the weight of the drugs. For the lowest tier of weight, no change to the punishment is being made. For the middle and upper tiers, the punishments are being enhanced.

In trying to make sense of this, I studied the changes relating to possession of diamorphine or heroin. I note that under the existing law, there is a presumption that a person is a drug trafficker once he is in possession of more than two grammes of diamorphine. In this Bill, the lowest tier of punishment for diamorphine cuts off at a maximum of 10 grammes, much higher than two grammes. No change in punishment for this tier is being proposed. As for middle tier, the cut off weight is set at between 10 to 15 grammes, while the upper tier is set at more than 15 grammes. It is worth noting that under the current law, trafficking in more than 15 grammes attracts the death penalty. For these two higher tiers, the punishments for possession are being increased.

It is important for the Ministry to justify these increases and elaborate on the local drug demand situation. Further, would it be correct to infer that these changes are actually targeted at cases where the suspects are charged with trafficking, but the trafficking charges somewhat fail in court?

Sir, before I end on the MDA Bill, I would like to make a general observation. Our strict anti-drug policies have broad-based support among Singaporeans, especially those who have lived through the earlier years when heroin and opium destroyed many families. However, there appears to be a desire in some segments of the population for a more nuanced approach, especially towards younger people who are influenced by peers to try drugs. It is not an approach I would advocate. But it will be important to engage with such sentiments.

I believe the Member Mr Zhulkarnain made a similar point earlier.

I now move to the Constitution (Amendment) Bill. There are two substantive amendments. Clause 2 concerns the amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act, while clause 4 seeks to plug what the Finance Ministry sees as a gap in the law.

As regards clause 2, as mentioned earlier, the Workers' Party supports the rationale for tackling NPS. The MDA Bill envisaged a supervision, treatment and rehabilitation regime, that may involve the detention of individuals without a court conviction.

Sir, we are always wary of any laws that enable arrest and detention without a court process. Nevertheless, in this specific circumstance, we are able to support the amendment to Article 9 to give effect to the treatment regime for NPS misuse.

I now move on to clause 4 of the Bill. This is an amendment to Article 148C concerning the powers of the Finance Minister to make transfers between the Consolidated Fund and its Contingencies Fund, and between the Development Fund and its Contingencies Fund.

During the Budget debate this year, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong reminded the House that in May 2020, the Government had raised the Contingencies Funds balance from \$3 billion to \$16 billion in anticipation of needing unforeseen and urgent cashflow due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that with the return to normalcy, he wished to reduce the balance of the Contingencies Funds from \$16 billion to \$6 billion. He assessed that this would ensure adequate resources for exigencies, while retaining discipline in how our finances were managed. He then highlighted that this Constitutional amendment was needed, as there was currently no mechanism for a reduction of the balances of the Contingencies Funds.

There are two new sub-articles being introduced to Article 148(c).

The proposed sub-Article 5 will enable the Minister for Finance to make transfers out of the Contingencies Funds back to the Consolidated Fund and Development Fund respectively. This will be allowed if the Minister, after proper inquiry, is satisfied that the sum to be transferred back is an excess of what is likely necessary to meet an urgent and unforeseen need from that Contingencies Fund.

As to how Parliament will be involved in this process, the proposed sub-Article 6 will require the Minister to present a report of every transfer as soon as practicable after the transfer is made.

Logically, there is no reason for us to object to a transfer back of the sums to the Consolidated Fund and Development Fund if these are assessed to be no longer needed for contingencies. Nevertheless, it is useful for the Minister to clarify the role of Parliament in this process.

In the May 2020 debate on the Fortitude Budget, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat had explained the role of Parliament when it came to drawing on the balance in the Contingencies Funds. He highlighted that any amount advanced by the Minister for Finance to meet urgent expenditure would thereafter be included in a Supplementary Supply Bill or Final Supply Bill, which would be presented to and voted on by Parliament as soon as practicable.

This is an important process as Parliament is briefed on the items being spent on and will vote on whether to pass the Bills or not.

In today's Constitution amendment Bill, we are dealing with a situation where excess monies parked in the Contingencies Funds are being returned to their parent funds. As the reductions in the balances will also require a reporting to Parliament, will the Minister explain what form this reporting will take, such as what information will be provided and how Members can participate in this process?

Mr Speaker: Mr Louis Ng.

5.31 pm

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon): This Bill will introduce a framework to control novel psychoactive substances (NPS).

Manufacturers of NPS circumvent the existing legal framework by altering the chemical structure of the substances. This results in new substances that have the same effect as illicit drugs but are now not regulated under misuse of drugs laws.

This Bill will allow us to regulate NPS in a nimble way by controlling substances based on their ability to produce psychoactive effects rather than on their chemical structures.

I have three sets of clarifications.

My first point is on excluded substances. To prove that a substance is a psychoactive substance under the new section 22A, the prosecution only has to prove that a product has the capacity to produce a psychoactive effect. The burden is then on the individual to prove that the psychoactive substance is an excluded substance on a balance of probabilities.

Excluded substances include alcohol, food, health products and herbal medicines.

Can the Minister of State clarify what exactly it is that the individual is required to prove? Is the individual required to prove that the substance is factually an excluded substance or is it sufficient for the individual to prove that they had reason to believe that the substance is an excluded substance?

My second point is on the new provisions of "stacked" presumptions. "Stacked" presumptions occur where proof of a single element triggers multiple presumptions. One example of this is section 18A. If an individual has the keys to a place where a psychoactive substance is found, the individual is presumed to have possession of the psychoactive substance. If the individual is presumed to have possession, the individual is also presumed to have known that the psychoactive substance has the capacity to produce a psychoactive effect. The individual is also presumed to not believe that the psychoactive substance is an excluded substance.

Furthermore, the presumptions are not rebutted by proof that the accused never had physical possession of the psychoactive substance. Such stacked presumptions are not new under the Misuse of Drugs Act. However, they are still concerning because they challenge the traditional position that the prosecution must prove every element of the offence beyond reasonable doubt. Stacked presumptions may be even more concerning when applied to NPS, which covers non-exhaustive categories of substances. Can the Minister of State clarify what would be required to rebut stacked presumptions?

My third and final point is on the enforcement of our drug laws through drug raids. I am glad that we have strong drug laws and that these laws are enforced robustly. However, innocent children may be implicated when their parents are caught up in drug raids. These drug raids can be traumatising for the children.

Will the Ministry work with MSF and the relevant social service agencies before and after a drug raid to ensure that the children in these situations are cared for appropriately? The next generation should not be punished or traumatised because of the wrongs of the previous generation.

Sir, notwithstanding these clarifications, I stand in support of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Mr Christopher de Souza.

5.35 pm

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah): Mr Speaker, I rise in support of this Bill seeking to amend the MDA.

Despite the challenges with taking such a strong stance on drugs, I have always held to my strong conviction that this is the best way to protect Singapore and protect families.

I have spoken before of our continuing need to review our MDA to tackle new and emerging threats, particularly new psychoactive substances (NPS) because of how fast such substances evolve and arrive on our shores. So, I am greatly heartened to see the Ministry grabbing the bull by its horns and pre-emptively creating this new regime and statutory framework to regulate psychoactive substances.

The threat that NPS pose cannot be underestimated – and I speak not just about the situation in Singapore but globally, because drugs are a transnational issue that we must collectively combat.

The number of NPS internationally far exceeds the number of controlled psychoactive substances by almost three times. That is because a simple modification to the chemical structure can result in a new variant.

In the 2022 report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it was recorded that there were 1,150 identified NPS across 134 countries, with 50 new ones being recorded since the year before.

The report detailed the global increase in countries reporting seizures of synthetic NPS, indicating a far greater geographical spread of trafficking. In 2009 to 2010, only 30 countries were reporting seizures of synthetic NPS. By 2019 to 2020, that number had increased to 57 countries – a jump from 18% of countries reporting to 41% of countries reporting.

Not only do NPS evolve rapidly, Asia accounts for a large percentage of the NPS being trafficked.

In particular, the largest quantities of synthetic NPS seized is ketamine, with a lot of the seizures happening in East and Southeast Asia, in countries like Malaysia, Thailand and China.

While the market for ketamine for non-medical use seems to have decreased in China, there has been a trend of expansion of the ketamine market since 2015 in the rest of Southeast Asia. Plant-based NPS like kratom and khat have also been proliferating with more countries reporting seizure, and the largest seizures for kratom has been in Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar.

These are but some of the most seized NPS, but there are many more also used and likely on the rise. Indonesia has seen a sharp increase in seizures of domestically manufactured synthetic cannabinoids and what is known as "gorilla tobacco". The global and regional situation is reflected in Singapore, where NPS are the third most commonly abused drug and there is a sharp increase in seizures of synthetic cannabinoids over the last five years.

This prevalence is highly concerning, especially so because the global trend is that NPS use is about 2.2% higher among school populations than the general population. In addition, NPS cause just as much harm as other drugs, with physical and psychological reactions, such as paranoia, seizures, hallucinations and even death.

Mr Speaker, I, therefore, strongly support the new regime that has been proposed to tackle NPS. It continues the Ministry of Home Affairs' and CNB's long-standing efforts to combat the rise of NPS.

In 2010, we first listed three NPS under MDA. In 2013, we introduced a more generic listing approach, given the chemical similarity between different NPS. Finally, in 2021, we had listed another 13 NPS and a further 13 more in 2022 as controlled drugs, in addition to the 12 generic groups.

So, we have continued to look at our statutory provisions and considered how we may best strengthen them to protect against any tolerance of NPS.

The amendment Bill then is a welcome addition and I applaud MHA and CNB for their work.

With Part 2 specifically listing out offences relating to NPS, we are able to target the trafficking, manufacturing and importing of NPS. Importantly, this includes offences of exposing a child to NPS or permitting a young person to consume NPS.

I also support the change in the Fifth Schedule. By listing what substances are excluded from the definition of an NPS, it creates a much broader ambit since now any substance not listed within the Fifth Schedule can be captured. This squarely deals with the proliferation of NPS variants such that MDA need not be constantly updated, which would be too lengthy a process and ill-equipped to handle the fast-paced nature of the NPS market.

In relation to that, clause 32 of the amendment Bill seeking to enhance the Minister's ability to amend the Schedule under section 59 will reflect this pre-emptive regime we are putting in place to tackle NPS.

Mr Speaker, even as we debate this amendment to strengthen our laws against NPS, I strongly believe our other pillar of rehabilitation in our policy against drugs is equally important.

We must recognise that NPS is a growing market and today's amendment Bill reflects that. But we should also place keen emphasis on rehabilitation so that we build a stronger social compact of individuals who have no desire for any sort of substance.

Earlier, I mentioned the trend of NPS being particularly attractive to the younger generation. I think we have to carefully monitor that because one in four drug abusers locally is under 30 years of age and that includes more than 50% of new abusers. Therefore, the crucial role of rehabilitation in integrating those who have fallen afoul of our drug laws back into society by giving them second chances.

This is done through programmes for the public or education institutions to interact with former offenders and increasing their employability.

At the end of the day, a former drug abuser has to not only leave a physical prison but break out of a social prison in order to reintegrate. Lowering these invisible bars of prejudice and suspicion and providing them opportunities to be mentored will allow young drug abusers to transform and overcome their rough start.

Mr Speaker, this amendment Bill equips our legislation well with the necessary toughness yet flexibility to deal with NPS. It provides for future flexibility to continue to evolve quickly to changes in the illicit NPS market. For all these reasons, I support the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Ms Joan Pereira.

5.45 pm

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar): Mr Speaker, Sir, with the trend of more new types of drugs produced, trafficked and sold in increasing quantities, it is important that we increase the penalties for drug offenders to act as an effective deterrent.

However, such deterrence alone is not sufficient, as we can still see these activities going on with impudence despite the harsh penalties. We will also need to consider how we can successfully flush out such syndicates operating in the region and their distribution channels into Singapore.

This is not easy as many of the syndicates are based overseas and their masterminds are also not within our jurisdiction. I hope that we can have even closer cooperation with our bilateral counterparts, such as the various platforms within ASEAN that deal specifically with this issue, including the Meetings of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD).

The UN had repeatedly appealed to governments, especially those in Asia, to consider the problem of the abuse of and trafficking in amphetamine-type stimulants in their entirety, including their prevalence and the reasons why more youths in the region are turning to the abuse of methamphetamine. This problem is a regional issue and every country has a part to play in slowing down this drug epidemic. Are there regional information sharing partnerships that can be enhanced? Can Singapore play a role in committing some resources to such efforts?

There are also shifting attitudes among governments in the region towards drugs, including some showing more tolerance or even acceptance of recreational uses for selected types of drugs like cannabis. This will invariably undermine existing efforts as the attitudes of youths in the region towards drugs will also shift.

With the advent of new psychoactive substances (NPS), we are not simply saddled with a drug issue, but it also translates into community mental health issues. Studies have also shown that substance abuse and mental health issues are often co-occurring disorders and abusers require longer-term support, treatment and guidance in order to have a better chance at rehabilitation. Therefore, can I request for more comprehensive and longer-term mental health resources and support for drug abusers who have gone through rehabilitation? Sir, in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] With the advent of new psychoactive substances (NPS), we are not simply saddled with a drug issue, but it also translates into community mental health issues. Studies have shown that substance abuse and mental health issues are often co-occurring disorders, and abusers require long-term support, treatment and guidance in order to have a better chance at rehabilitation. Therefore, can I request for more comprehensive and longer-term mental health resources and support for drug abusers who have gone through rehabilitation?

(In English): I support the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Mr Derrick Goh.

5.49 pm

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon): Sir, Singapore has been steadfast in its zero-tolerance approach towards drugs. This contrasts with the increasingly softer approach taken by more and more countries globally and in the region, including our neighbors in ASEAN, where Thailand has decriminalised and legalised cannabis. Media reports have highlighted that Malaysia is also aiming to learn from Thailand's cannabis policy.

I read the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime or UNODC report in June 2022. What drew my attention was that the legalisation of cannabis in North America had led to increased tax revenues and fewer arrests. What was even alarming for me was that cannabis use, particularly by the young, increased and co-related with psychiatric disorders, suicides and hospitalisation. It appears that they have traded short-term gains for negative longer-term impact on their society.

This is a path we cannot afford to take. So, I am heartened by MHA's commitment to ensure our drug policies are robust and relevant to deal with evolving trends, such as the advent of new psychoactive substances or NPS, especially given the reopening of borders and the rebound of overseas travel.

That said, I seek several clarifications.

Firstly, the Bill seeks to criminalise dealing and consumption of NPS unless they are listed in the re-enacted Fifth Schedule as having legitimate uses or controlled under other regulatory frameworks. Given that NPSs are inherently new, can Minister share what safeguards are in place to ensure that any newly discovered NPS is thoroughly examined before its inclusion or exclusion in the Fifth Schedule?

I raised this as Singapore adopts an evidence-based approach and has allowed the use of cannabis-derived medication in exceptional cases of drug-resistant epilepsy. There have also been efforts to develop synthetic cannabinoids for medical use. Therefore, I seek Minister's explanation on the robustness and frequency of review of the First and Fifth Schedules, to ensure both remain updated so that our drug control approach impede our scientific and medical research initiatives yet did not play catch-up with the ever-evolving drug variants.

Next, the Bill provides for an accused to be able to invoke a defence by proving that he/she intended or believed that the psychoactive substance would be used for a legitimate purpose, other than for human consumption. Notwithstanding that the burden of proof is on the defendant, can Minister clarify if and/or how agencies' resources will be expended in the validation of such claims by accused persons in such a defence, as well as the safeguards against attempts to frustrate justice?

As with all policies, it is imperative for legislation to be coupled with effective implementation to achieve intended outcomes. So, beyond the Bill, what is equally important is to continue strengthening our agencies' detective and intervention capabilities against substance abuse.

On this note, I was glad to hear about the new saliva test kit for drugs, shared by Minister of State Faishal at MHA's Committee of Supply (COS) debate and its deployment at checkpoints and roadblocks. Can Minister clarify if the new saliva test kit can detect NPS consumption? If not, are there plans to explore having similar efficient testing methods for NPS, to enhance on-ground detection as well as deterrence?

In addition, a public that is aware of the harms of drugs and NPS remains our first line of defence. As such, I seek Minister's clarification on the plan to better equip and educate the public on NPS, like how to spot them, so that they too can notify enforcement agencies and amplify efforts to combat the scourge of new forms of drugs.

Lastly, Minister earlier shared statistics on the increased use of NPS. As a matter of record, can he also provide the equivalent number used by our youths related to NPS? These statistics and trends, I believe, may also assist the public engagement effort by driving home the message that NPS are posing a real and credible threat within our society.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill and its tabled amendments. They are necessary to keep Singapore crime rates low and help minimise the impact to the lives of Singaporeans that have been marred by drug abuse.

Mr Speaker: Ms Nadia Samdin.

5.54 pm

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio): Sir, I rise in support of the Bill. Liberal and conservative views towards drugs describe little about the underlying human condition that fuels the necessity of today's debate here in this Chambers, namely, addiction.

Regardless of society's personal attitudes and perspectives on drugs, addiction is a problem that needs societal attention going beyond punitive measures.

While we seek to tackle the supply side issues through this Bill, my suggestions are rooted in supplementing the punitive measures with programmes and rehabilitation that tackle the issue of demand fueled by addiction.

Clause 2(b) amends the definition of "drug addict" in section 2 to include a person who, through the use of any psychoactive substance, has developed a desire or need to continue to take that psychoactive substance or a psychological or physical dependence upon the effect of that psychoactive substance. The effect of this amendment is that a person who is addicted to a psychoactive substance maybe committed to supervision, treatment or rehabilitation under section 34. This is aligned with existing powers with respect to controlled drugs.

I remember a photograph and some headlines in June 2022, which said that a baby was found in a squalid flat close to his mother during a recent drug bust. It was reported that his mother was a user. I saw some of the online comments. While majority agreed that drugs are harmful and supported a drug-free Singapore, some went further to call the mother heartless, useless and condemned her, among other terms that I cannot reproduce here.

Most people saw first a mother who was irresponsible as she was a user. A few looked at the photograph with a slightly different lens and saw a user who was struggling with her addiction yet doing the best that she could to still be a mother. I do not know either mother or child. But hope that both are getting the support and care that they need.

If you cannot bond with society healthily because you are traumatised or beaten down by life, you may born with something else that gives you a sense of relief.

People who develop addictions are often looked at society as being a person that has developed a fatal character flaw. However, research has shown that addiction is a medical condition that is often linked to undesirable conditions that create the disposition in the very first place and has the propensity to develop in the absence of a healthy environment.

A classic study conducted on soldiers integrating back into society post-war in Vietnam by Lee and Robins followed soldiers who used heroin heavily during the war after they returned home. In order to track if that translated into lifelong addictions, the data in the study found that environmental and social factors had a core relative effect on the soldier's decision to continue to abuse drugs after coming back from the war. Soldiers who came back to families and support structures were less likely to abuse drugs.

In Singapore, drug addiction remains a complex issue having an adverse impact on individuals, families and society. Over the years, the Government has implemented a range of rehabilitation programmes. For example, in 2014, the enhanced drug rehabilitation regime (EDRR) was introduced for first- and second-time drug abusers. In 2019, the drug rehabilitation regime was further enhanced to commit third time and subsequent drug abusers who are not charged with any other criminal offences to DRC.

I hope we can continue to enhance our rehabilitative approaches, in particular, programmes need to take into account evolving research and the complex and evolving environmental circumstances of drug addicts in order to provide personalised support.

In our current rehabilitation programmes, such as programmes by the DRC, Community Rehabilitation Centre and the National Addictions Management Service, there is already significant detachment from a one-size-fit-all approach. I welcome this, taking into account the fact that each individual's experience with drugs and addiction is unique and as such, treatment should be tailored to their specific needs. For example, some may require more intensive counselling, some may benefit more from group therapy or medical interventions. This is salient as research has shown that the lack of personalised support results in a lower success rate for rehabilitation programmes.

I would like to ask if the Government is looking to support and scale initiatives that have proven their ability to offer more personal and cost-efficient support to drug addicts seeking to re-integrate with society? In addition, how does the Government seek to improve the efficiency of these support initiatives by pairing it with harm reduction strategies, like overdose prevention programmes and medication assisted treatment?

Further, the lack of sustained longer-term support may lead to an addict's relapse and disappointment by loved ones, ultimately straining relationships and exacerbating addiction. This will create a harmful cycle.

The guiding aim of what I have mentioned will be to provide individuals with the tools to reduce the harm associated with drug use, keeping them safe and consistent as they work towards recovery, as we know that change does not occur overnight.

According to statistics by CNB, drug abuse among our youth has declined since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is positive news as it suggests that despite the increased social stresses and anxieties brought about by the pandemic, illicit substances were not an avenue that youths turned to to seek relief.

However, Mr Sam Tee, the current director of CNB added in an interview in November 2021 that abuse among youths of certain substances is quickly returning to pre-pandemic levels. The correlation between mental health challenges and drug use cannot be understated. People self-medicate in an attempt to feel better and often end up exacerbating the symptoms of the very condition that they are trying to sooth.

Collaboration between schools, communities and youth networks may help the development of a "Spot, Identify and Intervene" framework that could prevent the development of addiction to substances. We must also recognise the aetiology of mental health issues, such as inadequate supervision, lack of consistency in home environments, frequent parent conflicts, domestic violence, etc. A child growing up in these circumstances will not solely be deterred by the proverbial stick.

Next, I applaud further measures to safeguard our young population from the dangers of drugs and NPS addictions.

In an effort to evade legal restrictions, drug manufacturers have resorted to synthesising substances that mimic the effects of conventional drugs. Moreover, the adolescent demographic may be particularly vulnerable to succumbing to peer pressure or experimenting with illicit substances due to a lack of awareness or understanding of trade-offs. Thus, provisions in part 2(A), such as section 11(n), 11(p) and 11(q) are appropriate.

Attempts to shield our youth from being exposed to drug-related information while important, also needs to be realistic. Information permeates through phones, and contradicting narratives and perspectives of drugs can easily be found online. It is helpful to communicate in commonly accepted direct narratives, rather than blanket statements. For example, substance addiction often leaves the addict in a place where they lose agency over their lives.

Efforts such as "Finding Juliana", a TikTok campaign by the National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) illustrate this point well. Titled "What's Your Fix?", the campaign sought to develop an understanding on how addictions develop, and employed social media apps, such as TikTok, to impart knowledge and encourage positive decision-making, rather than scaring our youths.

Also, we need to be proactive in our approach to help those who have not yet fallen prey to drug addiction but are still at risk. Previously, I have volunteered with younger girls in Reformatory Training Centres (RTCs) and often left prisons worrying about the conditions that they would meet post-release. Financial challenges and poor familial relations, as well as sometimes parents who were users themselves, I hope we can further study the issue of vulnerable youths and inter-generational addiction, so that effective and timely support can be extended to them.

According to the 2021 report on youth delinquency by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), youth offenders who have experienced adverse childhood experiences are more likely to engage in drug abuse at a younger age and with a greater dependency.

The report also highlighted that family disruptions are a significant factor hindering the social and emotional development of children and increasing the likelihood of substance abuse. As such, I urge this House to also prioritise strategies to support family cohesion and address the underlying issues that contribute to family disruptions, especially where parents are already users while we introduce these amendments to MDA.

To conclude, it is imperative that policies aimed at addressing misuse of substances continue to account for the multifaceted circumstances that contribute to this. It is only by taking a whole of society approach and effectively addressing both supply and demand for illicit substances, that we can protect our people from the pain and suffering cause by substance addictions. Sir, I support the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Minister Indranee Rajah.

6.04 pm

Ms Indranee Rajah: Mr Speaker, Sir, Ms Sylvia Lim had a couple of clarifications with respect to the amendment to the Constitution allowing the monies to be transferred from the Contingencies Fund back to the Consolidated Fund.

As Ms Lim rightly noted, logically, there is no reason to object, but she wanted to know the process. She felt that it would be useful for the Minister to clarify the role of Parliament in the process and what form it would take, and how Members can participate.

The transfer of funds, from the Contingencies Funds to the Consolidated Fund or Development Fund, does not involve the appropriation of funds for Government spending. They merely reflect how we classify the Government's resources for specified objectives, in accordance with the laws governing each fund, for the purposes of accounting and reporting.

As such, it does not need to be specifically voted upon when we are returning it, and therefore, informing Parliament is sufficient, given that Parliament initially authorised the top-up of the Contingencies Fund via the supply process.

So, in specific response to the question, the form it would take would be a Miscellaneous Paper from the Minister for Finance, which would be submitted to Parliament. I do not have the exact wording with me, but it will say something like "There will be a reduction of X dollars from Contingencies Fund returned to the Consolidated Fund", and Members can then, if they wish, ask Parliamentary Questions. That is the form that it would take.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps, Ms Sylvia Lim, we can take clarifications later. Minister of State Faishal Ibrahim.

6.06 pm

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Mr Speaker, I thank the Members for their support of the Bills. I would like to first address an issue raised by Mr Louis Ng on the use of presumptions in the MDA. As Mr Ng pointed out, the use of presumptions and the application of more than one presumption acting on the same set of facts, is not new under the MDA.

We should remember that the fundamental reason for the use of presumptions in drug offences is because the facts, which are bring presumed, are often exclusively within the accused persons' knowledge. In the example given by Mr Ng relating to having a key to a place, the presumption places the onus on the person found in possession of such a key to explain why he did not know the drugs were there, in spite of having the key to that particular place.

Where there is no presumption, the burden is generally placed on the prosecution to prove a fact. Our long experience in dealing with drug trafficking syndicates is that without legal tools, such as presumptions, drug traffickers will be able to evade legal responsibility by simply saying that they did not know the drugs were there or they did not know what they were carrying.

The drug mules in the past, and still today, are trained to say certain things upon arrest. CNB knows this. The prosecution, despite having proven that the drugs were in the accused persons' possession, are often not able to prove the accused person's knowledge of the drugs beyond a reasonable doubt, so long as he simply says that he did not know the nature of the drugs.

The presumptions have been in existence since the introduction of MDA in 1973 and they have worked well. Without them, we would not have been able to keep the drug trafficking situation in Singapore under control. We would also have otherwise only been able to punish people who came clean and confessed to the offences, while the guilty traffickers who lied to the authorities would go free.

I would add that there are other presumptions, which have also worked well for other offences, such as the presumption that a person, whose urine test is positive, is presumed to have consumed drugs. Legally, the presumptions can be rebutted, and historically, they have been rebutted many times.

Whether the presumption can be rebutted turns on whether the accused's account is to be believed or not. He cannot simply say he did not know or he did not care. The facts or evidence required to rebut the presumption would very much depend on the nature of the defence raised by the individual and a credibility of his account.

The issue of more than one presumption acting on the same set of facts has been raised in the past, because the presumptions in the MDA presume different facts. More than one presumption can be triggered in respect of one set of facts. For example, if an individual possesses the keys to anything containing a controlled drug, he can be presumed to have that drug in his possession and also presumed to know the nature of that drug.

However, the presumption cannot be used unfairly to prejudice the accused. For example, the presumptions of possession and knowledge cannot be invoked together with the presumption of trafficking, as these presumptions each serve a different function.

The Courts are careful to ensure that the burden on the accused is not so onerous, that it becomes virtually impossible to discharge. The Court of appeal has said that, notwithstanding the use of presumptions, innocent persons can prove their innocence without any difficulty, whilst guilty persons cannot avoid liability by merely asserting a lack of knowledge without more, therefore undermining the general policy of the MDA itself.

In fact, the Courts have also said that the MDA presumptions strike an appropriate balance between the rights of the accused persons on the one hand, and the rights of the persons in the wider society on the other, who would otherwise be adversely and directly infected by the availability of drugs on the open market.

Sir, turning to NPS specifically, while I understand Mr Ng's concern, it is incorrect to state that the application of the MDA presumptions is more concerning when applied to NPS. The presumptions operate in the same way, to presume facts that are especially within the accused's knowledge. In fact, the Bill contains specific defences for NPS that do not apply to traditional controlled drugs.

For example, it is a valid defence for an individual to prove that the psychoactive substance is an excluded substance or that he intended to use the psychoactive substance for a legitimate purpose other than human consumption. To address Mr Ng's related question on this, an individual who claims that the substance is an excluded substance can either prove factually that the substance is an excluded substance, or where the section 18A(2) presumption applies, prove that he believed and had reason to believe that the substance was an excluded substance.

These defences are not applicable to traditional controlled drugs. We believe our proposed approach straddles an appropriate balance between ensuring that those who are in possession of NPS for illegal purposes can be dealt with under the law, while at the same time, ensuring that those who are innocent can show this without an unfair burden on them.

On the same topic of presumptions, Mr Zulkarnain asked about the safeguards in place to protect innocent landlords. During the investigation, CNB will establish who was in the possession of the drugs and how the drugs came to be at a particular location.

Landlords who simply rent their premises to others have nothing to fear if they have given the tenants exclusive possession of the property. CNB or AGC do not simply prefer charges against people who own properties and rely on the presumptions to prove their case.

In any event, as we have controlled drugs under the current law, an innocent landlord can easily rebut the presumption of possession by proving on a balance of probabilities that the psychoactive substance was not in his possession. To do so, the innocent landlord could, for instance, point to the fact that a third-party occupier had full access and control over the property in question.

Alternatively, if the innocent landlord was in possession of the item, but did not know of its nature, he could then rebut the presumption of knowledge by, for example, explaining that he did not know that the item has a psychoactive effect when consumed.

To address Mr Zhulkarnain's point about there being two separate presumptions of knowledge based on an initial presumption of possession, I should clarify that the new section 18A(2) represents only one presumption of knowledge, namely, knowledge that a substance is, in fact, a psychoactive substance.

As I explained in my opening speech, the new section 22B provides that such knowledge comprises two elements – it is established if the person knew the substance had the capacity to have a psychoactive effect on an individual when consumed, and did not know or have reason to believe that the substance is an excluded substance.

So, I hope I have addressed all the issues about presumptions.

Next, I would like to thank Mr Derrick Goh, Ms Sylvia Lim and Mr Zhulkarnain for their questions on the new control regime for NPS.

As mentioned in my opening speech, with this new framework, all newly discovered psychoactive substances will be subject to the new legislative framework by default. CNB can take action against persons dealing with them unless the substance is excluded under the Fifth Schedule.

Specifically, to address Ms Sylvia Lim and Mr Derrick Goh's question on the processes undertaken by MHA before listing newly discovered substances under the First Schedule or Fifth Schedule of MDA, if a newly discovered psychoactive substance intended for abuse emerges in the local market or is identified for international control by UNODC, CNB will, indeed, seek to list it in the First Schedule of MDA.

Before listing, CNB will work with HTX and HSA to conduct rigorous testing and industry consultations to ascertain if the substance has legitimate purposes. If the substance is found not to have any legitimate uses, it will be listed as a controlled drug in the First Schedule. This is the same approach adopted currently for substances we list under the First Schedule.

For example, in June 2022, we listed a synthetic cannabinoid in the First Schedule after it was first detected in circulation in November 2021. This took approximately eight months for the necessary testing, verification and legislative amendments to be carried out.

For completeness, to answer Ms Sylvia Lim's question if MHA intends to eventually list all psychoactive substances that are found to have no legitimate uses and intended for abuse under the First Schedule, the answer is yes, we do. We hope for MDA to be as comprehensive in its coverage of these harmful substances.

If the new substance is found to have legitimate uses or is regulated under other existing laws or regulations, it will be listed under the Fifth Schedule as an excluded substance. The frequency of such listings will depend on the emergence of new substances in the market.

If a newly discovered substance is legitimately being used for scientific or medical research purposes and this can be proven with supporting evidence, such research activities would not constitute offences under the new regime.

If, as in Mr Zhulkarnain's example, a person is found to have failed to comply with the expected standards in the handling of a psychoactive substance for legitimate purposes, like for medical research, they will not be prosecuted under MDA. They may instead be taken to task by the relevant governing authority or Ministry.

To reiterate, the amendments are not meant to target legitimate substances or activities. Instead, it is aimed at psychoactive substances created for the purposes of abuse.

On Mr Derrick Goh's question of resources expended in verifying an accused person's defence that the NPS he is dealing with has legitimate uses, I wish to emphasise that the current provision specifies that the accused bears the burden of proving on a balance of probabilities that the substance, indeed, had legitimate uses other than for human consumption. It would not be for CNB or the prosecution to prove or disprove his claim. This would prevent persons from attempting to employ such a defence without sufficient basis.

Mr Derrick Goh also asked if the new saliva test kits can detect NPS. Presently, the test kits deployed by CNB cannot detect NPS. While there are commercially available test kits that can detect certain classes of NPS, this would not be exhaustive due to the sheer number and diversity of NPS. The test kits used by CNB are meant as a screening tool and are able to detect the key controlled drugs that are commonly abused in Singapore.

Nevertheless, CNB will continue to monitor NPS trends and, with advancements in technology, CNB will be able to assess the feasibility of deploying more comprehensive test kits that are capable of detecting more NPS in the future.

I cannot agree more with Mr Derrick Goh's point on the importance of preventive drug education and keeping the public informed of NPS trends.

Since the emergence of NPS abuse in Singapore, CNB has been proactively publishing informational brochures on NPS and their harms. CNB also engages the youth within schools and through those in positions of influence over youths, such as parents, counsellors, educators, youth advocates and National Service commanders, to educate them on NPS and their harms.

I would also caution that if anyone is unsure if he is in possession of a psychoactive substance, he should undertake reasonable means to find out what is the nature of and the intended purpose of the substance in question, for example, by asking the person who gave him the substance. If the person continues to be unsure, he should report this to CNB or the Police immediately.

Mr Derrick Goh asked about statistics of youths abusing NPS. In my opening speech, I provided NPS abuse numbers in the last five years. Mr Goh may wish to refer to the annual statistics release published by CNB that provides a more detailed profile of drug abusers arrested by drug type, including NPS.

We cannot afford to be caught on the backfoot and only take action when NPS abuse becomes pervasive in Singapore.

Ms Sylvia Lim asked whether the amendments to introduce a tiered punishment framework for the drug possession offence are targeted at cases where the persons are charged with trafficking but the trafficking charge fails in Court.

The short answer is no. The question of whether charges would be preferred for trafficking or for possession would be determined by the facts, as established by the investigations.

Ms Sylvia Lim also asked for further justifications on why we need to increase the penalties for possession. CNB has observed in recent years that drug syndicates are smuggling larger quantities of drugs per transaction. We are concerned that this may drive up demand locally and may cause downstream law and order issues. Hence, that is why we want to be proactive to deter local possession of large quantities of drugs.

Ms Joan Pereira rightly pointed out Singapore's vulnerability to the threat of drug trafficking due to its transnational nature and asked if regional information sharing partnerships can be enhanced and the role Singapore plays in committing some resources to such efforts.

CNB actively participates in international and regional efforts for information sharing and operations. For example, CNB is part of the ASEAN Airport and Seaport Interdiction Task Forces, which provide platforms for enforcement agencies to collaborate and interdict drug trafficking in the region. CNB also works closely with its overseas counterparts to share intelligence and this has resulted in significant arrests and seizures both locally and overseas over the past years.

In 2022, CNB also organised an inaugural workshop on Singapore's Drug Control Strategy for our international counterparts to contribute to their capacity building and promote cooperation.

Such cooperation has been crucial in helping to keep the threat of drugs at bay. Specifically for NPS, information sharing in the region has allowed countries to quickly list NPS for control once they have first been detected in one country.

So, this has been very helpful because we want to make sure that we protect everyone. Many countries would like to play a part in this and see how we can reduce the harms to the people and prevent such happenings occurring in our jurisdiction as well.

In fact, MHA and CNB plan to further their commitment to the international fight against drugs by seeking membership at the global Commission of Narcotic Drugs for the 2024 to 2027 term. This will allow us to have a bigger voice in shaping international drug control policies and sharing our best practices on a global stage.

Mr Louis Ng also asked whether MHA works with MSF and social service agencies to ensure that children of drug offending parents are cared for appropriately. I will not go into a detailed reply as this topic has been discussed in the House before. In gist, the answer is yes. There is currently a referral process between CNB and MSF. CNB officers can conduct early identification of family members at the scene of arrest and make the necessary referrals to MSF. Even if there remains a caregiver for the child after the arrest, CNB will still alert MSF as long as the child was at the scene of the arrest. This is something that we have been enhancing, deepening, and our relationship with our agencies has become much better, so that we are able to help more and more Singaporeans.

Mr Zhulkarnain asked what MHA is doing in concert with HSA and other Ministries to address vaping. This topic was discussed at MOH's Committee of Supply debate earlier this month. MHA works with MOH, MOE, HSA and other agencies through the National Committee on Prevention, Rehabilitation and Recidivism, NCPR in short, to tackle the problem of substance abuse, particularly amongst youths. This issue is something that we work together on and it is something that, if you look back at the history, we have been doing for many decades and we will continue to enhance this effort.

I would like to thank Mr Christopher de Souza for his strong support on the Bill and for raising very important issues relating to our drug policies. We share his passion and commitment and we are very happy to have someone like him journeying with us to keep Singapore drug-free.

While we strengthen our enforcement framework against drugs with these amendments, MHA is still committed to ensuring that drug abusers receive the rehabilitation they require.

Ms Nadia Samdin asked if the Government can provide more personalised support to recovering drug addicts. Similarly, Ms Joan Pereira asked if more comprehensive and long-term mental health resources and support could be offered to drug abusers who have gone through rehabilitation.

MHA recognises that ex-drug abusers need community support in order to successfully reintegrate and not relapse. Some ex-drug abusers struggle with mental illness or juggle multiple stressors, such as securing employment or managing strained family relationships.

The Singapore Prison Service works with various community partners like the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA), Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) and religious social service agencies to provide continual pro-social support and engagement for drug abusers after their release.

During the time that an ex-drug abuser is placed on CNB's supervision, the CNB supervision officer assigned to the ex-drug abuser will regularly check in on his or her well-being and assess their reintegration needs. The supervision officer will make referrals to social service agencies, such as Family Service Centres, to provide further support for their mental, psycho-social and other needs.

As Ms Nadia Samdin has pointed out, our current rehabilitation programmes take a calibrated approach based on the individual's risks and needs. At the same time, CNB and Prisons conduct regular reviews, including with MSF, to determine what more can be done to support ex-drug abusers in their rehabilitation.

Ms Nadia also asked if MHA would consider adopting harm reduction strategies. At the 2018 Committee of Supply debates, the Minister for Home Affairs had set out MHA's position concerning the harm reduction approach. Our position remains the same. As mentioned in my opening speech, we take a harm prevention approach.

In Singapore, our tough laws have kept the drug situation here relatively under control and so, we must continue to keep drugs at bay, to prevent the harms from overwhelming us. Harm reduction strategies have limited application to Singapore's drug situation. Countries which adopt harm reduction measures are focused more on minimising further cost from HIV or other blood-borne infections transmitted through intravenous drug use, rather than on preventing drug use, because they have reached a tipping point where drug use is too pervasive to effectively control. Singapore is not in a state where we cannot deal with the drug situation. Therefore, there is no benefit or need for Singapore to adopt harm reduction measures.

Mr Speaker, these amendments to introduce a new framework to regulate NPS and to increase the penalties for the drug possession offence, reflect the Ministry's efforts to ensure that our drug laws remain an effective deterrent and to keep our drug situation under control. At the same time, as Members have mentioned, we also focus on educating our public on the harms of drugs and adopting evidence-based approaches to rehabilitation and aftercare.

Against the backdrop of a worsening global and regional drug situation, we must continue to press on our fight against drugs, to keep our streets safe and our families protected from the perils of drugs. With continued support from Members in the House, our community partners, advocates and members of the public, we will work towards maintaining a drug-free Singapore. Mr Speaker, I beg to move.

Mr Speaker: Are there any clarifications? Mr Zhulkarnain.

6.32 pm

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Thank you, Speaker. I also thank the Minister of State for answering the questions. For clarity in my speech when I referred to specific focus on youths, I was actually mooting for greater efforts on the part of MHA to prevent drug abuse amongst youths. I do have one clarification for the Minister of State.

Most of our PDE efforts for youths are in our schools and IHLs. But we need resources for parents to cope as well, especially with new drugs and NPS. Would MHA continue to work with Ministries and other independent bodies to help parents cope with these new drugs and new challenges that parents may face? In fact, I think CNB had a publication for parents previously called, "start talking before they start taking"? So, maybe those resources can be updated and there can be a sustained effort for parents as well.

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Sir, I thank the Member for the clarification. As I have shared in my answer, we have the NCPR platform where we not only look at efforts across agencies and the different community organisations, but we also look at specific areas that we want to focus on.

One of the areas that we are looking at today is also about youths' addiction issues, substance abuse – that is one aspect. The other aspect, CNB as the Member has shared, has its own PDE efforts. The efforts are not only linked with other organisations, but also look at the different segments of the society – parents, students. At the last MHA COS, I shared that the schools are committed to play a more active role in this aspect, in working together with CNB. And we will try to see how we can enhance that effort.

Another thing that we do, if you look at CNB's social media platforms, they are very active. We share various types of resources. One is about our operations; whenever we make arrests, all these, we will share. Secondly, we also share about the harms of drugs. Recently, Mr Christopher de Souza asked about how we can share further and I shared that it is something that we will continue to do.

Just a few days ago, I shared about the harms of cannabis on my social media platform. This is also what CNB does. We plan all these holistically, so that we try our best to reach out to the people whom we engage and how we can reach out further with others that we may not have engaged.

So, going forward, we are exploring ways to navigate this deeper and expand our outreach. Because at the end of the day, as I have shared, with the global situation, I think the only way to go forward is to continue this journey and get as many partners as possible to be on board this journey and protect as many people as possible, especially in Singapore, from the harms of drugs and at the same time, keep our aspiration high for a drug-free Singapore.

Mr Speaker: Ms Sylvia Lim.

Ms Sylvia Lim: Thank you, Speaker. I would like to have a clarification about the MDA. For MOF, I think I will follow up separately after I have read in more detail what was said.

My question for the Minister of State of Home Affairs is about the interim period when the Bill allows the enforcement agencies to proceed if a substance is found of a psychoactive effect, even though it has not been listed yet in the MDA First Schedule. It was mentioned that during this period, there would be industry consultations and so on, to determine if there has been any legitimate use for this product. And if there is a legitimate use, then it will not be listed in the First Schedule.

So, my question is, will there be any risk that people are arrested, charged or even sent for DRC, I am not sure, based on the general definition of psychoactive substance, based on what they have, but eventually the substance after due industry consultation is found to have a legitimate use and therefore it is eventually not listed in the First Schedule. I mean, will there be such cases and and how would they be dealt with?

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Sir, as I have shared earlier, this is not something new. We also referred to overseas jurisdictions – the UK and Australia.

What I want to assure Members is that we have a robust and very careful analysis system. We work very closely with HTX and HSA. In fact, since we shared about the need for this amendment, a few years ago, we have been working very hard on the ground from the operational point of view as well as our capability aspect, to determine how we can detect NPS.

Like I said, NPS is ever-changing. What is key is that with the capabilities that we have built and those that we have detected before, we will be able to test quickly. But there will be new ones where if we have not got any confirmation, we will not arrest the person. *[Please refer to "[Clarification by Minister of State for Home Affairs](#)", Official Report, 21 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 94, Correction By Written Statement section.]*

We will have to see how the structure of it and if the psychoactive effect is confirmed, then we will be able to take any action.

In this case, with the new amendment, we will look at the psychoactive effect. There are, from the scientific point of view, procedures involved, to test the psychoactive effect. Once we do that, we will be able to investigate further and work with the industry before we make and carry out any action.

So, I want to assure Ms Lim that we will carry out a robust set of tests and consultations before we take any action. And this is consistent with the amendments that we make. We will be looking at the psychoactive effects of the substance.

Mr Speaker: We first deal with the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill.

Question put, and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Committee of the whole House.

The House immediately resolved itself into a Committee on the Bill. – [Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim].

Bill considered in Committee; reported without amendment; read a Third time and passed.

CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE (AMENDMENT) BILL

6.42 pm

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim): Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Minister for Home Affairs, I beg to move, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Mr Speaker: The Question is, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Pursuant to Article 5(2) of the Constitution, a vote is taken to ascertain that the Second Reading of the Bill is supported by the votes of not less than two-thirds of the total number of Elected and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament, which is 63 Members. Clerk, ring the division bells.

After two minutes –

Mr Speaker: Serjeant-at-Arms, lock the doors.

Before I proceed to start the electronic voting, may I remind Members that to be seated at the designated seats and should only start to vote when the voting buttons on the armrest start to blink.

Question put, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Mr Speaker: You may begin to vote. May I remind Members to depress your vote button firmly in order to register the vote in the system.

Members are advised to check that their names have been registered according to the vote indication when the voting results are shown on the display screens.

Before I proceed to declare the results of the vote, are there any Members who wish to claim that his or her vote has not been displayed or displayed incorrectly on the screens?

Division Taken: Ayes,67; Noes, 0; Abstention, 0

Ayes	Ayes (Con't)
Tan Chuan-Jin (Speaker)	Leon Perera
Ang Wei Neng	Poh Li San
Baey Yam Keng	Pritam Singh
Chan Chun Sing	Rahayu Mahzam
Chee Hong Tat	Saktiandi Supaat
Cheng Li Hui	Seah Kian Peng
Eric Chua	Sharael Taha
Darryl David	Sim Ann
Christopher de Souza	Sitoh Yih Pin
Foo Mee Har	Hany Soh
Gan Siow Huang	Alvin Tan
Gan Thiam Poh	Carrie Tan
Gerald Giam Yean Song	Dennis Tan Lip Fong
Derrick Goh	Desmond Tan
He Ting Ru	Jessica Tan Soon Neo
Heng Chee How	Tan Kiat How
Heng Swee Keat	Tan See Leng
Shawn Huang Wei Zhong	Tan Wu Meng
Indranee Rajah	Teo Chee Hean
S Iswaran	Josephine Teo
Janil Puthuchear	Tin Pei Ling
Amy Khor Lean Suan	Wan Rizal
Koh Poh Koon	Don Wee
Kwek Hian Chuan Henry	Lawrence Wong
Desmond Lee	Alex Yam Ziming
Lee Hsien Loong	Yip Hon Weng
Liang Eng Hwa	Melvin Yong Yik Chye
Lim Biow Chuan	Zaqy Mohamad
Jamus Jerome Lim	Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim
Sylvia Lim	
Lim Wee Kiak	Noes
Masagos Zulkifli B M M	Nil
Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim	
Nadia Ahmad Samdin	Abstention
Ng Ling Ling	Nil
Louis Ng Kok Kwang	
Rachel Ong	
Joan Pereira	

Mr Speaker: I will proceed to declare the voting results now. There are 67 "Ayes"; zero "Noes"; zero "Abstentions". The Second Reading of the Bill has been carried by the votes of not less than two-thirds of the total number of Elected and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Committee of the whole House.

The House immediately resolved itself into a Committee on the Bill. – [Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim].

Bill considered in Committee; reported without amendment.

Third Reading

Mr Speaker: Third Reading, what day?

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Now, Sir, I beg to move, "That the Bill be now read a Third time."

Mr Speaker: The Question is, "That the Bill be now read a Third time."

Pursuant to Article 5(2) of the Constitution, a vote is taken to ascertain that the Third Reading of the Bill is supported by the votes of not less than two-thirds of the total number of Elected and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament, which is 63 Members. Clerk, ring the division bells.

After one minute –

Mr Speaker: Serjeant-at-Arms, lock the doors.

Question put, "That the Bill be now read a Third Time."

Mr Speaker: You may now begin to vote. Again, reminder to Members to depress their vote button firmly in order to register their vote in the system.

Members are advised to check that their names are registered according to their vote indication when the voting results are shown on the display screens.

Before I proceed to declare the results of the vote, are there any Members who wish to claim that his or her vote has not been displayed or displayed incorrectly on the screens?

Division Taken: Ayes,67; Noes, 0; Abstention, 0

Ayes

Tan Chuan-Jin (Speaker)
Ang Wei Neng
Baey Yam Keng
Chan Chun Sing
Chee Hong Tat
Cheng Li Hui
Eric Chua
Darryl David
Christopher de Souza
Foo Mee Har
Gan Siow Huang
Gan Thiam Poh
Gerald Giam Yean Song
Derrick Goh
He Ting Ru
Heng Chee How
Heng Swee Keat
Shawn Huang Wei Zhong
Indranee Rajah
S Iswaran
Janil Puthuchear
Amy Khor Lean Suan
Koh Poh Koon
Kwek Hian Chuan Henry
Desmond Lee
Lee Hsien Loong
Liang Eng Hwa
Lim Biow Chuan
Jamus Jerome Lim
Sylvia Lim
Lim Wee Kiak
Masagos Zulkifli B M M
Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim
Nadia Ahmad Samdin
Ng Ling Ling
Louis Ng Kok Kwang
Rachel Ong
Joan Pereira

Ayes (Con't)

Leon Perera
Poh Li San
Pritam Singh
Rahayu Mahzam
Saktiandi Supaat
Seah Kian Peng
Sharael Taha
Sim Ann
Sitoh Yih Pin
Hany Soh
Alvin Tan
Carrie Tan
Dennis Tan Lip Fong
Desmond Tan
Jessica Tan Soon Neo
Tan Kiat How
Tan See Leng
Tan Wu Meng
Teo Chee Hean
Josephine Teo
Tin Pei Ling
Wan Rizal
Don Wee
Lawrence Wong
Alex Yam Ziming
Yip Hon Weng
Melvin Yong Yik Chye
Zaqy Mohamad
Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim

Noes

Nil

Abstention

Nil

Mr Speaker: I will proceed to declare the voting results now. There are 67 "Ayes"; zero "Noes"; zero "Abstentions". The Third Reading of the Bill has been carried by the votes of not less than two-thirds of the total number of Elected and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament.

Bill accordingly read a Third time and passed.

EXEMPTED BUSINESS

(Business Motion)

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the business set down on the Order Paper for today be exempted from this day's Sitting from the provisions of Standing Order No 2." – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

SECOND READING BILLS
RESOURCE SUSTAINABILITY (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr Speaker: Minister for Sustainability and the Environment.

6.55 pm

The Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment): Mr Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, I beg to move, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Three years ago, I stood in this Chamber to introduce the Resource Sustainability Act 2019 or RSA, which is a key part of our Zero Waste Masterplan. The Act put in place a systems-level approach that mandated key responsibilities to support reuse and recycling nationwide.

It set out the legal framework to address our three priority waste streams – an extended producer responsibility scheme for e-waste, a mandatory reporting framework for packaging and mandatory segregation and treatment of food waste.

We have seen the law take effect since. Over 700 e-waste collection points are deployed across Singapore and over 9,000 tonnes of e-waste have been collected for recycling. Companies submitted their first reports for the Mandatory Packaging Reporting scheme last year. We see the first fruits of our shift from a linear take-make-throw economy to a circular one, where waste is turned into resources to be put to good use again.

Our sustainability movement has since gained momentum. We launched the Singapore Green Plan 2030 two years ago, with a comprehensive national agenda for sustainable development. Last year, we raised our national climate target to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, affirming Singapore's strong commitment to climate action.

To move decisively towards this goal, we passed the Carbon Pricing (Amendment) Bill to ensure our carbon pricing regime supports the transition to a low-carbon future.

Today’s Resource Sustainability (Amendment) Bill marks the next step in our national sustainability agenda. We are introducing three new measures to address packaging waste and food waste: a disposable carrier bag charge at supermarkets; a beverage container return scheme; and a food waste reporting framework for industrial and commercial premises.

These measures are also intended to spark behaviour change. They are a call for everyone to act, to participate and take a stake in Singapore’s zero waste journey to shift from a throwaway culture towards a more sustainable paradigm, one that is characterised by mindful consumption and the sustainable habits of reducing, reusing and recycling.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we are introducing the disposable carrier bag charge and the beverage container return scheme in the context of a global movement against plastic pollution. So, I would like to take some time to explain Singapore’s approach towards plastics and plastic pollution.

[Deputy Speaker (Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo) in the Chair]

Plastics, which are made from non-renewable fossil fuels, contribute to our carbon emissions when they are produced, transported and incinerated at end-of-life. Plastic pollution, especially in the form of transboundary marine litter, is a global problem, spoiling our environment and causing harm to wildlife. Curbing our use of plastics would protect our environment and conserve finite resources.

However, plastics, including single-use plastics, have many important uses and continue to be an essential aspect in many aspects of our daily lives. For example, it is a key component in personal protective equipment and disposable masks. Many Singaporeans also use plastic bags to dispose of trash hygienically.

Plastics are not the enemy here. The littering, wasteful use and unnecessary disposal of plastics are. While we share a common global problem of plastic pollution, we do not necessarily share a common solution. Every country has a different context, characterised by unique circumstances.

Take littering, for instance. Many countries are plagued by indiscriminate littering of plastics. Inadequate or poorly maintained waste disposal facilities can also cause plastics to leak into the environment. In Singapore, our strong stance against littering, along with an effective waste management system, has limited the leakage of plastics.

Likewise, because plastics can persist in the environment for many years if they are directly landfilled, some countries are introducing regulations to ban or restrict single-use plastics, and companies are responding by switching to biodegradable substitutes like paper, biodegradable plastics or wood.

However, biodegradable materials do not offer the same incremental benefit in Singapore, where all incinerable waste is not directly landfilled, but is either recycled or properly disposed of at waste-to-energy plants.

In addition, every material type requires precious resources like water, energy, fossil fuels and trees for their production, transportation and disposal. All these materials also leave behind a carbon footprint.

Hence, the most effective way to reduce our environmental impact is to reduce our use of all types of materials, not just plastics. And where we cannot eliminate the use of materials, we need to find effective ways of aggregating them for recycling where possible.

This is where the Resource Sustainability (Amendment) Bill comes in.

With the disposable carrier bag charge, we hope to nudge Singaporeans to reduce their use of disposable carrier bags, including plastic bags.

And with the beverage container return scheme, we will put in place a better system to extract clean and valuable streams of plastic and metal recyclables.

Let me explain each initiative.

The disposable carrier bag charge is, first and foremost, a behavioural nudge. Disposable carrier bags will remain available at retail establishments, but making the cost of the bag visible in supermarkets prompts us to pause and consider how many we really need. It is a reminder to bring our own reusable bags and to reduce the use of disposables – an essential feature of sustainable living.

The charge was a recommendation of a 2020 Citizens’ Workgroup, and we have engaged the public and supermarket operators extensively on the policy details.

A new Part 4A will be introduced to give effect to the charge, which will commence on 3 July this year.

Under section 23F, a registered retailer will be required to charge a minimum of five cents per bag provided to customers. We have kept the minimum charge low to moderate the cost impact on shoppers, while encouraging them to be mindful of the number of bags they take.

We will prescribe that operators of SFA-licensed supermarkets with an annual turnover of more than \$100 million will be required to register with NEA under section 23B.

Registered retailers may apply to be deregistered if their annual turnover does not exceed \$100 million for each of three consecutive years, or if they are no longer a regulated retailer.

Section 23H will require registered retailers to communicate this charge to their customers and set it out separately in receipts where provided. This will strengthen the behavioural nudge.

To monitor compliance, section 23I will require registered retailers to report data to NEA. For public accountability and transparency on the use of proceeds, section 23K will require registered retailers to publish information on the number of bags issued, the amount of proceeds collected and how the proceeds were used.

The Bill will also give effect to a beverage container return scheme. This is an extended producer responsibility scheme, where producers are made responsible for the collection and recycling of beverage containers like plastic bottles and metal cans that they put on the market.

Producers, typically, rely on a scheme operator to carry out these responsibilities. A deposit will be collected for each beverage product covered by the scheme, or “covered beverage product”, and refunded fully when empty beverage containers are returned at designated return points.

While the scheme is well-established in many jurisdictions around the world, it is the first in Southeast Asia and one of the first few in Asia.

The scheme will be a pathfinder for Singapore in our move towards a circular economy, especially for plastics.

Singapore’s recycling rate for plastics is low, at only 6%. The scheme will aggregate a stream of clean and high-quality plastic and metal recyclables. The plastic bottles collected will comprise mostly PET, or polyethylene terephthalate, a valuable fraction that is highly sought after by companies looking to use a higher proportion of recycled PET, or rPET, in their containers to fulfil their sustainability commitments. This rPET can be manufactured into new containers, breathing life into the circular model.

The beverage container return scheme was a recommendation of a 2019 Citizens’ Workgroup. To design a scheme suitable for Singapore, my Ministry and the National Environment Agency conducted over two years of engagements with stakeholders. Let me share the details of the framework.

I announced at MSE’s Committee of Supply debates that the scheme will cover plastic bottles and metal cans with volumes ranging from 150 millimetres to three litres. These have high material value and are easy to collect, compact and recycle.

I also shared that an 80% return rate target will be imposed on the scheme operator. We will move progressively towards this and set a return rate target of 60% and 70% in the first and second year respectively. At the steady state of 80%, this is estimated to amount to around 800 million beverage containers collected for recycling annually.

Now, on to further details of the scheme.

We will be prescribing a deposit amount of 10 cents per container to begin with. This amount takes into account public feedback, as well as the experience of other jurisdictions. In a recent REACH public consultation, the majority of respondents, about 84%, indicated that a deposit amount of 10 cents or higher would be suitable. A higher deposit would encourage participation and a higher return rate, but we do not want the deposit to be too high such that it deters purchases of pre-packaged beverages. Hence, on balance, we determined that a 10-cent deposit per container would suffice to help achieve an 80% return rate target.

To ensure a robust return point network, SFA-licensed supermarkets with a floor area of more than 200 square metres, which comprises about 400 supermarkets, will be required to set up return points. Supermarkets are ideal for this role as they are major sales channels of beverages and preferred by respondents in our public consultations as return point locations. This approach of deploying return points at supermarkets is proven to be efficient and associated with high return rates in overseas jurisdictions. To enhance convenience and encourage consumer participation, we will also work with the scheme operator and other stakeholders to establish additional return points in other accessible locations in the community.

To give effect to the scheme, we will introduce a new Part 4B.

Section 23O will require all producers, that is, importers and manufacturers of covered beverage products, to join the licensed scheme.

Section 23P will require containers of covered beverage products to be labelled: first, with a deposit mark for customers to identify covered beverage products; and second, with a barcode to facilitate the acceptance of empty beverage containers at return points.

Section 23Q makes it clear that the deposit is not part of the price of the beverage product, the beverage container or the use of the beverage container and is, therefore, not subject to GST.

The deposit, which is first provided by the producer to the scheme operator under section 23R, must be collected by every supplier for each covered beverage product the supplier sells.

Section 23S mandates that certain persons must set up return points, and section 23U requires return point operators to refund the deposit when an empty beverage container is returned, except under certain circumstances, such as if the deposit mark or barcode is so damaged that it cannot be read or scanned.

We will also be amending Part 6 of the RSA, which provides for the licensing of the producer responsibility scheme operator.

For the beverage container return scheme, a not-for-profit, industry-led scheme operator is preferred. This is similar to successful schemes in other jurisdictions, such as Norway and Denmark.

As the scheme is owned and run by the industry, the scheme operator will be able to tap on the industry’s capabilities and resources. It will also have a strong incentive to operate it efficiently and effectively, to keep scheme costs low for all parties.

I am happy to share that a number of beverage producers have expressed interest to jointly support the establishment of the scheme operator.

My Ministry and NEA will continue to engage industry players on the appointment of a suitable scheme operator. More details will be announced in due course.

The scheme operator will be licensed under the existing Part 6, with a few additions.

There is a need to safeguard the interests of various stakeholders, for example, if the scheme operator is led by larger producers. A new section 29A will enable the Minister to prescribe requirements for up to one third of the scheme operator’s key appointment holders, and to require the scheme operator to obtain NEA’s approval for these key appointments.

To deter the beverage container return scheme operator from missing the return rate target, section 32 will be amended to introduce a new, higher financial penalty of up to \$500,000 if the scheme operator does not meet the return rate target.

Additional safeguards will be introduced under section 32 to ensure that the power to impose financial penalties is exercised appropriately. NEA, in determining the amount of financial penalty, will be required to consider a list of factors, such as the nature, gravity and duration of the non-compliance.

We have been engaging the industry closely on the details of the scheme. The beverage producers who have expressed interest to jointly support the formation of the scheme operator are seriously looking at implementation details, such as setting up return points and the printing of the deposit mark and barcode for beverage containers. Bearing in mind the size of the task ahead, they have requested for more time to implement the scheme. They have proposed that the scheme go live from 1 April 2025, which is approximately two years from the date of passing of legislation.

We hear this feedback. While we want to move quickly to facilitate a shift towards a more sustainable way of doing business, we understand that the industry needs time to plan and set up a robust and effective scheme. This is to ensure smooth implementation at the ground for the multiple stakeholders of the scheme, beyond the manufacturers and importers to the F&B operators and consumers.

Therefore, we have taken in the proposal and the scheme will go live from 1 April 2025. Thereafter, a grace period of three months will be provided for the beverage and retail industry to clear unlabelled stock, which will not carry a deposit. By 1 July 2025, all covered beverage products supplied must be labelled, and all suppliers must collect a deposit for each covered beverage product sold.

We will continue to support and engage the industry as they work to fulfil their obligations under the scheme. Prior to the commencement date, we will also work with the appointed scheme operator on education and outreach efforts to prepare consumers and other stakeholders for the scheme.

We are also building on earlier foundations laid in the RSA to close the food waste loop. Food waste is a priority waste stream due to its high generation and low recycling rates. When food is wasted, so are all the resources used to cultivate, process and prepare it. With growing pressures on food supply chains and resource availability, we must rethink wasteful linear models and capture value from food waste.

To promote resource recovery for food waste, we introduced segregation and treatment requirements in 2019. The requirements are intended to apply to industrial and commercial buildings such as hotels, shopping malls and factories, which are large generators of food waste.

In addition to facilitating the treatment or conversion of food waste into useful products such as new food products or animal feed, other benefits include reduction in disamenities, such as odour and pest nuisance, at the premises.

We are also investing in critical infrastructure to ensure sufficient food waste treatment capacity. Construction of the food waste treatment facility at Tuas Nexus is ongoing and forms part of our efforts to support the industry in treating the segregated food waste.

To complement segregation and treatment requirements, we will be introducing a new requirement for building managers to submit food waste reports to the NEA under section 27C. This will raise awareness on the amount of food waste generated and encourage building managers to pursue waste minimisation opportunities.

To ensure minimal burden on building managers, we have simplified data requirements to key information such as the overall building-level tonnages.

In the long run, reducing food waste and segregating food waste for treatment could also reduce costs for businesses such as by reducing waste disposal costs downstream and reaping value from transforming food waste into higher value products.

We will stagger the implementation of the food waste segregation, treatment and reporting requirements.

For new buildings, the requirements will commence from 1 January 2024. These are buildings for which application for planning approval was submitted on or after 1 January 2021. For existing buildings, the requirements will commence progressively from the second half of 2025.

Part 5 of the RSA, which has not yet come into force, will be repealed and re-enacted to allow for the staggered implementation.

With more circular production practices emerging, there are increasing possibilities to transform food waste into higher value products. For example, waste bread can be used to make beverages and spent grains from breweries can be processed into powder to be used as ingredients for food products.

Therefore, our revised regulatory framework will also provide flexibility to enable the pursuit of these innovative food waste treatment methods.

Under the original Part 5, building managers of new buildings must cause segregated food waste to be treated onsite. The new section 27B will retain this requirement but also allow segregated food waste to be treated off-site with NEA's approval.

Under the original Part 5, building occupiers of both new and existing buildings must use the segregation and treatment arrangements provided by their building managers. The new section 27 will allow building occupiers of both new and existing buildings to pursue food waste segregation and treatment arrangements separate from those provided by the building manager with NEA's approval.

In assessing whether approval will be granted, NEA will take into consideration if the proposed treatment methods process food waste into higher value products.

Let me conclude. At its core, the issue of waste stems from human actions and choices. Likewise, the ultimate solution to achieve zero waste and a circular economy lies not in regulations or technologies, but with us.

With the Resource Sustainability (Amendment) Bill, we are putting in place stronger measures for individuals and the private sector to reduce waste and recycle more to achieve circularity. But these measures are merely a means to an end. The goal for these initiatives must be to catalyse a change that extends beyond the boundaries of the initiatives themselves. They must cultivate new behaviours and encourage a sustainable way of life amongst Singaporeans.

The amendments to the RSA will help to get everyone to pitch in for sustainability.

The private sector will need to establish circular business models to properly collect and treat their beverage products at end-of-life. Building managers and occupiers will need to track the amount of food waste generated and provide space to segregate food waste for treatment.

As individuals and consumers, we will need to rinse and segregate empty beverage containers so that we can return them for recycling and a refund of our deposit. We will also need to remember to bring our shopping bags when leaving the house.

But we will make this shift knowing that it is the right thing to do, that it is good for the environment and for future generations, and so that we can take pride in the stewardship of our resources and our country, and do our part in our global fight against plastic pollution and climate change.

Our journey towards zero waste will not be easy, but I can say with every confidence that it will be a rewarding one. Mdm Deputy Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Ms Poh Li San.

7.20 pm

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang): Mdm Deputy Speaker, most Singaporeans will agree that there is a need for new policies to mitigate climate change. However, the purpose of these new policies must do more than reflect a message of global warming. These policies must address the need to make small but impactful adjustments to our daily habits.

Let us talk about disposable plastic carrier bags.

As of 2018, 127 out of 192 countries had enacted certain national legislations to address the use of plastic bags. In some of these places, plastic bag bans have not been as effective. Like in California, studies have shown that while shoppers used fewer plastic bags, the sales and utilisation of trash bags has proportionally increased.

A migrant domestic helper, Ms Maricel Vicente from Bacarra, a municipality in the province of Ilocos Norte in the Philippines, shared with me that in her hometown, the supermarkets over there do not provide plastic bags, styrofoam or any plastic containers. They only provide thin brown bags with no handles. These bags are not helpful if you have to store and carry your groceries. The inconvenience reminded the shoppers to bring their own reusable shopping bags.

Singaporeans use around 2.5 billion plastic bags annually. Just take 10% of that with a five cents charge, you will get a hefty \$12.5 million annually in bag charge collection. Having said that, the additional five cents to each shopper will probably not deter most of them from the usage of plastic bags.

We should practice what supermarkets in Bacarra does. Completely stop providing plastic bags and encourage shoppers to bring their own recyclable shopping bags. Should shoppers require a bag for their groceries, they can always purchase recyclable bags just like any other product sold at the premises. Should bags be required for trash, trash bags can always be purchased at the supermarket.

This way, we are all implementing simple changes to slow down global warming. To add, this will also avoid any profiteering from the sale of plastic bags that was once provided free of charge.

Let us talk about the beverage container return scheme. An estimate of about 800 million plastic bottles and metal cans are expected to be returned for recycling purposes annually. It is a good thing.

We should do more to encourage this campaign by creating new roles. Maybe we could support the seniors who once collected discarded metal cans to be sold. Alternatively, scheme operators can hire seniors to manage the collection stations. The Government can support these roles.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I commend the MSE team for nudging Singapore towards a zero-waste nation. However, for these schemes to succeed, attention to details in their implementation is key and nothing beats the importance of communicating public education intensively. Singaporeans must understand why we need to do what we do and only then will our attempt to slow down global warming be a wholehearted nationwide effort. Notwithstanding my suggestions, I support the Bill.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Mr Dennis Tan.

7.25 pm

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang): Thank you, Mdm Deputy Speaker. This amendment Bill seeks to introduce three main requirements to the Act: (a) introduce a plastic bag charge scheme starting with the larger supermarkets with an annual turnover of more than \$100 million; (b) introduce a beverage container return scheme; and (c) require the segregation and treatment of food waste in prescribed buildings with requisite reporting to the authorities.

I will start with the plastic bag charge.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, back in 2018, when it was declared the Year of Climate Action in Singapore, I had spoken during the Committee of Supply (COS) debate and I asked the Government whether it had any intention to roll out a progressive plan to reduce the use of plastic disposables in Singapore involving either the restriction or the banning of single-use plastic carrier bags, straws and disposable cups, containers and utensils.

I had mentioned that Taiwan had just then announced a blanket ban in single-use plastics, including straws, cups and shopping bags by 2030. Prior to that, there was a progressive plan to make people pay for plastic products like plastic bags, straws, disposable food containers and disposable utensils in the interim.

Back then, there was already more than 40 countries taxing or limiting the use of plastic bags. The evidence had shown that even modest policy interventions can have significant impact.

In Britain, the usage of plastic carrier bags fell by 83% after the introduction of a plastic bag charge.

In 2020, the Workers' Party called for the introduction of a single-use plastic bag charge phased in over five years. I repeated this call in my Budget debate speech in 2021. I therefore welcome the imposition of a plastic bag charge to be formally included under today's amendment of the Resource Sustainability Act.

I am also heartened that Senior Minister of State Amy Khor recently cited statistics in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the UK, where after the introduction of a plastic bag charge in those countries, their usage of plastic carrier bags fell.

I quoted the example of the UK in this House five years ago. I am glad that the Government accepted the recommendations of the Citizens' Workgroup on Reducing Excessive Consumption of Disposables to impose a plastic bag charge.

The Government has also announced that the charge to be imposed will come into effect in mid-2023 to "nudge consumers to shift towards the use of reusable bags." This nudging is extremely important as we are talking about the long-term habits of individuals.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I have for the last few years in this House been calling for mindsets to shift in the way we use single-use plastic bags – to only use what we need to use.

In 2018, in response to my call for a plastic bag charge in comparison with other countries like Taiwan and the UK, Senior Minister of State Amy Khor said, "Miss Cheng Li Hui and Mr Dennis Tan asked about our efforts to deal with plastic waste and specifically, whether we will impose a charge or ban on single-use plastic bags. Unlike many of the countries that have imposed a ban or mandatory charge on plastic bags, we do not directly landfill our plastic disposables but incinerate them. Hence, we do not face the land and water pollution issues that plague those countries. Plastic bags are also necessary for responsible and hygienic bagging of waste in our moist, tropical climate. Unbagged household waste attracts pests like cockroaches and rats, creating serious environmental and health problems."

She also said that, "There are actually good reasons that single-use plastic bags have to be given or used by the public for bagging their waste. Therefore, the issue is really about excessive use – not that you cannot use plastic bags, but excessive use of plastic bags."

I agreed with her then and now that plastic bags are needed for the bagging of waste and that the issue is about excessive use of plastic bags. I also thought then and now that the fact that we incinerate our rubbish does not remove the need to educate and persuade Singaporeans to try to reduce our plastic bag consumption and to consider greater measures to reduce the use of plastic bags – hence, my suggestion for a plastic bag charge back in 2018.

In 2020, I said in my Budget debate speech that mindsets must shift in the way we consume – to only use what we need to use. For single-use plastic bags, I had asked – can we take or use what we really need? Can we pack more things into each plastic bag? Do we really need to double-bag all our groceries at the checkouts? If we only need to use, say, one or two plastic bags for very few disposals a day, do we need to take twenty bags from the supermarket in a week?

We can also reduce the number of single-use plastic bags we need to take for our refuse by concurrently using good quality reusable shopping bags. We may end up using fewer plastic bags and may still have enough bags for our refuse.

In my 2021 COS debate cut for MSE, I reiterated my call for mindsets to shift in the way we consume, to only use what we need to use, and called for less use of plastic bags.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I would reiterate what I have said previously on the use of plastic bags. Indeed, while the plastic bag charge will certainly nudge behaviours when people feel the pinch of having to pay for plastic bags, what is more important, I feel, is that we must get all Singaporeans to understand fully why we are doing this, why we need to reduce plastic bag use, how we can reduce plastic bag production, how we should reduce the number of plastic bags we incinerate every day and, most of all, to internalise them in our minds so that they instinctively guide our everyday actions. I would like to call on the Government to ramp up on our public messaging to Singaporeans of different age groups.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I am also glad that the Government is encouraging reusable bags. I have been using such bags for supermarket shopping for many years, a habit I first had when I was a student abroad. In my 2021 Committee of Supply debate cut for MSE, I reiterated the call to use more good quality reusable shopping bags in supermarkets or retail shops. Last year, our Aljunied-Hougang Town Council gave a reusable shopping bag to each of the HDB households in Aljunied and Hougang Town. I hope it will be a useful reminder to our residents to use more good reusable bags and minimise the use of plastic bags.

We have come a long way, even in the last few years, but I hope that, with the plastic bag charge, mindsets will change for those who are used to taking many plastic bags at the supermarket. We need to remind ourselves to only take what we absolutely need.

I would like to ask the Government whether it has any plans to increase public education to encourage less use of plastic bags in conjunction with the imposition of this charge. Can the Government share its staged plans, if any, to extend the plastic bag charge beyond its current category of retailers of more than \$100 million turnover?

Mdm Deputy Speaker, this Bill also introduces a beverage container return scheme which allows a refund of the additional fee imposed when a person buys a beverage in a plastic bottle and metal can.

I support this scheme and I think it can significantly reduce the amount of plastic bottles and metal cans which are currently being disposed of instead of being deliberately recycled via recycling bins and other proper ways. When we are out, there may not always be a recycling bin in sight when we want to dispose of our drink can or bottle after we have consumed the beverage. I can imagine the number of bottles or cans which are thrown into normal rubbish bins every day and taken to our refuse incinerator.

Also, although many Singaporeans have developed good recycling habits or practices, many are still not doing so. Singapore is not even at the stage as some first-world countries are where households are required to segregate their waste in different categories, such as general waste, paper, plastic, glass, metal and so on. We are using one recycling bin for different waste but, sadly, it is a common sight to see general waste and contaminated materials being thrown into recycling bins.

Madam, there is still much for us to do to improve our public education efforts.

I believe that the beverage return scheme will minimise wrongful disposal, encourage more recycling and inculcate better recycling habits. Like the plastic bag charge, beverage container return scheme is, sadly, a form of enforced public education. But it will bring certain knowledge to those who are hitherto ignorant or indifferent to recycling.

I would like to ask the Minister to share with the House how extensive is the projected availability of the beverage return vending machines. This is important as it complements retail outlets at venues where the beverage containers can be returned. Convenience will certainly enhance greater cooperation and compliance and affect the success of the programme.

We are told by NEA and MSE that packaging waste constitutes about one-third of domestic waste disposed of and about 60% of this is plastic waste and that, in 2021, only 6% of plastic waste disposed of was recycled.

I hope to see a significant reduction in the volume of such waste being sent to our incinerators after the beverage container return scheme and the plastic bag charge scheme are introduced. I also look forward to the scheme being extended to glass and beverage cartons soon. I would like to ask the Minister what are the Government's staged plans for further expansion of this beverage container scheme, including the projected time when the scheme will be expanded to glass, as I believe that a lot of glass and even carton waste can be further diverted away from incineration and be recycled and Singaporeans can be encouraged to work towards this goal.

And before I leave this point and as its follow-up to my COS cut of 2018 on a similar topic, I am also going to ask the Minister for an update on the Government's plans, if any, to reduce the use of styrofoam food and beverage containers which are still widely used.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I will next touch on the segregation and reporting of food waste, as required under the proposed amendments to the Act.

When I was a little boy, I remember being reminded by my parents to finish every bit of food on my plate and being told off for wasting food. Some of us will remember being told by our parents that we have to finish every single grain of rice in our bowl.

Why is curbing food waste important? It is important to curb food wastage because other resources have been invested to grow the food ingredients as well as the cooking of the ingredients for consumption.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)'s Food Waste Index Report 2021, 17% of our food ends up being wasted in retail and by consumers, particularly in households. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), food that is lost, which accounts for food that is grown, harvested and prepared for consumption right up to just before the retail stage and food that is wasted, which is food wasted at the household, retail or food service stages onwards, could feed up to 1.26 billion hungry people every year.

Nearer home, according to a 2019 Singapore Environment Council study, one in three Singaporeans throw away more than 10% of food weekly and this amounts to about \$342 million of wasted food a year. Further, food waste has grown by 20% in the past decade in Singapore.

According to UNEP's Executive Director, Mr Inger Andersen, each person is said to waste an average of 74 kilogrammes of food every year in all the middle- and high-income countries in the world.

Why is cutting food waste important?

According to UNEP, 8% to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food that is not consumed. Wasted food meant wasted efforts and resources in producing them, including land, fertilisers, water, packaging, transportation, fuel and so on.

Food waste may also be deposited in landfills, increasing the production of methane emissions. Even in Singapore where we burn our waste before depositing in landfill, cutting down waste food will also greatly reduce the amount of waste we incinerate and, to some extent, ultimately dumped in landfills.

According to NEA, food waste accounts for 12% of our total waste in Singapore by 2021. We need to work on its reduction. Reducing food waste will also be of great help in making our progress towards our climate goals, including our 2030 emission targets.

That brings us to why we need to do food waste segregation and reporting. Segregation and reporting are the first step to help us to realise and account for our food waste. A retailer or food service provider can accordingly be better guided to take actions to reduce food waste and/or even direct food waste to better mitigation measures. Unsold or unconsumed food can be passed on to food banks and charities for consumption by the less privileged. They can also be converted to composts, animal feed or biofuel gases as they are being done in other countries.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for the halving of per-capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and the reduction of food losses along production and supply chains, otherwise referred to as the SDG target of 12.3. Achieving this target would have significant implications for the fight against climate change. UNEP's Food Waste Index Report supports the goals of SDG 12.3 with its comprehensive and reliable food waste data collection, analysis and modelling to date and helping countries to measure food waste at household, food service and retail levels, to track national progress towards 2030 and to report on SDG target of 12.3.

I support the proposed amendments in this Bill for food waste segregation and reporting which will complement and support global efforts via UNEP and FAO and through the Food Waste Index Report. Naturally, Singapore, Singaporeans and our Government must do our part to support with clear actions the SDG target of 12.3.

UNEP has reported that the true scale of food waste and its impacts have not been well understood until now. I agree. I would argue that we really should educate Singaporeans of all ages and educational levels on the perils of food waste and how we must reduce food waste and channel produced food resources to better uses in mitigation.

While our Government has through its Zero Waste Masterplan and the guides it produced for F&B outlets, supermarkets and food manufacturers to guide and help businesses to reduce food waste with greater focus on production processes, proper inventory management and effective perishables handling, more must be done to educate domestic households and individuals so that every Singaporean knows about the issue of food wastage and how every Singaporean can consciously minimise food wastage in our daily living habits.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I help out regularly at a food rescue food distribution in Hougang which focuses primarily on fruits and vegetables. It gives me a frightening glimpse of the potential or actual food wastage at the wholesalers' level on an everyday basis.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, to put things in perspective, according to NEA, the total amount of food waste generated in Singapore was 817,000 tonnes in 2021, an increase of 23% from 2020. However, crucially, less than one in six Singaporeans are aware of the problems of food wastage in Singapore.

I call on the MSE to have a multi-lingual public education campaign to educate Singaporeans on the issue of food waste in individual households, food service, retail and wholesalers. Singapore and Singaporeans must all do our part to step up our efforts to help reach the SDG target of 12.3, of halving food waste by 2030 within the next seven years.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, curbing food wastage can go hand-in-hand with curbing food insecurity especially among lower income Singaporean households. I applaud many different organisations like Food Bank, Wiling Hearts, many lesser known or less formally organised groups and Singaporeans who are already doing that, such as the Red Collective and the many food rescue groups operating in different parts of Singapore, bringing excess food to lower income Singaporeans, reducing food wastage and helping the food-insecured Singaporeans.

Mdm Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, I support this Bill and I will repeat my call in my Budget debate speech last year for mindsets to shift in the way we consume single use plastic bags and indeed, all single use plastic products, to only use what we need to use. I also hope that the beverage container return scheme will soon be extended to glass bottles and beverage cartons.

Finally, I call on MSE to have a multi-lingual public education campaign to ensure more Singaporeans will understand the issue of food waste in individual households, food service, retail and wholesalers so that Singaporeans will double our efforts towards reduction of food waste at all levels.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Mr Shawn Hwang.

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong): Mdm Deputy Speaker, according to WWF 2019, the societal costs of plastics produced globally in 2019 were US\$3.7 trillion, more than India's GDP. Although Singapore has a small global footprint, our globalised economy will influence and shape the wider commercial networks beyond our shores.

Within our shores, we are already facing the environmental impact. For example, Lorong Halus dumping ground, a 234-hectare landfill, was opened in the 1970s. For many years, it was plagued by illegal dumping, foul smell and pollution of the surrounding natural habitat. By 1999, it was filled up in 30 years and was closed.

We then transited to Pulau Semakau, a 350 hectares facility 50% larger than Lorong Halus and receives more than 2,000 tonnes of incineration waste daily. At this current rate, it will run out of space by 2035, with only 12 years remaining. Therefore, we will need to develop more capacity beyond Pulau Semakau.

According to the Singapore Environment Council, Singapore uses 1.76 billion plastic items annually. Of which about 820 million are plastic bags from supermarkets. Close to half a billion PET bottles and disposable plastic items. These plastic products require massive energy and resources to manufacture, distribute and dispose of.

Some studies mentioned that Singapore only recycles 13% of domestic waste. So, what has impeded the recycling efforts? Most were due to the leakage of food and liquid waste, as well as e-waste and styrofoam, which contributed to most of the contamination, rendering most items unsuitable for recycling.

When I engage businesses, youths and residents, many have expressed passion for the climate emergency and their desire to play a more active role. As individuals, they want to have more alternatives and access to participate in more sustainable activities and lifestyles. As a citizen, they urged for more action, a swifter and deliberate effort to push toward a more sustainable society.

In addition, I hear the youths actively advocating for more action to secure their future and our future generations.

This Bill will enable us to reduce waste generation and recover valuable materials from crucial waste elements. It will allow us to divert waste from Semakau and extend its lifespan. The reduced waste generation will reduce our carbon emissions from incineration, build capabilities, and move towards a more circular economy.

I have a few questions for the Senior Minister of State.

On the disposable carrier bag charge, how will this affect supermarkets that operate under a single brand but use several SPVs and subsidiaries where individually, the turnover is less than \$100 million? Will this be aggregated at the group or subsidiary level?

Can the Senior Minister of State share more on the reporting and recording-keeping requirements and how often should these retailers report the details of the bag charge requirements, and if there are any baseline requirements on how this should be published?

Will there be a future mandatory requirement to channel the collected proceeds to support social and environmental causes?

On the beverage container return scheme, in the scenario where the scheme operators have failed to achieve the required return rate, what will be the consequences and mitigating factors?

How will the disposal and collection scheme work when cross-border commercial activities are involved, such as F&B services onboard aircrafts and ships?

And on food waste reporting, what are the approval considerations for new building managers to pursue alternative food waste treatment methods located off-site? Mdm Speaker, I support the Bill.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Leader, adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT OF DEBATE

7.47 pm

The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah): Mdm Deputy Speaker, I beg to move, "That the debate be now adjourned."

Resolved, "That the debate be now adjourned." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Resumption of debate, what day?

Ms Indranee Rajah: Wednesday, 22 March 2023, Madam.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: So be it. Leader.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, "That Parliament do now adjourn." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

Mdm Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order No 2(3)(a), I wish to inform hon Members that the Sitting tomorrow will commence at 1.30 pm. Order. Order.

Adjourned accordingly at 7.48 pm.

**WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER NOT ANSWERED BY END OF QUESTION TIME
ELECTRIC VEHICLES CURRENTLY DEPLOYED BY PUBLIC SECTOR AND PLANS TO CONVERT MORE
VEHICLES INTO ELECTRIC ONES**

27 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Transport (a) how many electric vehicles are currently deployed by the public sector; and (b) whether there are plans to convert more vehicles to electric vehicles.

Mr S Iswaran: As of February 2023, the public sector has deployed 89 electric vehicles.

Under the GreenGov.SG initiative, all new cars procured by the public sector from this year onwards will be electric, or alternatives with zero tailpipe emissions. Other vehicle types procured from this year onwards would also run on cleaner energy, subject to the availability of models that meet agencies' operational requirements.

**CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES WILL REVEAL NAMES OF PERSONS
ASSOCIATED WITH ONGOING INVESTIGATION**

29 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) under what circumstances will law enforcement agencies divulge the names of individuals who are associated with an ongoing investigation or details of the said investigation before it is completed; and (b) in cases where such information is publicly divulged, what measures are taken to ensure that the said public disclosure does not prejudice the investigation or the individuals concerned.

Mr K Shanmugam: This question was addressed in the oral reply for Question No 2 delivered during the Parliament sitting on 20 March 2023. [Please refer to "Naming of Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern when Being Investigated for Giving False Evidence in Judicial Proceedings while Keppel Offshore and Marine Senior Staff were Not Named", Official Report, 20 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 93, Oral Answers to Questions section.]

**WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS
ABUSE OF GOVERNMENT-LINKED ONLINE RESERVATION SYSTEMS**

1 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Prime Minister (a) whether the Government tracks the prevalence of abuse of Government-linked online reservation systems, such as for SportSG facilities, where slots are subsequently resold; and (b) if so, what is the frequency of such abuses.

2 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Prime Minister whether the Ministry has evaluated the efficacy of its safeguards, such as anti-bot solutions, limiting multiple logins within the day, and blacklisting and suspending accounts, currently in place to prevent bots and other automated reservation tools rapidly taking up all available slots for Government-linked online reservation systems.

Mrs Josephine Teo (for the Prime Minister): The Government is aware that automated bots may be used to secure limited goods, slots or services on various websites, including Government-linked online reservation systems. Some errant users have gone further to use these bots or encourage others to lend their accounts to them, so that they can resell the slots for profit.

Such actions undermine the fairness of the booking process and crowd out legitimate users. The Government, therefore, pays close attention to instances of abuse and takes prompt actions to stop them. For example, since early 2021, SportSG has stepped up its on-site enforcement measures. A person who books a slot must be present and be part of the playing party or risk the booking being cancelled. In addition, SportSG conducts periodic checks on suspicious booking patterns in the ActiveSG system and on-selling activities across various social media platforms. If suspicious booking patterns are found, the accounts will be suspended for a period of three months for the first time and 12 months for repeat violations. Since 2021, more than 600 bookings have been cancelled for on-selling activities and about 200 ActiveSG accounts have been suspended for suspected bot usage.

Government agencies have also put in place technical measures, such as the use of Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA), introduction of delays between login attempts, and web application firewalls with bot control features, to detect and prevent automated bots from launching actions on websites. As technology evolves, bots will become more sophisticated and require newer counter-measures. These may come at a cost to user experience, including to persons with disabilities or who have intermittent access to the Internet. The Government must strike a balance between introducing frictions to protect against abuse by some, and usability for the vast majority.

REPRESENTATION OF RESIDENTS AFTER DISSOLUTION OF PARLIAMENT

3 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Prime Minister after Parliament is dissolved and before the results of the General Election are announced (a) whether the former Members of Parliament are allowed to (i) hold Meet-the-People sessions in their constituencies, interact with residents and provide assistance to them and (ii) write appeal letters to Government agencies or other organisations on behalf of their constituents; and (b) if they do, whether the Government agencies are obliged to respond to them.

Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister): The law does not prohibit anyone, including former Members of Parliament (MP) from holding Meet-the-People sessions, interacting with residents and providing assistance to them, such as by writing appeal letters, after Parliament is dissolved, as long as they do not misrepresent themselves to be serving MPs.

Ministries and other Government agencies will duly consider any appeal letters received, whether they are written by serving MPs, former MPs or members of the public and will reply to the appeal letters after due consideration.

ACCURACY OF GUIDELINES IN SECTION 2.4 OF CANDIDATE HANDBOOK FOR GE 2020

4 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Prime Minister whether the guidelines in section 2.4 of the Candidate Handbook for General Election 2020 published by the Elections Department concerning activities from the Writ of Election to Nomination Day are legally accurate.

Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister): The guidelines in section 2.4 of the Candidate Handbook for General Election 2020, concerning activities from the Writ of Election to Nomination Day, are legally correct in respect of General Election 2020.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN TO WOMEN DEGREE HOLDERS

5 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Prime Minister for women holding Bachelor degrees or higher educational qualifications born (i) before 1968, (ii) between 1968 and 1977 and (iii) between 1978 and 1987, what is the breakdown by percentage who respectively have (i) 0 children, (ii) one child, (iii) two children and (iv) three or more children.

Ms Indranee Rajah (for the Prime Minister): The Census of Population published by the Department of Statistics provides the number of children born to ever-married resident women, by age group and highest qualification attained. The relevant figures published in the Census of Population 2020 are extracted below for reference.

Age Group (Years)	Total	Number of Children Born				
		None	1 Child	2 Children	3 Children	4 Ch
		University*				
Total	334,761	75,244	87,066	128,572	36,752	
15 - 19	-	-	-	-	-	
20 - 24	423	279	109	36	-	
25 - 29	21,185	14,583	5,054	1,396	136	
30 - 34	59,755	23,657	21,031	13,161	1,679	
35 - 39	68,773	11,745	18,614	30,496	6,752	
40 - 44	63,797	8,953	15,150	29,657	8,473	
45 - 49	49,512	7,205	12,051	22,538	6,456	
50 - 54	30,572	4,399	6,816	13,630	4,755	
55 - 59	18,772	2,340	3,996	8,035	3,611	
60 - 64	11,151	1,352	2,355	4,412	2,393	
65 - 69	5,727	355	1,095	2,720	1,287	
70 - 74	2,787	226	455	1,504	529	
75 - 79	1,254	110	214	575	324	
80 - 84	773	26	103	315	276	
85 & Over	281	14	24	100	82	

*University includes bachelor's degree and higher educational qualifications. Data pertain to residents who were not attending educational institutions as include those who were upgrading their qualifications through part-time courses.

The relevant percentages can be ascertained from this publicly available information.

OUTCOME OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS INVESTIGATED FOR OFFENCES

6 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Home Affairs of the children and young persons who are investigated for offences in the last three years, how many are (i) issued with stern warnings, (ii) issued with conditional warnings, (iii) charged and obtained a discharge amounting to acquittal, (iv) charged and obtained a discharge not amounting to acquittal and (v) convicted.

Mr K Shanmugam: Between 2020 and 2022, a yearly average of (a) 873 children and young persons under the age of 16 were issued with stern warnings or conditional warnings for offences investigated by the Police or Central Narcotics Bureau; (b) 94 were charged and convicted; and (c) none were charged and obtained a discharge, whether amounting or not amounting to an acquittal.

OUTCOME OF CASES UNDER CHAPTER 11 OF PENAL CODE

7 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Home Affairs in each of the last 10 years (a) how many cases involving Chapter 11 of the Penal Code, relating to false evidence and offences against public justice, have the Police investigated; (b) what is the median time taken to investigate such cases; and (c) what is the breakdown of outcomes for such cases.

Mr K Shanmugam: Based on more readily available data, from 2018 to 2022, Police investigated 389 cases involving offences under Chapter 11 of the Penal Code. Of these, 61 cases were eventually prosecuted in Court. The remaining cases are still under investigation or had been issued with warnings, or no further action had been taken.

Police do not track the time taken to complete investigations of offences under Chapter 11 of the Penal Code. It depends on many factors, including the complexity of the case and availability of witnesses.

PROFILE OF FOREIGNERS GRANTED SINGAPORE CITIZENSHIP

8 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Home Affairs for each year since 2000, what is the (i) age, (ii) profession and (iii) income distribution of foreigners who have been granted Singapore citizenship.

Mr K Shanmugam: On age, the Member may refer to my parliamentary reply to him on 1 August 2022. *[Please refer to "Gender and Age Breakdown of New Citizens at Point of Obtaining Citizenship Each Year Since 2000", Official Report, 1 August 2022, Vol 95, Issue 65, Written Answers to Questions section.]*

On profession, from 2000 to 2022, at point of application, on average, about 37% of new Singapore Citizens (SC) granted each year were Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians (PMET), 14% were non-PMETs and 49% were not economically active. The last group comprises those who were not working and were granted SC on the basis of family ties to Singaporeans, being dependants of main applicants, or were still studying.

Based on available data, from 2012 to 2022, at point of application, on average, about 32% of new SCs granted each year had a gross monthly income above the median income of full-time employed SCs of that year. This calculation includes new SCs who were granted SC on the basis of family ties to Singaporeans, being dependants of main applicants, or were still studying; and may or may not have been working at the point of application.

MOTORISTS CHARGED FOR OBSTRUCTING EMERGENCY VEHICLES

9 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Home Affairs in each of the last three years (a) how many motorists have been charged under the Road Traffic Act 1961 for obstructing emergency vehicles; and (b) what is the breakdown of vehicle types for these offenders.

Mr K Shanmugam: Under the Road Traffic Act 1961, it is an offence for motorists to obstruct emergency vehicles that are responding to an emergency. The composition sums for this offence are \$150 for light vehicles and \$200 for heavy vehicles. Offenders will also receive four demerit points. In cases where there are aggravating factors, the Traffic Police will charge the offenders in Court. First-time offenders can be fined up to \$1,000 or imprisoned up to three months, or both.

Between 2020 and 2022, no motorists were charged in Court for this offence. The number of motorists offered composition sums was four in 2020, two in 2021 and zero in 2022.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the motorists offered composition sums, by vehicle type.

Table 1: Breakdown of Motorists offered Composition Sums by Vehicle Type

	2020	2021	2022
Light Vehicles	4	2	0
Heavy Vehicles	0	0	0

TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS INVOLVING FOOD DELIVERY OR COURIER RIDERS

10 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) whether the Ministry will consider collecting data on the number of road traffic accidents involving motorcycles, power-assisted bicycles and personal mobility devices ridden by persons performing food delivery or courier services; and (b) whether the Traffic Police intends to roll out more road safety public education campaigns targeted at such road users.

Mr K Shanmugam: The Traffic Police (TP) do not actively track the occupation of road users involved in accidents.

That said, TP have been increasing public education efforts targeted at persons working in food delivery and courier services, through the National Delivery Champions Association, as well as delivery companies, such as Grab and foodpanda. These efforts aim to promote safe riding practices.

TP also partner the Ministry of Manpower, the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council and the Land Transport Authority to engage these road users and their delivery companies. For example, in November 2022, the Delivery Safety Workgroup set up by the WSH Council released a set of guidelines on how delivery companies can enhance the safety of their drivers and riders on the road. These guidelines include providing drivers and riders with feedback on their safety behaviour using telematics, engaging those who show repeated risky behaviours, equipping them with knowledge on how to be safe and reducing their exposure to unsafe situations, for example, rushing during wet weather, riders carrying heavy loads. Many members of the Delivery Safety Workgroup, which include key food, e-commerce and courier delivery companies, have implemented these recommendations.

LAND VALUATION FOR COMMUNITY CENTRES AND CLUBS

11 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Law how is the land valuation for community centres and community clubs calculated.

Mr K Shanmugam: The answer relates to Community Centres and Clubs which are on land managed by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA).¹ The vast majority of Community Centres and Clubs are on land managed by SLA.

SLA values the rent for tenancies that it issues for Community Centres and Clubs at the prevailing market rate for Civic and Community Institution use, taking into consideration various parameters, such as location, floor area, land area and also the specific types of other uses, for example, childcare centre, shops, within the development.

Note(s) to Question No(s) 11:

¹ There is a small number of Community Centres and Clubs, which, for a number of reasons specific to the area, or how the land was allocated and so on, are on land managed by other agencies/Ministries.

LIFE-CYCLE ASSESSMENT OF CARBON FOOTPRINTS OF CARRIER BAGS

12 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment whether the Ministry will consider highlighting (i) the life-cycle assessment of the carbon footprints of plastic bags vis-à-vis paper bags and reusable cotton bags and (ii) the challenges of composting paper in the Singapore context as NEA rolls out its disposable carrier bag charge.

Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien: In 2018, the National Environment Agency (NEA) released the key findings of a lifecycle assessment study on carrier bags and food packaging used in Singapore. The study estimated that using a reusable bag for one year could replace 125 single-use plastic bags, or 52 single-use paper bags.

The study found that single-use plastic bags had the highest global warming potential and energy consumption. On the other hand, single-use paper bags and single-use biodegradable plastic bags contributed significantly to deforestation and had high water consumption among the carrier bags studied. Hence, substituting single-use bags of a certain material type, for example, plastic bags, with single-use bags of another material type, for example, paper or biodegradable plastics, would not necessarily result in a better environmental outcome. The most environmentally friendly option is to minimise use of disposables where possible, by reusing our carrier bags.

There is no paper composting or recycling facility in Singapore. Paper recyclables collected are aggregated and sent to overseas facilities for recycling.

Ahead of the implementation of the disposable carrier bag charge from 3 July 2023, we encourage everyone to do their part for the environment by using reusable bags.

PROJECTED INCREASE IN HOSPITAL BED CAPACITY IN NEXT FIVE YEARS

13 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether the Ministry has data on the expected increase in the number of private hospital bed capacity in the next five years and, if so, what is the number; and (b) whether there are any plans to call for the tender of additional hospitals to supplement the projected increase in public hospital bed capacity.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The Ministry of Health (MOH) does not have the projected capacity of private hospitals as they are driven by commercial and other considerations.

Nonetheless, MOH does facilitate the development of private hospitals which operating model can complement that of public healthcare institutions. We will announce such plans whenever they are available and ready.

CALIBRATION OF NUTRI-GRADE SYSTEM AND PLANS TO EDUCATE PUBLIC

14 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether nutritionists were consulted in the calibration of the current Nutri-Grade system; (b) whether the Ministry will consider expanding the current Nutri-Grade system beyond sugar and fat content to provide a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of the nutritional value of drinks for the different age groups; and (c) how does the Ministry plan to educate the public on the limitations of the current Nutri-Grade system.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The Ministry of Health (MOH) had consulted local experts from different disciplines including nutrition, food science, behavioural science and public health epidemiology, to ensure that the Nutri-Grade grading system is scientifically robust and designed to spur industry reformulation and nudge consumer behavioural change. The Nutri-Grade grading system focuses on sugar and saturated fat, as they are the current key nutrients of concern in beverages.

The Health Promotion Board (HPB) rolled out a public education campaign in December 2022 to increase awareness of the Nutri-Grade mark, including advisories that beverages graded C or D may still be recommended for individuals with specific dietary needs, such as full cream milk for children aged one to two years old, and 100% juice for seniors with difficulty in chewing whole fruit.

MOH and HPB will continue to monitor the implementation of the Nutri-Grade grading system and the impact to the public and review it as appropriate.

USE OF HANDPHONES AND ABSENCE FROM OPERATING THEATRE BY MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS DURING SURGERY

15 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether the Ministry will introduce rules on the conduct of medical professionals during surgery to prohibit the use of handphones; and (b) how are medical professionals from public hospitals held accountable if they are absent from the operating theatre when conducting surgery and an emergency arises.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines (ECEG) of the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) guide medical professionals in providing medical care. In their clinical practice, medical professionals must regard the care of their patients as their primary concern. They should not engage in actions that, by commission or omission, jeopardise patient care or pose risks of harm to patients. This duty of care applies in all clinical settings, including in the operating theatre.

Medical professionals must not allow themselves to be distracted during their provision of care to their patients. If they are called away to attend to more urgent matters, for example, to attend to other critically ill patients, they should arrange for clinical cover so that the quality of care provided is not compromised.

The use of handphones and other communication devices is, generally, not prohibited within the hospital. This is because medical professionals engage in team-based practice and need to communicate with one another to coordinate care for their patients. Medical professionals should use their handphones and other communication devices responsibly.

Medical professionals will be held accountable if they are negligently absent from the operating theatre when on duty. First, they will be subject to the disciplinary process of the healthcare institution. They may also be subject to sanctions under the SMC disciplinary process if a formal complaint is lodged.

LENGTH OF LEASE DURATION OF PUBLIC RENTAL FLAT TENANTS

16 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development with regard to public rental flat tenants (a) what is the current 25th percentile, median and 75th percentile length of lease duration with the HDB; and (b) how do the lengths of the lease differ when compared to 10 years ago.

Mr Desmond Lee: Among public rental tenants, the length of stay at the 25th percentile, median and 75th percentile is currently four years, 10 years and 19 years respectively. The corresponding figures for 2013 are three years, eight years and 17 years.

ALLOCATION OF PUBLIC RENTAL FLATS TO APPROVED APPLICANTS

17 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development (a) whether the Ministry can provide the current outstanding number of public rental flat applications which are approved but have yet to be allocated a flat; and (b) what is HDB's process for the prioritisation and allocation of available rental flats to approved applicants and the weightage of various factors that are considered.

Mr Desmond Lee: Approved public rental applicants will be invited to select a flat in chronological order, that is, from the earliest to the most recently approved. Each applicant will be invited up to three times to select a flat. Those who do not select a flat after being invited twice will be deprioritised, to give other applicants the chance to select a flat first. Upon appeal, priority may be granted to applicants who are in urgent need of housing, such as those with medical grounds or other exceptional circumstances.

There are about 1,000 approved applicants who have not selected their public rental flats. Forty percent of them had been invited to select a flat previously but did not do so. The average waiting time for approved applicants to be invited to select a flat has come down over the past year to about six months currently.

SUPPORT FOR SINGAPOREANS TO RENT IN OPEN MARKET

18 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development (a) what measures are being considered to support Singaporeans intending to rent a house in the open market; (b) whether rent control mechanisms are being considered for the private housing market; and (c) what are the thresholds and parameters that the Government will consider before implementing housing rent control mechanisms.

Mr Desmond Lee: The vast majority of Singaporean households own their homes. To support the minority of Singaporeans who need to rent, there are existing measures, such as the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS), for eligible families waiting for the completion of their BTO flat. We have been working to increase the PPHS supply and are on track to double it to about 1,800 PPHS units

by this year. We are also ramping up the supply of public and private housing, which will inject supply into the rental market in the coming years. For example, close to 100,000 public and private housing units will be completed from 2023 to 2025.

International experience has shown that rent controls are likely to distort the housing market and may inadvertently reduce rental supply or disincentivise landlords from maintaining proper upkeep of their rental units.

We are monitoring the situation closely and will adjust our policies as necessary.

SPALLING CONCRETE CASES REPORTED TO HDB IN PAST THREE YEARS

19 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for National Development of the annual number of spalling concrete cases reported to the HDB in the past three years, how many cases pertain to HDB flats that are (i) five years old and below, (ii) five to 15 years old, (iii) 15 to 25 years old, (iv) 25 to 35 years old and (v) 35 years old and above.

Mr Desmond Lee: In the past three years, there were no reported cases for flats that are (i) five years old and below. For flats that are (ii) five to 15 years old and (iii) 15 to 25 years old, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) received about one case per 1,000 flats per year. For flats that are (iv) 25 to 35 years old and (v) 35 years old and above, HDB received about three and 32 cases per 1,000 flats per year.

FORGERY OF IN-PRINCIPLE APPROVAL LETTERS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

20 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) whether the Ministry investigates potential collusion between employers in Singapore or local employment agencies with overseas agents for forgery of in-principle approval letters for migrant workers; and (b) if not, whether the Ministry will start doing so.

Dr Tan See Leng: The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) conducts thorough investigations to identify the parties involved in all our cases. As part of the investigation process for the forgery of in-principle approval (IPA) letters, MOM will establish whether there is any collusion between the local employer or the employment agency with the overseas agent. From our investigations into all these reports for the period 2018 to 2022, only one local employer was charged and convicted in Court for this offence. MOM will not hesitate to take enforcement action against any errant local employer or employment agency who is found to be complicit in forging the IPA letters.

INCLUSION OF OTHER QUALIFYING FULL BANKS AS FIXED DEPOSIT BANKS UNDER CPFIS

21 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Manpower with regard to Fixed Deposit Banks under the CPF Investment Scheme (CPFIS) (a) whether the CPF Board has considered including other banks in addition to the three local banks; (b) how many Qualifying Full Banks have applied to be a Fixed Deposit Bank under CPFIS; and (c) whether CPF Board has approached these Qualifying Full Banks that meet the criteria to offer such services under CPFIS.

Dr Tan See Leng: In addition to the three local banks, one Qualifying Full Bank¹ has applied for inclusion as a fixed deposit (FD) bank under the CPF Investment Scheme (CPFIS). CPF Board welcomes interested banks to apply for inclusion as a FD bank under CPFIS. Relevant information on the inclusion criteria² and application process is published on the CPF Board website.

Note(s) to Question No(s) 21:

¹ Qualifying Full Banks are foreign banks conducting a range of MAS-regulated activities, including retail deposit-taking, in Singapore. These banks may also offer Supplementary Retirement Scheme and CPF Investment Scheme accounts, and accept fixed deposits under the CPF Investment Scheme and CPF Retirement Sum Scheme.

² Inclusion criteria as a FD Bank under the CPFIS: (a) locally-incorporated bank with capital fund size of at least S\$1.5billion and has a good credit rating; or (b) subsidiary of a locally-incorporated bank which meets criteria (a); or (c) foreign banks with Qualifying Full Bank privileges.

**CORRECTION BY WRITTEN STATEMENT
CLARIFICATION BY MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS**

The following statement was made in the reply given by the Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) during the Second Reading debate of the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill at the Sitting of 21 March 2023:

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim): What is key is that with the capabilities that we have built and those that we have detected before, we will be able to test quickly. But there will be new ones where if we have not got any confirmation, we will not arrest the person. [*Please refer to "[Misuse of Drugs \(Amendment\) Bill](#)", Official Report, 21 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 94, Second Reading Bills section.*]

Written Statement by Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim circulated with leave of the Speaker in accordance with Standing Order No 29(5):

I wish to make the following factual correction to the reply given during the Second Reading debate of the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill at the Sitting of 21 March 2023. My reply should read as follows:

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim): What is key is that with the capabilities that we have built and those that we have detected before, we will be able to test quickly. But there will be new ones where if we **do not have reasonable suspicion**, we will not arrest the person.

ANNEXES

Annex 1()

Annex 2()

Annex 3()

VERNACULAR SPEECHES

Vernacular Speech by Dr Wan Rizal()

Vernacular Speech by Mr Zaqy Mohamad()

Vernacular Speech by Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim()

Vernacular Speech by Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim()

Vernacular Speech by Ms Joan Pereira()