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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTEENTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

Wednesday, 1 March 2023

The House met at 10:30 am

VOLUME 95

NO 89

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.

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast).

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 Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang).

Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio).

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

Ms Foo Mee Har (West Coast).

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

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).

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 Puthuchear (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.

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member).

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 Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member).

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).

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

Ms Mariam Jaafar (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.

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).

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

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok).

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio).

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

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).

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 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).

Dr Tan Yia Swam (Nominated Member).

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer).

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 Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar).

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang).

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

Mr Xie Yao Quan (Jurong).

Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

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:

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong).
Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member).
Mr K Shanmugam (Nee Soon), Minister for Home Affairs and Law.
Mr Tan Kiat How (East Coast), Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and National Development.
Mr Teo Chee Hean (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security.
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (Jurong), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (Holland-Bukit Timah), Minister for Foreign Affairs.
Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

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 K Shanmugam	22 Feb	01 Mar
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam	26 Feb	05 Mar
Mr Teo Chee Hean	28 Feb	02 Mar
Dr Ng Eng Hen	01 Mar	03 Mar
Dr Shahira Abdullah	01 Mar	01 Mar
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan	01 Mar	03 Mar

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

FURTHER ROLL-OUT OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TEAMS IN SCHOOLS

The following question stood in the name of **Ms Mariam Jaafar** –

1 To ask the Minister for Health what are the plans for the further roll-out of mental health support teams in school, including independent schools.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): Question No 1, please.

The Senior Minister of State for Health (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Health): Sir, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has developed various mental health services catering to youths. In schools, the Response, Early Intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH) collaborates closely with the school and family to provide mental health interventions, such as depression, anger and anxiety management, coping skills and social skills group programmes to students with mental health needs. MOH will continue to work with the hospitals to ensure there are adequate resourcing for the REACH teams to cope with the needs from schools.

In the community, we have set up services including the Youth Community Outreach Teams (CREST-Youth), Youth Integrated Teams (YITs) and Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) that reach out and engage with at-risk youths. These services work closely with the schools and Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) to provide mental health screening and assessments, emotional support and psychosocial interventions and link youths to the appropriate resources and other services for further support.

ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT'S COVID-19 PROCUREMENT AND EXPENDITURE

2 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance with regard to the Ministry's review on COVID-19 pandemic-related procurement and expenditure (a) what is the total value of expenditure made (i) without quotation estimates and (ii) with single quotations respectively; and (b) for each of these categories, what is the total amount made to related parties.

The Senior Minister of State for Finance (Mr Chee Hong Tat) (for the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance): Speaker, from January 2020 to July 2022, agencies adopted Emergency Procurement procedures to directly contract with suppliers instead of going through open sourcing. I hope the Member understands why such an arrangement was necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, for the Government to respond swiftly to the crisis.

Of the \$72.3 billion COVID-19 pandemic-related spending, about 90% was not for procurement of goods and services, but to provide support for families, workers and businesses. Of the \$8 billion of procurement, none were made without a quote, and about \$1.1 billion was made with a single quote, for the purchase of testing and swabbing services, as well as food and medical supplies.

For those procurement contracts that were entered into with single quotes, no procurement was made to related parties, which refers to companies that are directly owned by the Ministries or Statutory Boards.

Government agencies are expected to ensure proper and impartial evaluation is done and seek the necessary approvals for all procurement, including those done under Emergency Procurement procedures. All procurement transactions are further subjected to independent checks by agencies' internal audit teams and the Auditor-General's Office (AGO).

Mr Speaker: Mr Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): I thank the Senior Minister of State for his reply. Does the total COVID-19 spending of \$72.3 billion include the amounts spent by Temasek Holdings, Temasek Foundation and other Temasek-linked companies for their COVID-19 activities?

Secondly, the scope of the review requested by the Ministry of Finance (MOF) only covers whether the transactions were bona fide and that there were no erroneous payments. Will MOF and AGO also be reviewing potential wastage in the procurement process and ascertaining whether the value-for-money procurement approach was adhered to in all instances?

Mr Chee Hong Tat: Sir, the first question from Mr Giam, yes, there were contracts that were awarded to Temasek-linked companies. I think some of these were also previously discussed in this House.

The second question on whether the audits would cover not just to make sure that the transactions were done in accordance with proper procedures – I think that was what the Member was saying – but also to ensure value-for-money, yes, I think the audits, both the AGO's and also the internal audits, will look to cover both areas. [*Please refer to "Clarification by Senior Minister of State for Finance", Official Report, 1 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 89, Clarification section.*]

Mr Speaker: Mr Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song: Sorry, on the first question, I just want to clarify. What I was asking for is not the contracts that were awarded to Temasek-linked companies, but the expenses incurred by Temasek in terms of giving out face masks, various oximeters and all that. Was that part of the \$72.3 billion or was that something that Temasek incurred on their own?

Mr Chee Hong Tat: Sir, I think we were talking about Government spending. So, what I cited earlier in terms of the \$72.3 billion, I mentioned in my reply that the bulk of it, 90%, was not meant for procurement, but as support – Job Support Scheme, the COVID-19 relief grants and so on and so forth – that we give to families, workers and businesses.

The \$8 billion – I have given Mr Giam a breakdown of which are single quotes. This is Government expenditure, this is from the Government.

If I turn to what is, I think, Mr Giam's larger question, is it whether you think that Temasek companies should be included in this overall Government expenditure? No? Okay. Thank you.

PRIVATE COMPANIES PROVIDE CASH ADVANCES TO THEIR EMPLOYEES AS EXEMPT MONEYLENDERS

3 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Law (a) how many private companies, including Grab, are authorised to provide cash advances to their employees as exempt moneylenders; (b) whether exempted moneylender schemes such as Grab's Partner Cash Advance programme which charges an interest rate comparable to that of credit card companies should be subjected to the same regulations for moneylenders; and (c) what measures are there to prevent companies from using "cash advances" as a means of engaging in moneylending activities with high-interest loans.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Law (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Law): Mr Speaker, at the outset, it is important to set out the framework that applies to the regulation of moneylenders in Singapore, as this is necessary to answer the Member's question.

The Moneylenders Act 2008, or MLA, prohibits persons from carrying on the business of moneylending unless they (a) are authorised to do so by licence, (b) have been granted an exemption, or (c) are excluded moneylenders.

Moneylenders that are licensed can lawfully lend money to the public at large and must comply with the MLA and its subsidiary legislation.

An "excluded moneylender" is a person falling within a list of definitions in the MLA and includes any person that lends solely to that person's employees as an employment benefit. The provisions in the MLA and its subsidiary legislation do not apply to excluded moneylenders. The Ministry of Law (MinLaw) does not regulate excluded moneylenders and does not maintain figures on the number of such moneylenders.

An “exempt moneylender” refers to any person that has been granted an exemption by MinLaw from complying with various provisions of the MLA and its subsidiary legislation, including the requirement for a licence to lend money. Exempt moneylenders can only engage in a limited scope of moneylending activities, such as lending to specific borrowers or for specific purposes. Lending by exempt moneylenders must be assessed to have potential benefits, such as providing an avenue of safe credit to meet a specific need, while also having sufficient safeguards in place to protect borrowers. There are currently 31 exempt moneylenders.

Before granting any exemption to any applicant, MinLaw carefully examines the proposed lending model to ensure borrowers get safe access to credit with adequate protection. The factors considered include the profile of the applicant, the purpose of the proposed lending model, the prudence of the lending practices adopted, whether there are safeguards in place to protect potential borrowers and the economic or social benefits arising from the lending model.

For each exemption granted, the key features of the proposed lending model, including the charges on loans, are incorporated as conditions to the exemption, which the exemptee is expected to comply with. In addition, exempt moneylenders, like licensed moneylenders, are required to observe borrowing cost restrictions, to prevent them from extending loans with exploitative interest rates. An exemption can be revoked for non-compliance with its conditions.

In this regard, GFin, a subsidiary of Grab, intended to implement its “Partner Cash Advance” programme for Grab drivers and delivery partners. As these persons are not employees of GFin, GFin could not be considered an excluded moneylender. Hence, GFin had to apply for an exemption to implement the programme.

In granting the exemption to GFin, MinLaw assessed that its proposed programme provided an alternative source of safe and sustainable credit to their partners who might not qualify for other forms of credit or who may be charged high interest rates due to their irregular incomes. Furthermore, GFin had incorporated sufficient safeguards in the programme such as developing an internal credit scoring system to assess the maximum amount of loan a partner could take and had put in place various initiatives to provide support for partners who face challenges in making repayments. Having weighed these considerations, MinLaw granted GFin an exemption in August 2022 for a period of three years.

Should MinLaw receive other similar exemption applications in future, the same framework in which we assessed GFin’s application will be applied to these applications.

Mr Speaker: Mr Yip.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the reply. Learning from GFin, how can we better monitor and regulate the introduction of new initiatives and programmes that offer commercially high interest loans, which are just like licensed moneylenders?

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: As explained in my answer earlier, there is already a framework in place, which is the MLA, to regulate the practice of moneylending. So, if they do not comply, then, they would be in breach and that would be non-licensed, and there would be penalties that will be attracted.

In respect of programmes like these that have been put out by Grab, these are in a special category and they have to apply for exemptions. As I mentioned, there are rigorous criteria that we look through before that exemption is granted. The conditions are attached to the exemption and there is monitoring as to whether there is compliance and whether it is within a certain timeframe, after which they are either extended, with or without conditions, or not given further. I trust that addresses the Member's questions.

INVESTIGATION INTO FEEDBACK RECEIVED ON SPEEDING VEHICLES WITH MODIFIED ENGINES

4 **Dr Lim Wee Kiak** asked the Minister for Transport (a) how much feedback has LTA received from residents in the past year from speeding vehicles with modified engines; (b) what is the estimated time frame for LTA to conduct an investigation and to implement measures to address the issue; and (c) whether the Traffic Police cameras that are located in the area will be equipped to capture the footage related to this problem.

The Senior Minister of State for Transport (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Transport): Enforcement against speeding and the illegal modification of engines is done by the Traffic Police (TP) and Land Transport Authority (LTA) respectively. In 2022, TP received about 420 complaints about speeding; LTA received about 3,600 reports on illegal modifications.

LTA conducts onsite checks on the reported vehicles, either at the reported location or at the registered address. Vehicles assessed to be illegally modified will have to be inspected at authorised inspection centres. The registered owner of an illegally modified vehicle will be charged under section 5 of the Road Traffic Act and liable for a fine of up to \$5,000, imprisonment of up to three months, or both.

Investigations typically take approximately eight weeks and can be longer for more complex cases.

TP uses cameras for enforcement against speeding. When TP officers on patrol detect a speeding vehicle with suspected illegal modifications, the case will be referred to LTA for further investigation.

Mr Speaker: Dr Lim.

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang): Sir, I would like to thank the Senior Minister of State for the reply. My residents complain a lot about vehicle noise, especially along Woodlands Ave 10. At night, it is usually very quiet and there will be occasional vehicles that are very, very loud.

My question to the Senior Minister of State is whether we can use technology such as noise-detection cameras like those deployed in the UK and New York last year as stated in reports, to detect such vehicles. It is very hard – by the time they report, the vehicles are gone; unless the Police can be there all the time, and especially in the middle of the night.

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan: As the Member has rightly pointed out, vehicle noise, particularly in the middle of the night, may even seem louder than what it would be, because of the low ambient surrounding noise. Vehicle noise may not just be because of illegal modifications or speeding. It could be the vehicle design, the way the driver drives a car and maintenance and so on.

Having said that, we note the concerns of residents and we do work with TP as well as the National Environment Agency (NEA) to carry out enforcement operations when there is a need.

With regard to that use of technology, acoustic cameras, currently we have no plans. This is actually under NEA. So, currently, my understanding is that we have no plans to install such noise measuring instruments to detect violations, simply because it is actually quite challenging.

Unlike a speeding offence, you can capture it with a speed camera visually. It is challenging to attribute the source of noise to a specific vehicle due to interference from surrounding traffic as well as other sources. The acoustic cameras, as they are called, I think, still have limited ability in detecting noise violations from individual vehicles accurately and reliably.

So, we are monitoring developments in technology in this area and if possible, if useful, we will utilise it, with a view to strengthen enforcement. But at the moment, there are currently no plans. We are monitoring the technology.

PROVISION OF INCENTIVES FOR HOUSEHOLD ENERGY EFFICIENCY IMPROVEMENTS

The following question stood in the name of **Ms Mariam Jaafar** –

5 To ask the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment whether the Government will consider providing incentives for household energy efficiency improvements.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): Question No 5, please.

The Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment): Sir, as this topic will be addressed in the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment's (MSE) Committee of Supply (COS) debate, which will be happening soon, I would like to request that the Member waits for the detailed response during MSE's COS debate.

SYNERGISED APPROACH ACROSS AGENCIES TO PRESENT COMMON FRONT AGAINST VAPING

6 **Mr Murali Pillai** asked the Minister for Health having regard to the prevalence of vaping as a substitute for smoking and the potential for vaping and smoking activities to happen together, whether there is scope to consider synergising the enforcement capabilities of the Health Science Authority with the National Environment Agency to present a common front against vapers and those who are in breach of the prevailing regulations.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health): Mr Speaker, the Ministry of Health (MOH) takes a multi-pronged approach to address the issue of vaping, including working with our partner agencies to strengthen enforcement measures and public education efforts.

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and National Environment Agency (NEA) are working together on a cross-enforcement pilot for NEA's enforcement officers to also enforce against vaping offences.

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok): Mr Speaker, Sir, I am glad to note that the HSA and NEA are working together to deal with this problem. Having regard to the increasing rate of vapers – and as I understand between 2020 to 2022, it is four times more vapers being caught – is there sufficient enforcement bandwidth with HSA to make sure that we send a strong signal that those who breach the laws in dealing with vaping, action would be taken against them? And really, we want to stem the tide, so to speak.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: I thank the Member for the question. Indeed, that is the main issue about making sure that there is meaningful enforcement, in light of the increasing rates that we are seeing. Part of the intent of the cross-enforcement pilot is to look into that and how we can synergise resources to be able to delegate the work and address the growing concern in the community.

LESSONS FROM ANTI-WASTE SOCIAL EXPERIMENT THAT SEEMED TO GENERATE MORE WASTE

7 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment having regard to a recent anti-waste social experiment by NEA that seemed to generate more waste whilst raising awareness (a) whether the use of existing waste materials will be prioritised over creating new ones for future campaigns; (b) whether there are plans to seek input and involvement from local environmental organisations and advocates in planning future campaigns; and (c) whether the Ministry will consider sharing lessons from public reactions in shaping future sustainability awareness and as part of its public education efforts.

The Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment): With "The Waste Cafe", the National Environment Agency (NEA) had sought to illustrate the cumulative environmental impact of a seemingly simple act of consuming coffee using a disposable cup. The social experiment has generally been well-received. The collected used cups were repurposed into impactful educational exhibits that are roving across Singapore to raise public awareness about the importance of reducing, reusing and recycling.

We have noted the views of those who felt that the experiment could have been done differently and have suggested areas for improvement. We welcome feedback from all parties and will take them into consideration to improve our future campaigns.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): I thank the Senior Minister of State for her reply. Will the Ministry consider using technology and digital displays instead of physical waste to showcase excessive consumption and not use methods such as providing free items to generate additional waste for future campaigns?

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan: I thank the Member for his views as well as suggestions. As I noted, the collected used cups were actually repurposed and used as part of the roving exhibition. In fact, some of it is used as a facade of now what we call The Waste Less Cafe, where the members of the public can get free coffee if they bring their reusable mug. Some are also repurposed as craft for children.

But as I have also noted, we hear and note the differing views of some and the suggestions that have been given, and we certainly will take their feedback including the Member's views and suggestions into consideration in our future campaigns.

REQUEST FOR PEDESTRIAN OVERHEAD BRIDGE ALONG UPPER SERANGOON ROAD

8 Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong asked the Minister for Transport whether LTA will consider giving priority to the inclusion of the pedestrian overhead bridge located along Upper Serangoon Road next to Blocks 362 and 363 Hougang Avenue 5 into its lift installation programme given the larger concentration of seniors living in the vicinity.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Transport (Mr Baey Yam Keng) (for the Minister for Transport): Mr Speaker, for the retrofitting of lifts, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) prioritises pedestrian overhead bridges (POBs) at locations which benefit large numbers of seniors and commuters with mobility challenges, and which are near public transport nodes and healthcare institutions.

The POB highlighted by the Member will be accorded due priority in LTA's future reviews based on the above criteria.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang): I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the reply. Is the Senior Parliamentary Secretary able to advise on what is the likely time range that these lifts will be installed on this overhead bridge? Because there have been calls, appeals to LTA, as LTA would know very well, for a number of years since the previous Member of Parliament of Hougang had been in office.

As LTA would have noted by now, there is a large number of seniors as well as young parents and they need the use of this overhead bridge to access the nearby town centre including the MRT station, the bus interchange and the nearby Hougang Polyclinic as well. So, we would be grateful if the Senior Parliamentary Secretary can give an expected time range for my residents.

Mr Baey Yam Keng: Sir, LTA conducts the retrofitting of POBs in phases. We are now in Phase 4 and we aim to complete Phase 4 by 2028. So, currently we are reviewing the POBs among the approximately 600 POBs in Singapore to see how we can prioritise the various POBs.

The POB in the Member's constituency as I said will be accorded due priority. It would be accorded higher priority than other POBs with a lower number of senior residents living nearby. We also note that there are clinics and also the Hougang Central Market that would be served by this POB. That would be given due priority in our assessment. I seek the Member's and his residents' patience.

Mr Speaker: While we are on this topic, I would like one in Ubi as well.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY GRANT AMOUNT DISBURSED

9 Ms Mariam Jaafar asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) how much has been claimed in energy efficiency grants since its inception; and (b) what is the profile of the companies that are claiming the grants.

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Low Yen Ling) (for the Minister for Trade and Industry): Mr Speaker, since the launch of the Energy Efficiency Grant (EEG) on 1 September 2022, Enterprise Singapore has received more than 1,000 applications. The majority of applicants are from micro-SMEs with annual revenue of less than \$1 million and more than half are from the food services sector.

In addition to the EEG, businesses can also tap on other energy efficiency schemes, like what I mentioned during the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) Committee of Supply (COS) debate yesterday, including the National Environment Agency's (NEA) Energy Efficiency Fund, the Economic Development Board's (EDB) Resource Efficiency Grant for Emissions and the Building and Construction Authority's (BCA) Green Mark Incentive Scheme for Existing Buildings 2.0. Businesses can also refer to the GoBusiness website for more information on available resources.

Mr Speaker: Ms Mariam Jaafar.

Ms Mariam Jaafar (Sembawang): I thank the Minister for the response. Can I also check how does this number of 1,000 applications measure up to what MTI had expected or desired when launching the scheme, bearing in mind that the scheme is now being extended for another year? Do you have additional targets in mind and what can be done to increase adoption, if it falls short of expectations?

Ms Low Yen Ling: Mr Speaker, I want to thank the Member Ms Mariam Jaafar for her questions. I want to reassure her and the Members that in MTI and all our economic agencies, in particular Enterprise Singapore, are very focused on helping SMEs on their sustainability journey.

And to that end, we have also elaborated during the MTI COS debate yesterday that we have rolled out several schemes and measures that include supporting our SMEs in making the green transformation at a systems level. For example, from acquiring expertise and skills to new technology and capabilities. My colleague Minister of State Alvin Tan talked about the Enterprise Sustainability Programme – that is an important programme to help SMEs integrate sustainability into their business processes, products and services.

We also know that because of the elevated energy price, there are some sectors that are particularly more affected. For example, the food services, the food manufacturing as well as the retail sectors.

This is why we have curated the EEG and when we launched it on 1 September, we are focusing on the SMEs in these three sectors. Because based on our feedback and based on our dialogue with the companies as well as with the trade association and chambers (TACs) representing the sector, these are the sectors which have been significantly affected by higher electricity prices in terms of the impact on their overall business cost. So, the EEG supports the firms in these three sectors in improving the energy efficiency and alleviating increasing business costs, due to increased energy prices.

The scheme was only launched five months ago and since then, we have been working with the TACs, specifically Restaurant Association of Singapore, Singapore Retailers Association and Singapore Business Federation, and other TACs like Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and so on, to raise awareness of this scheme.

And now we are focused on following up on the interest that has been surfaced by the companies. I want to assure the Member that MTI will certainly continue to work closely with our industry partners including TACs and the companies in these three sectors to explore and develop cost competitive and secure solutions that will meet both our long-term energy needs and low emission targets.

10.58 am

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.]

ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024

(Committee of Supply – Paper Cmd 20 of 2023)

Order read for consideration in Committee of Supply [4th Allotted Day]

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD K (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION)

(A vibrant economy and a resilient workforce)

Head K (cont) –

Resumption of Debate on Question [28 February 2023],

"That the total sum to be allocated for Head K of the Estimates be reduced by \$100." – [Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan].

Question again proposed.

The Chairman: Minister for Education.

10.58 am

The Minister for Education (Mr Chan Chun Sing): Chair, we thank Members for all their suggestions and comments. In particular, the passionate speech by Ms Denise Phua and the vivid imagery of Mr Patrick Tay's Iron Man.

To Ms Phua, I would like to share that indeed new wine needs new wineskins, not just one type but many types, to cater to the diversity of needs and aspirations of our people. More importantly, we need new mindsets, which I will come back to, together with Mr Patrick Tay's Iron Man.

Like the public, some Members have asked the Ministry of Education (MOE) to do less. They are calling for later start times and earlier end times. They believe in teach less, test less, less stress and hopefully, better results for all.

Others have asked MOE to do more. They want smaller class sizes, smaller schools, closer guidance and supervision, better support for students with higher needs and more types of learning opportunities; including Ms Carrie Tan, who suggested incorporating more nature and outdoor experiences into the curriculum.

Many Members have given us suggestions on what more we should teach in our schools. I was hoping to also hear more views on what we can remove from our students' and teachers' load.

Some have called for more porosity in our education pathways, more social mixing in schools. Others want affiliation priority and alumni privileges to be maintained, to build stronger school networks and uphold their school culture. Some have called for the removal of Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), others to extend PSLE preparations for our students to more overseas schools.

11.00 am

Some have called for smaller school sizes, more niche programmes and co-curricular activities (CCA). Others think every school should be able to offer a comprehensive and identical suite of programmes and CCA. Ultimately, we all have to work within the finite resources and time budget of our school system, students, teachers and even parents, to best meet the needs of diverse needs of our children.

Every idea is well-meaning but it affects different groups of stakeholders differently. To chart our way forward, we have to first understand the complex needs of the future and the diverse needs of our children.

A more uncertain world demands resilience. Resilience comes from a diversity of strengths. A more diverse population with diverse aspirations demands mass customisation beyond mass access. We should expect a more variegated system, with more models, but within our means and capabilities and a less structured system to allow adaptation and faster evolution.

We are starting from a position of strength. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study found that our students from less advantaged backgrounds not only outperformed their international counterparts of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but they did better than the OECD average in all core domains. These students typically have less access to private tuition and have still managed to do well by international standards. This goes to show that our students are industrious and our education system is doing something right. Instead of attributing our students' achievements to the private tuition industry, we should give credit to our students, schools and teachers where credit is due.

In recent years, our efforts to support our students to progress to our post-secondary education institutions have also been paying off. Today, about 97% did so in the year 2021. This is significant by any international standards.

Nonetheless, we will be the first to acknowledge that our system is not perfect. Indeed, I do not believe that there will ever be "perfection" for our system. Adaptability, resilience and relevance to the times are much more important attributes and we certainly will not sit on our laurels.

I have covered the larger philosophical and directional issues of our education system at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2023 seminar. Members can read the speech online and I do not intend to repeat them today.

Instead, today, let me walk Members through the challenges and aspirations for each stage of our education journey.

We start by giving every child a good start in life. There is more scientific evidence and we all agree that the foundational years play a critical role in our children's holistic development. Beyond numeracy and literacy, this is also when they develop important socio-emotional skills and their innate curiosity to learn.

Hence, we have taken decisive steps to make affordable and high-quality preschool education accessible to families. Today, there are 50 MOE Kindergartens (MKs) all over Singapore. We are on track to opening another seven by 2025 and a further three by 2027 based on current plans. The 60 MKs will contribute to the Government's commitment to achieve 80% Government-supported preschool places by around 2025.

Today, around 95% of all Singaporean children aged five to six years old are enrolled in preschools, even without making it compulsory under the law. So, that is not our biggest challenge. However, among children from the lower-income families, we still see an enrolment gap at ages three to four, and poorer attendance compared to their peers. We need to go beyond enrolment to encourage regular attendance. More importantly, we need to work with families to create conducive home environments which can help our children's development so that all these efforts will complement and not undo the good work of our preschools.

We know that there is no silver bullet in addressing these complex family and social issues. The Government provides targeted assistance to lower-income families based on their individual circumstances. This includes supporting them in their parenting journey through KidSTART and highly subsidising the cost of preschool. Together with the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), we welcome more ideas on how preschools, families and the community can work together to better support children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Next, for primary schools, let me deal with three issues: Primary 1 (P1) registration, affiliation and PSLE.

Mr Lim Biow Chuan and Mr Louis Chua asked about the P1 Registration Exercise. Parents consider various factors in selecting primary schools for their children. Some parents prefer convenience for a school near their homes. Others would like their children to join their alma mater, so they can benefit from a similar school experience and become part of the same school community. Yet, others place a premium

on the types of programmes offered by a school.

While MOE can guarantee more than sufficient places for all Singapore Citizen children in our primary schools, no one has yet found a way to satisfy all parental preferences. The P1 Registration Framework has to strike a careful balance among the competing considerations. Each year, about 98% of Singaporean children get into a primary school of their choice, or within two kilometres of their residence. We revised the framework last year and we will continue to update the system as circumstances change and societal needs evolve.

More importantly, we need to promote a mindset shift among us parents. Every child is unique in his or her temperament, strengths and aspirations. Every school provides valuable and distinctive programmes. Instead of asking whether a certain school is a good school, the more relevant question to ask is, "Is this a good school for my child?"

As parents, we should choose schools based on our children's needs, rather than the perceived prestige or popularity of the school.

Members have also discussed the educational merits of school affiliation. It enables a school to preserve its traditions and culture, and build a stronger school spirit. But affiliation, beyond a certain point, is not without its risks. We need to avoid closed and exclusive social circles, which risk fragmenting and stratifying our society, especially as our society matures. This means we must ensure that schools with affiliation remain open, accessible and inclusive for students of diverse backgrounds.

This balance to maintain the accessibility of our schools to all, regardless of background, is a dynamic balance that we must be prepared to adjust over time according to our societal circumstances and needs.

MOE cannot do this alone without the support of school alumni and parents. The privileged, among us, must believe in sharing their access and networks. We must understand the responsibilities that come with success and not inadvertently form closed social circles.

As Spiderman would say, "To those with great powers, come great responsibilities." And I hope that all the alumni from the successful schools understand what I mean.

Moving on to PSLE, there are calls to remove the PSLE, but for different reasons – all well-meaning, but not always without unintended consequences.

Some think it is too stressful. But it is neither realistic nor desirable to shield our children from all the stresses they will have to face in life, especially in a more competitive and globalised world. Our job as parents and educators is to help our children pick up the skills and positive attributes and attitudes to manage the demands of school, work and life in general; to grow our capacity to overcome stress and not just to shield ourselves from unnecessary stress.

We should not demoralise our children through incessant comparison. Instead, we should help them maximise their potential and do justice to their gifts. This is why MOE introduced changes to the PSLE scoring system in 2021, so that the results are no longer as finely differentiated and reflect students' objective performance, rather than relative to their peers. This encourages students to focus on their own progress instead of comparing themselves with others.

This is why in all my Edusave Awards Ceremony, I remind the students that "it is more important to keep surpassing oneself through life than just surpassing someone else in an exam".

We have also received feedback that removing the PSLE would allow our children to pursue other dimensions of growth. Indeed, we have been focusing more on important life skills in our curriculum. Hence, all weighted assessments have been removed for Primary 1 and Primary 2 since 2019, and Mid-Year Examinations will be removed for all primary and secondary levels this year.

Besides reducing the assessment load and perceived examination stakes, these adjustments free up more time and space in schools to strengthen learning dispositions and holistic development.

Some Members, including Assoc Prof Jamus Lim, Ms Hazel Poa and Ms Denise Phua, in previous years, have brought up the related concept of through-train programmes. In fact, we have studied this issue very carefully in MOE but there are various implications to work through.

First, if we do away with the PSLE, we lose an important checkpoint in assessing a student's mastery of core concepts as they transit from primary to secondary school. The PSLE is a useful guide for students to take subjects at appropriate levels at the next stage of learning. Without the PSLE, it would be more challenging to place students in a suitable educational setting and not always better for learning outcomes, nor teaching efficacy.

Second, many parents and students would like to choose their schools or educational setting. For this group, removing the PSLE entirely would deny them this choice, or simply transfer stress elsewhere, such as to competition for P1 registration. In simple terms, few would hesitate if the through-train programme helps their children get into a popular secondary school. But many would hesitate if it means they do not have a choice to be in a secondary school of their choice through merit. We should also consider if a through-train model would reduce opportunities for students to interact with peers of different backgrounds through their primary and secondary years.

There are other ways to support the learning needs of different students flexibly, without completely doing away with national examinations or moving entirely to a through-train system. An example is regional CCA groupings. Yet, another example is Subject-Based Banding (SBB), which Mr Baey Yam Keng and Mr Darryl David have asked for updates on.

Next year will mark a significant milestone with the implementation of Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB) in our secondary education system. Beyond reducing stigmatisation, the removal of course labels will lead to meaningful changes in our students' educational journey. Students will have greater flexibility to take subjects at a level that is more or less demanding, depending on their strengths, interests and learning needs. There will be more social mixing, with increased opportunities for students to interact with peers of different profiles.

However, it is not a straightforward transition for schools to make. Teachers will need to get used to managing classes with diverse student profiles. It is actually more work and harder work for our teachers and schools. Our teachers are willing to do this for the benefit of our students, but we should not think that it does not demand more from our teachers.

Students will need to take greater ownership of their learning. Our schools also have to grapple with the practical issues such as timetable scheduling for various subject combinations. MOE will carefully and systematically work through these issues to support our schools in the implementation of FSBB and provide them with the necessary resources.

At the same time, if we accept that our children have different abilities and needs, then we should accept that we should not make every school take the same approach to teaching and learning. This is why we have a variegated education landscape today. Schools offering the Integrated Programme and Specialised Schools will not implement the full features of FSBB because they cater to specific student profiles through a whole-school approach. Homogenising all our schools for the sake of social mixing alone would come at the expense of our ability to offer mass customisation and differentiated experiences for our students. I do not think this is the outcome that Members want from us.

Nonetheless, we have sought to enhance diversity in our schools through other means, while moving away from the sole dependence on the national examination as a single metric for placement to secondary schools. This includes our efforts to increase the proportion of students admitted via Direct School Admission (DSA) system and broadening the definition of DSA selection process to recognise a range of talents, potential and achievements.

Let me now elaborate on how FSBB will change students' educational journey.

The vast majority of students will continue to be admitted to secondary schools based on their PSLE scores. Starting from the 2024 Secondary 1 cohort, MOE will post Primary 6 students to secondary schools through three Posting Groups – Posting Groups 1, 2, and 3 – mapped to the PSLE score ranges for Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic) and Express courses respectively. This ensures that schools continue to admit students with diverse strengths and students continue to have access to a wide range of schools. By admitting students from different Posting Groups, schools can also enable diversity at the class level, with mixed form classes that comprise students offering subjects at different subject levels.

11.15 am

Unlike streaming, Posting Groups will only be used to facilitate admissions and to determine students' initial subject levels for most subjects at the beginning of Secondary 1. Beyond that, Posting Groups will not shape the secondary school experience. Currently, students may choose to take certain subjects at a more demanding level if they are eligible. Under Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB), this flexibility has been expanded to more subjects.

With guidance from their schools, some students have also begun to offer elective subjects at a less demanding level. This gives them room to pursue their interests without adding undue stress to their overall curriculum load.

Finally, at the end of secondary school, students will receive a common certificate – the Singapore-Cambridge Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) which reflects their different subject combinations and levels. Starting from 2027, SEC will replace the separate Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) "O" and "N" Level examinations.

The option of spending a fifth year in secondary school will remain available to students who wish to offer subjects at a more demanding level. This is to allow them to pace their learning and potentially access more post-secondary pathways. To cater to a wider profile of students offering subjects at different subject levels, FSBB changes will be accompanied by expanded admission and progression pathways in our Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs). Minister Maliki Osman will share more details.

Students should still have strong fundamentals to thrive in the pathways they choose. Hence, we will be retaining the existing junior college admission criteria to ensure students can cope with the A-Level curriculum. Mr Baey Yam Keng and Mr Darryl David asked if MOE plans to review the "A" Level curriculum, to ensure that it remains relevant in today's education landscape. Over the years, we have gradually reduced curriculum content to free up more time and space for the development of 21st Century Competencies, or 21CC, as we call it.

Today, the curriculum content of most of our "A" Level syllabus is already similar or narrower than the international syllabus used as benchmarks, for comparison. It is not possible to reduce curriculum content further without compromising the overall rigour. However, we will be making key changes in other ways.

First, Project Work (PW) nurtures 21CC and life skills through working in teams. These are the very skills which Members have said are essential to thrive in the future of work. To encourage students to make the most of the exciting collaborative and interdisciplinary learning experience offered by PW, we will make it a Pass/Fail subject, and exclude it from the computation of the University Admission Score (UAS).

Our students have done well in PW over the years. Making PW a Pass/Fail subject now encourages our students to exercise greater agency and creativity in areas of interests, rather than be driven by grades alone. A Pass in PW will still be required for admission to the Autonomous Universities (AUs), to show that students have attained the skills which are critical for future learning and work. We will implement these changes from the Academic Year 2024, the JC1 and Millenia Institute (MI) Year 2 cohort onwards.

Second, to nurture the joy of learning, we want our students to follow their passions, instead of only picking subjects that they will score well in. To achieve this, we will make changes to how we compute the University Admissions System (UAS). From the Academic Year 2026 admissions, the fourth content-based subject will no longer be counted in the computation of UAS by default and will only be included if it improves UAS.

This will also allow our students to better calibrate their learning load, so that more time can be redirected to holistic development. I should emphasise that students will continue to benefit from a broad-based "A" Level curriculum, as they still have to offer four content-based subjects, of which one would be from outside their specialisation.

Parents and educators may be concerned that our pre-tertiary students will no longer take their fourth content-based subject or PW seriously. We believe that our students will still apply themselves. Today, it is already optional for students taking H1 Mother Tongue Language (MTL) to include the subject in their UAS computation. Nevertheless, these students continue to put effort towards their MTL studies as they are intrinsically motivated to learn and improve. And this is exactly the positive attitude that we hope to cultivate through our curriculum changes – with students taking ownership of their own learning.

Lastly, similar to what has already been done for our primary and secondary schools, we will remove Mid-Year Examinations for all junior colleges and MI. The time saved from preparing for examinations can be channelled towards deeper student engagement and learning through more varied experiences. Teachers will continue to use assessments in a formative and calibrated way to monitor learning progress and support each student. The removal of the Mid-Year Examinations will take place in phases for different levels in junior colleges and MI starting from 2024.

Our efforts to foster stronger 21CC development and ensure future-ready graduates extend to our IHLs as well. Mr Sharael Taha highlighted that companies value industry-relevant skills and competencies over paper qualifications. Our IHLs equip students with life skills competencies, such as critical thinking, innovation, communication, as well as self-awareness and mental resilience.

Part of the training in IHLs also includes developing interdisciplinary expertise, which means that students learn to apply knowledge and skills across different fields. For instance, under the new Minor programme launched by Republic Polytechnic this year, students can embark on additional areas of study beyond their diploma, such as in Business, Digitalisation or Sustainability.

Let me now turn to lifelong learning, which I am happy to note has caught Members' interest and attention. Ms Denise Phua noted that in the 2016 OECD Survey of Adult Skills, Singaporeans aged 16 to 34 performed well, while those aged 45 to 65 performed lower than the OECD average in literacy and numeracy. This is a reflection of how OECD countries have built up their education systems much earlier than us and their older cohorts have benefitted from this.

For Singapore, we should take heart that we have done a tremendous job in bringing our schools and higher education system to high standards within the span of the past few decades. This is why the performance of our younger Singaporeans were comparable with the advanced economies. But we will not stop there. With lifelong learning, we are now doing more for both our young and young-at-heart, as what we teach and learn in the first 15 years is no longer adequate for the next 50 years, without a significant top-up.

I thank Mr Patrick Tay for his suggestions to increase Continuing Education and Training (CET) opportunities. In fact, given the rapid pace of industry transformation, we can expect more dynamic changes in the demand for skills. However, Members have also raised concerns about perpetuating a paper chase. Indeed, this is not our intention.

The objective of continual learning must be the purposeful and timely acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills. When a certain defined body of knowledge or skills has been acquired, the qualification then serves to reflect the mastery attained. The stackable pathways that our IHLs have significantly expanded in recent years enable this. Today, there are pathways offering substantive skills upgrading at different levels catering to Nitec, Diploma and Degree holders.

Over the past few years, annual enrolment into stackable courses has grown from around 31,000 to around 36,000, from 2018 to 2022. We will ensure that training opportunities continue to be industry-relevant, accessible, affordable and just-in-time, to better meet the needs of our adult learners.

Today, we have a 40% lifetime cohort participation rate target for subsidised undergraduate degree places for fresh school leavers, and an additional 10% allowance for adult learners. In close consultation with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and economic agencies, we have decided to increase the "lifetime cohort participation rate" for publicly funded university degrees by 10 percentage points, from 50% currently to 60% by 2025, so that more Singaporeans can obtain a degree from our AUs, not just at the point of 18 years old, but throughout their life.

This takes into account the demand for degree-level manpower across the economy in the medium term, arising from our industry transformation efforts. The move to a "lifetime cohort participation rate" concept symbolises the change in mindset that we need to embrace. There is no need to rush to frontload education, as there will be more subsidised places for CET pathways to support upgrading

later in life. It is also about ensuring that the format of these CET programmes is suited to the needs of our working adults and to the industries that they work in. The AUs have begun to innovate their offerings to better cater to adult learners' needs as well.

Let me illustrate using the ICT sector. Mid-career workers looking to switch into the ICT sector can pursue a degree in Applied Computing at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) whilst working. The degree programme will be delivered through a mixture of asynchronous and in-person learning to help adult learners manage their busy schedules. Polytechnics' Post-Diplomas will also be recognised for credit exemptions, to provide a more seamless upgrading pathway for Diploma holders.

Individuals who are already working in the ICT sector can deepen their skills or pick up new specialisations through SIT's micro-credentials. These are modular courses which deliver job-related skills in areas, such as Computer Networks and Software Engineering. They can also stack these micro-credentials towards the Applied Computing degree.

Alternatively, individuals who prefer a more skills-based upgrading pathway can sign up for the 42-Singapore Programme in Computing, a collaboration between Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and École 42. There are no academic prerequisites, and students will undergo industry-relevant training centred on project-based and peer-to-peer learning.

MOE is also studying how to better support mid-career workers by enabling them to upskill ahead of job transitions. In the past year, under the Forward Singapore exercise, we heard from Singaporeans on the barriers to reskilling or upskilling, particularly for those in their 40s and 50s. We are looking at ways to reduce the high opportunity costs of training for this group of workers, to enable them to participate in more substantive training for a skills reboot. For example, we are considering how to provide more support through a SkillsFuture Credit top-up, and training allowances for mid-careerists in transition who go for intensive full-time training.

However, to achieve lifelong learning, just shifting individual attitudes and raising the supply of training programmes will not be enough if employers continue to fixate on credentials. We need employers to hire and compensate workers fairly, based on their skills rather than paper qualifications, support workers in their upskilling and provide opportunities for workers to apply new skills at work. This will ensure that after undergoing training, Singaporeans can get a real boost to their employability and wages, and access to better job opportunities.

Chairman, I have talked about providing customised and porous pathways for continual learning across the life course. Three key enablers undergird this vision: technology, educators and partnership. Technology is altering every aspect of life, and education is no exception. Technology has raised the productivity in our schools. We have, and will, continue to digitise and streamline manual processes with the use of Parents Gateway, a one-stop portal for schools to communicate with parents. This has helped to alleviate teachers' admin workload.

But as Mr Darryl David, Mr Lim Biow Chuan and Dr Wan Rizal have observed, the potential of the EdTech Plan goes beyond that. We have seen how technology allowed learning to continue across all schools even through the COVID-19 pandemic. EdTech also allows for mass customisation of teaching and learning, catering to the diverse learning needs of our students. These have been enabled by our national online learning platform – the Singapore Student Learning Space (SLS). With your permission, Chairman, may I ask the Clerks to distribute a screenshot of SLS?

Mr Chairman: Please do. *[A handout was distributed to hon Members.]*

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Members may also access these materials through the MP@SGPARL App. The screenshot shows the SLS resource library, where students can learn a range of academic subjects from primary school to pre-university, as well as to explore their non-academic topics, such as financial literacy. Students can access these online resources via SLS anytime, anywhere.

Let me share two examples. First, with the MTL Text-to-Speech and Speech Evaluation tools, students can practise their oral communication skills and receive feedback instantly. I am quite sure most parents do not know this. Second, students can use simulations and interactives to visualise concepts which might otherwise be hard to grasp. For example, the movement of individual particles in a wave or the relationship between distance and time illustrated by the movement of a train.

With SLS, all our students have effectively been equipped with a "personal tutor"; that is, a wealth of resources and tools to guide their individual learning, no matter their financial resources.

The screenshot which we had distributed is meant as a taster for the parents amongst us. I hope that Members will find time tonight to log in with your children to explore its many useful features. And this is a friendly cost-saving tip for all parents; no need to go and buy other school exam papers and try our SLS for free.

Imagine the future of learning augmented by EdTech, where our higher-needs students can identify and improve their areas of weaknesses by revisiting lessons and resources at their own pace, and higher-ability students can stretch themselves by progressing to more advanced topics or topics that interest them. This mass customisation uplifts the bottom and stretches the top without overloading our teachers.

11.30 am

In the next phase, MOE will also introduce AI-enabled systems to better support our educators to teach more effectively. To give an example, the Learning Feedback Assistant for English Language will provide basic and personalised feedback on grammar and spelling to students, allowing our teachers to focus on more complex aspects of language use, such as creative expression and tone.

MOE will progressively implement these systems through the SLS from the fourth quarter this year. We will share more about our long-term EdTech plans in the coming months.

Today, MOE already takes a two-pronged approach in supporting our students' diverse learning needs.

First, we put more resources where the needs are higher. Schools have the flexibility to deploy teachers to teach students with higher needs in smaller pull-out classes. Second, we focus on recruiting and training competent educators to ensure that our students receive high-quality education. In the future, we can add a third prong to capitalise on EdTech to further enable self-directed and adaptive learning, to better support our students with different needs.

As EdTech becomes a pivotal part in our strategy to support the diverse learning needs of our students, our teachers must also grow and be conversant with EdTech.

I thank Ms Denise Phua and Dr Wan Rizal for their interest in how we empower our teachers. MOE will continue to support our teachers with training and resources to develop their capacity to teach with technology.

To help teachers plan for their personal and professional development, MOE is refreshing the Teacher Growth Model. Teachers will learn more about pedagogies that lend themselves better deliver the 21CC gain digital literacy as well as content and skills related to STEM and environmental sustainability.

Indeed, educators are the backbone of our education system. Rest assured that we will not tolerate any abuse towards our teachers. We have provided schools with clear guidelines on establishing positive home-school partnerships.

I hope to have everyone's support to respect the professionalism of our teachers and not create undue stress for our teachers when they do not fulfil our individual demands. Supporting our educators in focusing on higher value tasks and providing them with opportunities for professional development are some other ways in which MOE supports the well-being of our teachers.

Finally, I agree with Mr Shawn Huang and Mr Sharael Taha about the importance of forging partnerships for education. Parent Support Groups (PSGs) have been active partners in enhancing our students' educational experience, such as in the area of Education and Career Guidance. For instance, in Palm View Primary School, the PSG invites parents in diverse occupations to share with the students about their work. Such collaborations help our students better understand their interests and aspirations, as well as the range of careers available.

Alumni also play an important role in plugging students and fresh graduates into industry networks. For example, SMU's Alumni Mentoring Programme provides a platform for students and graduates to gain insights into specific industries and discover job opportunities.

And I call on companies and unions to work closely with our IHLs and schools to help our people keep up-to-date with the fast-paced industry developments and emerging opportunities. We share responsibility in preparing our students for the workforce and inspiring the next generation.

Some companies have partnered our schools to broaden students' exposure through the Applied Learning Programmes (ALPs). For example, as part of Dunearn Secondary School's ALP in STEM, food scientists from Fraser & Neave (F&N) Ltd conducted a workshop for interested students to learn about processes behind the creation of new drinks. The F&N food scientists have also been conducting annual Food Science career talks for the graduating students. I hope to see more of such partnerships.

It is a win-win situation when companies and unions are directly involved in the training and development of IHL students. All polytechnics, ITE and most AUs have made internships a compulsory component of their courses. Last year, more than 2,300 companies partnered our IHLs to provide internships. The students were able to connect what they had learnt in the classroom to their workplace, while the companies were able to access a new pipeline of talent.

Minister Mohamad Maliki Osman will now elaborate on MOE's other policies and I promise to Mr Patrick Tay that I will come back to Iron Man before we conclude.

The Chairman: Minister Dr Mohamad Maliki.

The Second Minister for Education (Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman): Mr Chairman, MOE is committed to bringing out the best in every student and support them to their full potential. As our education system evolves to keep pace with global developments, we must pay special attention to students with greater needs and ensure that they have the opportunities and resilience to grow up well, regardless of their starting point in life and the challenges that they face.

As Mr Shawn Huang and Ms He Ting Ru pointed out, some students from disadvantaged families find it harder to keep up in school due to their home circumstances. This may lead to long-term absenteeism issues, struggles with motivation and lower self-esteem.

To safeguard social mobility and ensure that these students receive the support and develop resilience to overcome challenges in spite of their difficult home circumstances, we established the "Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce" (UPLIFT) in 2018.

In 2020, we piloted the UPLIFT Community Network (UCN) to strengthen the support ecosystem for students from disadvantaged families and address school attendance issues early. As the pilot showed positive outcomes, I updated Members last year that the UCN will be rolled out nationwide progressively from 2022.

Let me provide an example of the support provided by the UCN. Daania was a Secondary 4 student who skipped school frequently and felt disengaged from her teachers and peers. She has five other siblings, including a newborn. I am very sure Members would have seen such cases in their respective constituencies. With her father being the sole breadwinner and mother juggling child-minding responsibilities, Daania did not have a good relationship with her parents as they found it difficult to set aside the time and energy to engage and support her. Despite Daania's attendance issues, her teachers continued to reach out to her and to encourage her to attend school more regularly. The school also offered financial and academic support to help her cope.

The UCN complements the school's efforts in two ways. First, the Town Level-Coordinator in the UCN ropes in community resources to provide supplementary support to students' educational and developmental needs. Daania was also enrolled in the MENDAKI's Tuition Scheme, where she also received additional academic and mentoring support.

Second, the Town-Level Coordinator supports parents to improve and stabilise the home environment, including having volunteer family befrienders mentor these families. With the relaxation of the COVID-19 restrictions, befrienders resumed in-person visits from June last year, allowing them to better connect with their families. In Daania's case, the Coordinator worked with two befrienders to provide Daania's mother with emotional and financial support. The befrienders helped Daania's mother with the childcare application for the youngest child, freeing her to better support her other children. With their support and advice, the relationship between Daania and her mother improved tremendously.

Daania also regained motivation and confidence in her studies. Her school attendance improved and she did well enough to progress to a course of her choice in ITE. The term has started for a few months now and I am glad that she is coping well.

Stories like this illustrate how collaboration between schools, families and the community can benefit our students for those who need help. Parents share that they felt more supported by the UCN, appreciate the increased community support and have seen positive developments in their children. Schools similarly appreciate that closer collaboration with social service agencies (SSAs) from the UCN support. This gives us the confidence to continue with our plans to roll out the UCN nationwide to 12 more towns in 2023. We expect to support about 1,300 students and their families this year.

Mr Chairman, beyond the UCN, many community partners have stepped forward to support and befriend students from disadvantaged backgrounds under UPLIFT. For example, we partnered the Singapore Management University (SMU)'s Centre for Social Responsibilities to pilot befriending programmes for primary school students in need. SMU students and schools co-created activities that served to build students' motivation and resilience. We are grateful for the help of our community partners and will strengthen our partnerships with the community.

To strengthen the support provided to disadvantaged and at-risk students within the school environment, we have also provided additional manpower resourcing to schools through the UPLIFT Enhanced School Resourcing initiative. These additional resourcing support schools in establishing more targeted programmes for students with higher needs. For example, some teachers have been deployed to provide mentoring and additional academic support for students with absenteeism issues.

The number of schools supported under this initiative has grown from 23 schools in 2019 to 47 schools in 2022. We plan to further expand this to about 100 schools in the next few years, to support about 13,000 students. This is in addition to existing programmes like the Learning Support Programme for English (LSP) and the Learning Support for Mathematics (LSM) for lower primary students who need additional support in these subjects.

We will also continue to work closely with other Government agencies to explore how best to strengthen whole-of-Government social service delivery for higher-needs students and those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will include further integrating our processes with other social service initiatives, like ComLink and KidSTART, so that students and their families receive more coordinated and seamless support from the Government.

In addition to our UPLIFT efforts, MOE provides education subsidies and financial support to ensure that our national schools and institutes of higher learning (IHLs) remain accessible and affordable. For example, we recently enhanced financial assistance and bursary provisions for Singapore Citizens (SC) students from lower-income households in our schools and our IHLs respectively. This ensures that no Singaporean student is unable to access schools and IHLs because of financial reasons.

Mr Faisal Manap asked if we could extend financial assistance to non-citizen students studying in national schools with at least one SC parent. Financial subsidies are differentiated by students' citizenship status to reflect the benefits of citizenship, in line with the broader Government policy of differentiating benefits by citizenship status. Non-citizen students with financial difficulties can approach their schools for assistance. MOE will assess their situation and exercise flexibility on a case-by-case basis, with special consideration given to those from lower-income households.

Mr Faisal Manap also asked if MOE's financial assistance scheme and Edusave Awards, currently only available to SCs in national schools, can be extended to madrasah students. This is not the first time that he has made this point and this will not be the first time that MOE is giving this very considerate response. All SCs, aged seven to 16, receive yearly Edusave contributions for their educational uses.

However, students in private schools, including those in madrasahs, are not eligible for MOE's financial assistance scheme and Edusave awards. This reflects our preference for all SCs to enrol in national schools, to go through a common educational experience so as to build a national identity and social cohesion. Parents are aware and thus make informed choices when they decide to enrol their children in

private schools instead of our national schools.

Notwithstanding, the Government recognises the role of madrasahs in the community. MUIS provides financial assistance and alternative awards for madrasah students. For example, MUIS assists madrasah students from low-income families through the Progress Fund Madrasah Assistance Scheme (PROMAS) and administers the Madrasah Student Awards to recognise academic excellence and progress.

Let me move to another group of students – those with special educational needs (SEN). We will continue to enable them to lead meaningful lives and fulfil their aspirations despite their learning difficulties.

11.45 am

The challenges faced by families and students with SEN are multifaceted and require whole-of-community support across life stages. MOE works closely with various Government agencies and SSAs to meet the children's and families' needs at different stages of their journey. I will focus on the schooling years today and my Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) colleagues will share more on the additional support that will be provided beyond the school setting.

I thank Mr Shawn Huang, Ms Rahayu Mahzam and Ms Denise Phua for their suggestions and passionate call to MOE to provide more support for students with SEN. I want to tell them we hear you. We feel you and we are with you. Indeed, over the years, we have enhanced SEN support in the education landscape significantly. And we will continue to explore what more we can do with our partners to support our students with SEN.

We are committed to strengthening structures and teacher capacity for consistent enactment of inclusive practices across all our mainstream schools, in order to lower the barriers to learning and help our students with SEN build key life skills. Today, our schools are supported with teachers trained in special needs and SEN officers. These educators are guided by a dedicated case management team that monitors students' progress and overall well-being. They work closely with parents to develop holistic intervention plans, and support students' transition at different stages of their educational journey. Schools have also worked hard to grow an inclusive culture where peers actively appreciate and support each other. These friendships bring joy and teach students with SEN how to build meaningful relationships and thrive in school and in life.

For students with moderate to severe SEN, we have enhanced accessibility to quality Special Education (SPED) schools by strengthening curriculum efforts and ensuring sufficient capacity to cater to different disability profiles. We recently announced a fifth SPED school for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder who can access the national curriculum.

The IHLs similarly provide targeted support for students with SEN, from pre-enrolment to graduation. This includes course advisement for prospective students, helping students identify courses that better suit their interests and learning needs, and partnering educators to support students' learning needs. The IHLs also work with SSAs to prepare and ease students' transition to internship and employment. We will continue to work with schools and IHLs to strengthen support for our students with SEN across their educational journey.

Let me focus on two key enhancements in the SPED sector.

First, with growing emphasis in education to recognise diverse strengths among our students and the vision for an inclusive Singapore, a key focus is to help peers from diverse profiles integrate and learn from each other.

Since 2007, under Satellite Partnerships, SPED schools have been partnering General Education (Gen Ed) schools to conduct joint learning activities, such as learning journeys and camps. These activities promote inclusion between students with and without SEN, build capabilities for peer support and inculcate positive values.

From 2023, Satellite Partnerships will be replaced by School Partnerships, that is, partnership between Gen Ed schools and SPED schools, to broaden and deepen existing partnerships while cultivating stronger and more collaboration between SPED schools and Gen Ed schools.

Besides providing students with opportunities to develop deeper relationships through sustained and meaningful interactions, School Partnerships, that is, between Gen Ed and SPED schools, will also focus on professional exchange between teachers and build capabilities, something suggested by Ms Denise Phua in her speech yesterday. Such mutual professional learning can enhance pedagogical practices in the classroom and strengthen how teachers facilitate integration between students from partner schools to nurture them into empathetic, confident and independent learners.

An example of a successful partnership is between Bukit Merah Secondary School and Tanglin School. Partners since 2018, students from both schools share their passion for sports and co-curricular activities (CCAs) together through training sessions jointly organised by their teachers. Sudip from Bukit Merah Secondary School shared in his reflections that he learnt how to better work in a team and tap on one another's strengths through floorball practices with peers from Tanglin School. Likewise, James from Tanglin School shared that having the opportunity to train with peers from Bukit Merah Secondary School for the Play Inclusive Badminton matches brought them closer and taught him how to work alongside peers new to him.

I am heartened by the inclusivity shown by these students and the friendships formed over the years. We will work closely with Gen Ed and SPED schools to develop more meaningful partnerships by finding synergy through shared strategic directions, niche offerings and location proximity.

Second, MOE will continue to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in SPED schools to prepare students to be active in the community and contributing citizens.

Since 2020, we have embarked on developing SPED Teaching and Learning Syllabus across seven SPED learning domains to raise the quality of curriculum in SPED schools and to provide them with greater resources to achieve the desired SPED outcomes, including lifelong learning for our students.

Three SPED syllabuses were launched in the past two years for the learning domains which include one, Visual Arts; two, Daily Living Skills; and three, Vocational Education. These syllabuses have strengthened curriculum design and lesson delivery, and promoted stronger collaboration between educators and allied professionals, and partnerships with families and the community.

Two additional SPED syllabuses in one, Communication and Language; and two, Social-Emotional Learning will be launched this year.

First, the Communication and Language syllabus will be launched, and they will place stronger emphasis on communication and strengthen the partnership between teachers and Speech and Language Therapists to equip students with skills to connect meaningfully with others.

The second one, the Social-Emotional Learning syllabus will introduce skills of self-determination to give students' agency in pursuing their aspirations, and nurture confidence and resilience to cope with challenges and changes in their lives.

These are important life skills to better support students with SEN in their transition to post-school as they integrate with the larger community, help them live independently, learn continuously and work productively.

Alongside these curriculum enhancements, we recognise the need to continue working with schools to build capacity and develop the skills of educators to support the implementation of these syllabuses. We will also continue to deepen our partnerships with SSAs to attract talents and study the suggestions by Members to keep SPED schools forward looking.

Ms Denise Phua asked whether the formal SPED school exit age can be extended from 18 to 21 years old. While the exit age remains at 18 years old, MOE has extended funding for SPED students who can offer vocational certification. These students can access open and paid employment, and so a longer runway of up to 21 years old is given to them to attain these national certifications.

For a majority of SPED students, we have pegged the exit age at 18 years old taking into consideration that a post-school option would be more meaningful in supporting their transition from school to community. However, for all SPED graduates, MOE is committed to working with SG Enable and the SSAs to facilitate their post-school transition, and to co-create avenues for continual supports for them.

We fully appreciate the effort of all our SPED schools in equipping our students with skills to prepare them to lead independent and fruitful lives. It has not been an easy journey, but we have made significant progress. MOE will continually enhance our support for SPED schools, and more details will be shared at upcoming platforms this year.

Mr Chairman, aside from targeted support and programmes, we want to develop resilience in all our students, for them to persevere in the challenges that will inevitably come.

It is not easy being a youth in today's complex and fast-paced environment. Our youths face pressure on multiple fronts, including on social media. Many youths have spoken up and expressed concerns on mental health issues. In fact, many of us when we meet young people at our engagement sessions, key of their mind is really mental health issues. And Dr Wan Rizal also spoke on the importance of supporting our students' mental well-being. We would like to assure our students and parents that mental well-being will always be a key priority for MOE.

Over the past few years, aside from systemic changes to reduce overemphasis on academic grades and to nurture a joy for learning, we have strengthened measures to help students stay resilient amidst challenges and enhanced the overall system of support.

First, the refreshed Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum provides greater emphasis on Mental Health Education. The curriculum aims to help students tap on their natural strengths and develop a wider repertoire of skills and habits so that they can overcome the hurdles that they face, whether at home or in school or in the community. The roll-out for the refreshed CCE curriculum started in 2021 and will be completed by this year.

These resilience and social-emotional skills are further practised and reinforced beyond the classroom, such as through CCAs and camps. I encourage all students to make good use of these platforms and develop deeper bonds with your friends who will walk with you through the good and bad times.

These educative efforts also extend to the IHLs where there already are a good range of programmes in place to raise awareness on mental health issues.

Second, we have strengthened the support ecosystem for our students. All schools have peer support structures, and students are taught how to look out for, offer support to their peers and refer them to trusted adults where necessary.

Struggling students manifest their distress in different ways, such as social withdrawal or acting out behaviours. Teachers are equipped to look out for these signs of distress and understand underlying needs so that they can provide the right support and guidance. We are also enhancing mental health literacy to enable teachers to better identify and support students of all ages with mental health struggles. Schools have also set aside dedicated time and space at the start of each term for teachers to engage students on issues affecting their well-being.

We have also stepped up efforts in the recruitment of school counsellors and will continue to grow our pool of teacher-counsellors. Students who need professional support will also be referred to community resources. These efforts ensure that early identification of students with mental health issues and that support will be provided in a timely manner.

Beyond these school-based initiatives, we need strong partnerships with stakeholders, including parents, community partners and agencies. So, I encourage parents to actively journey together with their children and schools to facilitate a more holistic development for their children.

MOE is involved in inter-agency collaborative efforts such as the Interagency Taskforce for Mental Health and Well-Being to better support the mental health needs of families, children and youths. One area that the Taskforce is looking into is identifying ways to help youths and parents better access coordinated mental health services. MOH will share more details on these efforts.

12.00 pm

Let me now speak on the progress we have made in the polytechnic and ITE sector.

We agree with Ms Mariam Jaafar and Dr Wan Rizal on the need for our applied education pathways to support the growing interests and learner profiles among our youth.

In January 2022, I announced the recommendations from the Review of Opportunities and Pathways in Applied Education, which studied how to better support the diverse needs and aspirations of students and graduates from the polytechnics and ITE while ensuring that they have the relevant skills to thrive in the future economy.

Good progress has been made in two key areas.

First, to enhance students' career readiness and aspirations, ITE introduced the enhanced three-year ITE curricular structure leading directly to a Higher Nitec from the 2022 intake. Interim indicators from the first phase of implementation have been positive.

More students indicated interest for courses under the enhanced curricular structure compared to similar past Nitec courses. Lecturers also observed that students enrolled in the three-year courses are more motivated and attrition rates in the first six months have improved.

ITE will continue to monitor the outcomes of the first phase of implementation closely. It is on track in transitioning the remaining courses to the enhanced curricular structure by 2026. Students can look forward to courses such as the three-year Higher Nitec in Nursing and International Logistics, which will be launched next year.

Second, in recognition of the growing diversity in students' interests and learner profiles, the polytechnics are piloting flexible modular loads. Under this pilot, students can spread their learning beyond three years by taking fewer modules per semester. Such flexibility allows students to pursue other interests and take more time to build their academic foundation. The preliminary take-up rates have been encouraging.

In addition to this pilot, students are given the flexibility to take up electives, where feasible. With limited curriculum hours, institutions have to balance between allocating time for electives and for equipping students with the necessary specialised skill sets and knowledge to meet industry needs. MOE will work closely with the polytechnics and ITE to monitor the progress of these enhancements and make necessary adjustments to ensure they fulfil their intent.

As mentioned by Minister Chan Chun Sing, the Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB) will be fully implemented in secondary schools for the Secondary 1 cohort from next year onwards. This means that streaming will be removed.

This is a significant move in our overall general education landscape. With this move, students can customise their learning by taking a combination of subjects at different levels, suited to their strengths and pace of learning.

In line with this shift, MOE will adjust the admissions criteria for post-secondary pathways to recognise more diverse profiles of learners and provide them with more options. The range of post-secondary pathways that students could be eligible for will no longer be limited by streams but by their performance at different subject levels. Let me elaborate on these changes.

First, more students will be able to access the Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP). Today, the PFP is only open to eligible students from the Normal (Academic) stream. To allow a wider learner profile to benefit from the PFP, access to the PFP will be expanded to include students taking G3 subjects or a mix of G3 and G2 level subjects.

This change will take place from the 2028 PFP intake and the number of students accepted every year could increase up to 2,600 from about 1,700 today. The PFP admissions criteria will be maintained to ensure that students continue to have the fundamentals to cope with the rigour of the PFP.

We will also adopt a cluster-based admissions approach for the PFP from the 2026 intake. Today, students are admitted directly to specific diplomas in their PFP year. In 2026, students will be admitted to broad clusters such as sciences and humanities, arts, media and business before choosing a specific diploma in the cluster after their PFP.

Students will have more time to make informed choices. Polytechnics can also better match students' interest and abilities with specific diplomas. This builds on our efforts to expose students to multiple courses in a cluster before deciding on a specific diploma that they want to pursue, an approach currently adopted by the Common Entry Programmes in the polytechnics.

Second, MOE will review admissions to Polytechnic Year 1 to better recognise the different subject levels taken by students. For example, today, students have to take five G3 subjects to be eligible for Polytechnic Year 1. With FSBB, some may take subjects at the G2 level. We are exploring allowing one G2 subject to be considered for admission.

In addition to these enhancements, ITE students will have more opportunities and flexibility to determine their skills and competencies through the expansion of ITE diploma offerings. These offerings will enable students to better attain work-ready skills in line with changing industry needs.

ITE's Work-Study Diplomas (WSDips) and Technical Diplomas (TDs) are apprenticeship-based, which cater to students who prefer a more hands-on learning style.

WSDips also place students in jobs related to their discipline of study, allowing them to deepen their skills through a structured training programme. Thus far, about 1,600 students have graduated from ITE diploma programmes with positive employment outcomes and salaries comparable to that of polytechnic graduates.

In 2023, ITE will expand its WSDip offering by launching four new programmes, bringing together a total to 40 programmes under the WSDips initiative. ITE will also double the TD programmes, offering six TDs, up from three today.

A total of 1,400 places will be offered across ITE diploma programmes, enabling more than 10% of ITE Nitec and Higher Nitec graduates to progress through these pathways.

One student who has benefited is Izz, who enrolled in the Nitec in Space Design (Architecture) before progressing to the Higher Nitec in Architectural Technology. Izz interned at an architectural firm as part of his Higher Nitec course. The firm was so impressed by him and his hard work and dedication and decided to sponsor him for his WSDip in Architectural Building Information Modelling (BIM) and Design while concurrently employing him as an architectural assistant. This has allowed Izz to directly apply what he has learnt in class and work to client projects, giving him a head start in his career.

With these enhancements, we hope to better support the needs of diverse student profiles, their aspirations and strengthen their career readiness and resilience for jobs of the future economy.

Mr Chairman, we would also like to take this opportunity to assure Mr Leon Perera that internship is an important feature of our polytechnic and ITE education. Internships allow students to apply what is taught in the classroom to the real world and equip them with deeper industry-ready skills.

All polytechnics and ITE have made internships a compulsory component of their courses. Institutions also work closely with the industry to offer quality internships to their students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Mr Chairman, allow me to continue in Malay, please.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Chairman, MOE is committed to nurture and develop the potential of students with different needs and strengths.

For students with special educational needs, we will strengthen efforts to nurture inclusivity in schools by deepening partnerships between Special Education schools (SPED) and general education schools. It will create more opportunities for interaction and these aim to help students become more inclusive and thoughtful towards others. We recognise that it is not easy to nurture students with special educational needs. Therefore, we will continue our efforts to improve the teaching and learning in SPED schools. We will also channel more resources to SPED schools.

Apart from SPED schools, we will also make improvements in the polytechnic and ITE sector. Arising from the implementation of the Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB), the Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams will be removed. This is a major change in our education system landscape.

With FSBB, the admission criteria for post-secondary pathways will no longer be determined by streams but by subject levels and performance of students. Changes to the polytechnic admissions criteria will recognise a wider profile of learners and provide them with more options. Beginning with the 2028 Polytechnic intake, the Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP), which is limited to students in

the Normal (Academic) stream today, will be opened further to more learner profiles. We are also reviewing the Polytechnic Year 1 criteria to better recognise the different subject levels taken by our students.

We also recognise the ever-changing industry needs. In order to prepare our learners, ITE will expand their Work-Study Diplomas (WSDips) and Technical Diplomas (TDs) offerings to allow students to deepen their skills and competences through a more hands-on pedagogy. The expansion of the WSDips and TDs programmes aims to support ITE students in their aspirations for upgrading and to acquire Diploma qualification. So far, 1,600 ITE students have passed the WSDips and TDs diploma courses and managed to get good jobs with salaries equivalent to our polytechnic graduates. I encourage ITE students to make full use of the opportunities, given the positive employment outcomes. We will continue to encourage more of them to make use of these opportunities.

For primary and secondary schools, MOE recognises the importance of equipping students with a strong foundation in Mother Tongue Languages. This will enable our students to appreciate our heritage and culture, and communicate effectively with communities across Asia and the world.

In this regard, we have provided more opportunities for our students to use the Malay Language beyond the classroom. For example, the Malay Language Learning and Promotion Committee (MLLPC) collaborated with the Mandai Wildlife Group to launch the Kembara Nusantara programme. This programme promotes the teaching and learning of the Malay Language for preschoolers, their parents, and teachers through fun-filled activities at the Singapore Zoo. So, they will learn the Malay Language when they visit the Singapore Zoo. We will continually review our efforts to make language learning more authentic by leveraging on creative methods so that the love for Malay Language will continue to blossom in the hearts of our students.

12.15 pm

(In English): In conclusion, as we enhance our education policies in response to changing needs, we will help every student make the best of these opportunities and nurture them into skilful and resilient Singaporeans. We must also work together to strengthen the inclusiveness of our education system, so that no one is denied of a good education because of their circumstances. *[Applause.]*

The Chairman: Clarifications. Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim.

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): Thank you, Chair. Just a clarification for Minister Chan. I accept the Minister's arguments that the PSLE could, in fact, offer an important checkpoint and allow parental choice with regard to secondary school entry. But I wonder if he would not also agree that allowing a parent to choose for their child not to take the PSLE is yet another dimension of choice.

If so, then what are the inhibitions behind the – and I will emphasise this word – "optional" through-train policy as the Workers' Party (WP) has proposed? Does it have to do with resource constraints, such as a belief that it is not possible to create such through-train schools? Or is it more with a perceived lack of demand, as he may have alluded to? If it is the latter, what then would be the hurdles to piloting this for just a small number of schools to gauge the take-up?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Mr Chair, I thank Member Assoc Prof Jamus Lim for allowing me to elaborate on this.

We have no philosophical difficulty considering that. But let us just walk through the process, and we have thought about this. Should we pilot a few schools for through-train? So let me walk through the process and some of the things that we have to step through in order for us to consider this.

First, who gets to go to the through-train programme? I think most of us as parents will know, at Primary 1, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for us to know the abilities and interests of our children. If the through-train programme is to a very popular school – and you know which one I am talking about – I am sure there is no shortage of takers for this through-train programme.

But what about those who develop a bit later and want the chance to go to some of these schools? Does it mean therefore they do not get the chance to go to these schools? And how does that affect the social mixing that we spoke so much about in this House?

So, we have to step through this. Who gets to go through a through-train programme?

The second issue: supposing, I, as a parent, I decided that my child will go for the through-train programme. Sometime during primary school, I figured out that my child may not be suitable for this programme. Then, what do I do?

The third issue: if we have no checkpoint at P6 or any other years – you can argue whether it is P6 or any other time – if you have no checkpoints at all, then how do we help our students to get into the correct educational setting?

This then might consequently mean the fourth issue, which is that in a secondary school, every secondary school which is in the through-train programme must be able to cater to the diversity of learners.

Which then comes to the fifth issue: how do we resource these schools with a complete suite of programmes for the students that we have taken in at P1 with the promise that regardless of their abilities, after they have gone through it for various years, that we will be able to provide them with the full pathways?

So, do not get me wrong. We are not ideologically closed to all good ideas. But we have to step through this.

I have also spoken with my foreign counterparts. Some of them have some segments of their system with this through-train programme and the experience has not been uniformly positive for the reasons that I mentioned.

So, I would say this: we have considered this and we are still considering this. We have to step through the issues, non-trivial issues, systematically.

So, I repeat what I mentioned in my speech. Many have said to remove the PSLE. But let us get the reasons right – why do we want to remove or want to consider removing the PSLE? Let us not do it for the wrong reasons and let us not end up with unintended consequences.

The Chairman: Mr Darryl David.

Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio): Thank you, Chair. Just a couple of clarifications. First of all, regarding Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB), it is heartening to hear Minister Maliki mention that students will have multiple options to take, especially in the polytechnics, from FSBB.

But I have a question which is a different side of the same coin. Conversely, will some students perhaps be restricted in their options after they have finished secondary school? So, for example, if I had taken Chemistry or Maths before and I just managed to pass, then I could maybe take it still in junior college.

With FSBB, if I took Chemistry or Maths at a G1 level, would I still be allowed to take it? Or would it be because I did not take it at a higher level and therefore the pathways are restricted for me if I did not take a subject at a sufficiently high enough level at G2 or G3?

The next clarification is regarding EdTech. I think Minister Chan mentioned that it is good that we can access SLS anytime anywhere. As a parent of a child in Primary 6, I must say that it is a very, very useful system indeed. But while we can access it anytime anywhere, Minister, what about those students who may not have the devices to access it? I would like to ask whether, with a wonderful tool like SLS, it would be a pity if some of our students did not have the devices to access it. Are there schemes or plans to ensure that students have the device, whether it is a tablet, a mobile phone, or even a laptop, to ensure they can fully reap the rich benefits of a system like SLS?

Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman: I thank Mr Darryl David for his question on FSBB. First, I think we want to ensure that we understand and parents understand the concept and philosophy behind FSBB. It is really to recognise the potential of every student with regards to different subjects. Traditionally, we assume that you do all the subjects in the same level. That is where the streaming came in: the Express, the Normal (Academic) and the Normal (Technical) streams.

But we acknowledge that over the years we want to facilitate students' ability to focus on subjects that they are strong in and also do subjects that they may not be strong in but are capable of coping with. And so, when we look at the post-secondary pathways, it is really to recognise that and how we can find the combination.

Today, for most polytechnics, the current criterion is equivalent to the Express stream – the five G3-dominant combination. As I mentioned in my speech earlier, we are considering allowing the usage of the G2 subjects. So, the question is, when you are doing G1 today, where do you go afterwards? In the FSBB programme, it is what we call the education and career guidance; career guidance by the teachers to help the students at each level. So, at Secondary 1 when you come in after PSLE, you are guided in terms of your performance at PSLE. And looking at your strengths in each subject, the school and the teachers will guide the students on what they can and should take when they get into Secondary 1. And then by the time they get to Secondary 3, as they prepare for the major examinations, they look at the performance again.

What we want to ensure is whether you do a subject at G1, G2 or G3, such a combination, there will be a pathway for you – it could be at our ITE, where, as I announced also, we now have the three-year Higher NITEC curriculum that they can aspire towards. And if that continues, then they can aspire towards joining the polytechnics afterwards, or joining our technical diploma programme or our work-study programme.

So, there are expanded pathways and this allows them to feel that they are not pigeonholed at such an early age. That has been the feedback from many Members of the House that we should not pigeonhole our students too early but instead allow them to explore their own potential. I hope that that flexibility allows the students to also feel good, and that the revision of the education system is really meant for them to grow and appreciate their own strengths.

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chair, short answer, no worries. All our secondary school students have their own personal learning devices. Any primary school students who require a device because of their family circumstances can approach the school for help.

The Chairman: Ms Carrie Tan.

Ms Carrie Tan (Nee Soon): Thank you, Mr Chairman. Firstly, I would like to empathise with Minister Chan, Minister Maliki and everybody in MOE for trying to address all our needs with very competing and difficult constraints in resources. But I would like to first clarify that in my proposal for naturalistic pedagogy, it is not so much of asking MOE to do more but an invitation to MOE to consider "how else might we"?

So, I would like to ask Minister whether MOE might be open to make a pathway of teacher training in naturalistic pedagogy possible for the new cohorts of teacher-applicants at NIE to explore this pathway.

And the second question is related to this; I heard the Ministers' encouragement to our companies and the private sector, we are constantly encouraging the private sector to hire based on skills and not qualifications. May I know if we have any kind of research or survey with employers to understand the reasons why they continue to keep to the current hiring practices despite our many messages encouraging them to look at a skills-based hiring rather than a qualifications-based hiring?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: We thank Ms Carrie Tan for her suggestions. We understand the spirit of what she is asking. Whether naturalist pedagogy will be in the mainstream pathways, I will have to leave it to my professional colleagues in NIE to make the judgement. But we are always open to explore all the different pedagogies, whether to adapt and adopt them in part or in full, to benefit our students.

Second, technically, I should not be answering this because the Member asked why the industry is not recruiting people based on currency rather than grades? Well, as the former Minister for Trade and Industry, maybe let me hazard a reply.

I think all of us are human beings, including HR professionals. People were doing hiring. We sometimes fall into the habit of trying to reduce everything into something that we can manage. So, in the past, maybe we were all very comfortable with reducing the perception of ability to a single unitary dimension, which is called either the GPA or the grades. But having said that, as the former Minister of Trade and Industry, I have seen many progressive companies that have actually gone beyond this, and I have always encouraged my teachers to go and visit some of these companies to understand their HR processes.

In fact, last year during MOE's annual workplan, I asked one of my teachers this question: do they know what will be the first question that the potential employer will ask our students?

To be fair, not all my teachers will be familiar with this because they are not in the business. So, I encouraged them to talk to the employers. And I also encourage the employers to come and talk to the schools to help our students understand the kind of abilities and capabilities required for the future.

The second thing that I think we can do to help us evolve faster in our mindset is this: we have to invite all the industry leaders to come into our schools to see our students, be it ITE, polytechnics or even secondary schools. Talk to them, inspire them, share with them what kind of skillsets are required and, at the same time, see what our students are capable of.

12.30 pm

So, I could give an example. Today, the IT industry is very hot. It is perpetually short of manpower. But today, many of the IT industry firms want to ask for graduate degrees or IT-related graduate degrees. So, we suggested to them, "Why don't you come and look at the polytechnic students and look at even the ITE students?" They can do certain jobs with their skill sets. And, in fact, some other countries can just call their polytechnics "colleges" overnight and award "degrees". Our polytechnic students are not any worse off compared to many of the foreign graduates.

So, go beyond the title of a diploma or a degree and look at the actual skill sets.

When the industry people come and join us on the boards of the schools or the ITEs and the polytechnics, and whatever they feel that we are not doing adequately, give us the feedback, we adjust the curriculum and we will have a faster speed to market timing to help the industry fulfill their manpower needs and, at the same time, allowing our graduates from our polytechnics, ITE and universities to be much more industry-ready.

So, I think we need to work hand-in-hand, but we need to go beyond this mindset and reduce all the abilities of the individual to one matrix.

And the last appeal that I have, when I speak to all my industry partners, is this: MOE will never be able to produce the perfect student and perfect worker for you with all the requisite skills because it does not exist.

As the MOE students join you to become the workers in the industry, it is also the responsibilities of the industry to keep training our students and to keep them up to date. Otherwise, there is no way that we can produce that perfect student that meets all the industries' needs forever.

In fact, I did a thought experiment with a group of entrepreneurs whom I met. I said, "Why don't you tell me all the skill sets that you want from our students?" So, they gave me a long list of all the skill sets that they desired.

So, I said, "Very good. As the former MTI Minister, why don't I make you a deal? I will produce the students with all these attributes in five years' time, in 10 years' time and you sign me a contract that you will employ them when they graduate."

None of them took up my offer. Because they realise that whatever they say today will be outdated by then and in MOE, we are in the lifelong education business. We cannot produce people with skill sets overnight. But it does require a partnership for us to keep ourselves updated in our curriculum so that we are at a faster speed to market, and it does require us to also work with the industry to keep training our workers so that they remain current even after they join the industry.

And to Ms Denise Phua's question, today, if you look at the PISA score, at the school level, once they depart school, we are at the top of the league. We want to make sure that we are still top of the league as they grow older.

Today, we are not top of the league for the older age groups because our education system started a bit behind the other more established economies, but we have every aim to make sure that the skills of our adult workers remain at the top of their league in their respective age groups.

And this is why our definition of success cannot be the first 15 years of what our children achieve in school, but the next 50 years of what our workers achieve beyond school.

The Chairman: Ms Foo Mee Har.

Ms Foo Mee Har (West Coast): Thank you, Chair. I have two clarifications for Minister of State Gan Siow Huang. It is related to the speech I made.

The first clarification is, Minister of State actually responded to my call that from the vast group of SkillsFuture training providers, it is time for the Government to streamline into three categories and actually, indeed, that is the plan. Could Minister of State elaborate on the criteria that MOE will be using to streamline the whole group of 790 training providers which I counted online?

The second recommendation I gave to Minister of State is about the idea of appointing lead training providers for each of the key sectors along the Industry Transformation Map (ITM). A little bit about the idea like anchor operators in the childcare sector. You work closely, they are selected by the industry and, most importantly, they must be set up to do practice-based training, not just academic but to reskill people with practice-based curriculum using real-life simulation. People who teach those programmes are industry leaders so that the skills are really practice-based. So, can the Minister of State comment on that?

The Minister of State for Education (Ms Gan Siow Huang): I thank Ms Foo Mee Har for that question.

Before I answer that question, I just would like to add to what Minister Chan said in response to Ms Carrie Tan's question about why there seems to be companies who are hiring based on qualifications instead of skills, despite it being common sense that actually it is more sensible and logical for employers and HR to hire people based on skills.

In my interactions with companies as well as with our training providers, I understand that some of our companies, especially the smaller ones, may themselves not be very clear about the definition of skills. Indeed, it is a science; there is language around how skills should be defined.

That is why for some time SSG has been developing skills frameworks that apply to different sectors. There are altogether 34 now for different industries. And it is very useful for companies that need help in identifying the skills for the different job roles in their companies to refer to the skills framework. This will help them in better defining and hiring people based on their needs and not to over-hire.

For example, it is quite common that I hear from Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) sometimes in job advertisements, companies put out an ad that they want to hire an undergraduate in ICT. But actually, could they have considered a diploma graduate in ICT? How familiar are they about the differences in the skills that our university students and our polytechnic students have in terms of ICT?

There is also responsibility on MOE's part to help employers out there to understand the differentiation and we will do better in this.

We also hope that through work-study programmes and apprenticeship, employers will be able to better understand, see and experience for themselves the quality of our students, whether they are from ITE, polytechnics or universities, and not just blindly assume that they are of certain differences in standards based on qualifications alone.

Coming to Ms Foo Mee Har's questions, on the criteria for streamlining training providers, it is quite challenging indeed because every training provider tells us they are very good in the courses that they are providing.

So, what we do really is, we look at the employment outcomes, whether people who attend the courses get a job within a certain number of months after course completion, whether the training providers are able to connect the trainees or the course participants with potential hirers and companies out there so that the chances and the networking opportunities for the trainees would be much better.

We also look at employment outcomes for people who are already being hired or already have a job. But going through the training, they are able to qualify for a higher job role. That would be helpful. That, we deem to be a tangible employment outcome.

So, those companies and training providers that provide such courses, we will want to provide more funding support basically, to lower the costs of these courses and also to steer more trainees into these courses provided by such training providers.

But we also know that it is not always so easy for a person to get a promotion straight after attending a course or to land a job immediately after completing a programme. Sometimes, it takes multiple steps before a person can land a job or get a promotion.

So, we do track this overtime and we look to our industry partners, trade associations and looking forward to NTUC, the unions as well that commit a lot of their resources and the unions' workers for training, to give us the feedback so that SSG and the Government can, through multiple sources of information, be able to better identify training providers and courses that can make an impact on the workers.

On the other question where the Member mentioned anchor operators – yesterday, Ms Foo Mee Har also brought up the concept of a lead training provider, I believe. That is a useful concept. We are open to it. In fact, we have Continuing Education and Training (CET) Centres. I think there are about 20 of them now. These are what I would deem to be equivalent or similar to the concept that Ms Foo Mee Har is referring to. We have them in retail, tourism, hospitality and so on. They are the ones that we deem to have reached a certain high level of standards in training and generation of workers for the industry. Many of them are industry leaders themselves, not necessarily training providers, or pure training providers or IHLs. We cast our net quite wide. We do look for training providers that are strong in producing trainees of good outcomes.

The Chairman: Just as I was about to ask that Members keep their clarifications short, I think, it would be fair, if the response could be also a little bit shorter. It would be good. Mr Louis Chua.

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I just have two quick clarifications for Minister Chan in relation to the P1 registration framework. I fully agree with Minister's view that we need to change mindsets here.

And so, for the first clarification, in terms of the societal circumstances and needs which Minister spoke about before making further changes, can he elaborate further on what these are?

And second, in relation to that, I understand alumni ties and community ties – not meant to be literal – are important to parents. But, at the same time, could we not then look at the home-school distance as a primary factor while still keeping some of these other ties in relation to the secondary criteria, to send the right signal that distance and convenience for their children would be the most important factor?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chair, let me explain what I mean by societal considerations, to answer both of the clarifications by Mr Louis Chua.

First, when the country was young, community-based groups and alumni, they all played an important part, and they still do in helping to foster a sense of community and spirit. But as society matures, there is always a risk that such groups become closed and exclusive groups. That is why, over time, we must find that balance. That is what I mean by societal circumstances. This happens in Singapore. It happens everywhere across the world.

So, if we accept that there is a role, a need for some local community, we also accept that home-school distance is important for the convenience of the students and the parents, and once we accept that there are these two, sometimes competing considerations, then our job is to find the balance. And we must be prepared to adjust the balance according to circumstances and the societal needs.

12.45 pm

Will just using home-school distance alone solve this problem? I do not think it will. In fact, if we only use home-school distance alone, then we may have another unintended consequence, which has happened in Singapore and elsewhere. What happens is that, for the so-called perceived popular schools, everybody will want to move near there; and now, instead of competing at two kilometres, it may be one kilometre or 500 metres. So, it does not really solve our problem.

Let me narrate this story, it is a true story. Somewhere in Boston, once upon a time, there was one particular school that nobody wanted to go to because it was up and far away from central Boston. So, all the immigrants went there because it was far away. And after many years, the hardworking and talented immigrants all made a name for the school. It became the best performing school. And lo and behold, every well-endowed family started moving to that school. Today, that school is a very good school in Boston, with a very well-heeled community around them. Have they solved the problem of diversifying the base? With all good intentions, it was defeated by human preferences.

If we think that that is far-fetched, I suggest that it also happens in Singapore. *[Applause.]*

Mr Chairman: Mr Saktiandi Supaat.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh): Thank you, Mr Chairman. I just like to ask the Minister regarding SLS that Minister shared earlier. I laud the efforts by MOE to push towards digitalisation and EdTech. My question is in regard to accessing SLS and the Minister mentioned, accessing it from anywhere.

My concern is, as I go around to meet my residents, I see some of the students at home with their grandparents, some are in broken families. My question is whether SLS will be data intensive? And when it is data intensive, what type of extra help can we put in place together with the other Ministries to make sure that some of these students can be helped, especially in terms of data costs and access to SLS, which is exceptional?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chairman, the short answer is that this is something that we have already done, during the COVID-19 times. During the COVID-19 times, we did two things, which Members may not be aware of.

First, when we distributed the devices to our schools and the students, for those who are unable or have difficulties with the data charges, we provided them with free dongles for them to access the data.

Second, for those who have difficulties with their home environment, which may be less than conducive, we continue to open our schools and allow the students to access the school services, even in the depth of the COVID-19 crisis. We will continue to provide such access to all students, regardless of their financial background.

Mr Chairman: Ms Denise Phua.

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar): Thank you, Chairman. I have three points. Minister, I think the "no PSLE through-train" idea was not just a Workers' Party (WP) idea. Many of us are interested. And I know that the MOE staff had gone through the idea, even during Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's time.

Sir, I would like MOE to consider getting some of us involved in thinking through some of the constraints and considerations, to see if indeed, in Singapore, there is no way that a through-train school like this can happen.

The second clarification is about MOE Kindergartens (MKs). I know that when MOE first entered this space, it was to give access to the less advantaged or disadvantaged preschoolers. That is one. Second is also to learn a little bit more about the space of early childhood education, in terms of content, pedagogy and assessment.

So, I want to ask what lessons has MOE has learnt from this MK initiative? And how can they be shared, to ensure that those who have no access to these good MKs have a chance to also learn and everybody can be uplifted, in terms of early childhood, preschool or kindergarten education? That is my second question.

My third one is: I know that, as some of the Members, including the Minister, have mentioned, quite a number of employers are still fixated on paper qualifications versus skills as the proxy for promotions and for hiring. I know it is not easy, but I wonder if the public sector, being the biggest employer in Singapore, can show and lead the way? There are some jobs that are probably being done already in the public sector that use skills-based instead of paper-based criteria.

I also know, however, that in education or in a non-profit organisation, one of the conditions is that there must be some kind of paper qualification. Sir, I wonder if we can comb through some of these, to ensure that the biggest employer in Singapore, the public sector, show and lead the rest of Singapore in using skills and not paper qualifications as a criterion.

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chairman, we thank Ms Denise Phua for offering us her ideas and help, to think through and step through some of those issues about the through-train system that we talked about.

I just want to say this, short of doing that today, for a certain segment of our population, we essentially have already reduced the stresses that are associated with school choice when you go to secondary school. And that is through the Direct School Admission (DSA) system, where they can use different abilities to get into different schools that specialises in different areas.

This is slightly different from a through-train because it is not one-to-one. It is one based on merit to your specific skills. And FSBB will continue to expand this to reduce the stress, if stress is the concern. But as I mentioned, stress cannot be the only reason for us to think about this. It must be how we can better make use of the time for the holistic development of our children. So that is the first one.

Second, Ms Denise Phua asked about the MK lessons. I worked on this with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat when I was the then-Minister for Social and Family Development and he was the then-Minister for Education, that we started MK for a couple of reasons. First, at that point in time, there was a plethora of pedagogies and practices across all our preschools, and we wanted to make sure that we have a body of knowledge that we can set as our baseline. Setting up MK together with the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC) has been most instrumental in helping us to determine this baseline, where we can share the best practices with the rest of the other preschool providers.

The second very useful thing when we started MK was this: now that we have a better understanding and grasp of the cost drivers for any preschool education, that allows us to determine the subsidies that we should be giving to the various preschools to make sure that the essentials are fulfilled and not frittered away on other things, which are, perhaps optional, perhaps frills. So, that is the second.

The third comment by Ms Denise Phua, I will make sure that the Minister-in-charge of Public Service gets the message, and we will continue to do that.

Mr Chairman: Mr Patrick Tay.

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): I would like to take the Minister's suggestion earlier to invite us to suggest ideas where we can do less and jettison, and also following up on hon Member Dr Wan Rizal's suggestion on lightening the workload of teachers.

I have one suggestion. Currently, I think a lot of teachers and educators, particularly in primary schools and secondary schools, are very bogged down with setting examination scripts – every year, year on year, trying to innovate and find new ways to ask questions. And to lighten the load, can we do it at the cluster level for economies of scale? So that you also do not have to second-guess the other schools and try to get the other schools' papers and stuff like that. That would also lighten the load of teachers – by setting examinations for subjects at the cluster level.

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chairman, we thank Mr Patrick Tay for his suggestion. Indeed, that is something that we have considered very seriously in MOE. And I will say a few things in response to that.

First, we are all for sharing. In fact, I encourage all my educators to try to share their best practices. I have what I call the "80/20" rule. For 80%, you can share, download the best practices from everywhere. But for every teacher, you must have 20% where you customise to the local needs of the students in your school because the learning profiles of students in the different schools are quite different. So, 80/20.

The baseline is 80%; do as much as we can to share, to lighten the workload and for the remaining 20%, you must customise.

The second comment that I would say is that: yes, indeed, we appreciate the Member's affirmation of our teachers. When it comes to FSBB for the same subject, the teachers may have to set three different sets of paper because of the three different standards. So, indeed, it is a lot of work. But I must say this: our teachers are not afraid of hard work; they just want the work to be meaningful so that they can help our students to grow and grow well. So, that, we will do.

The third thing I would caution in this idea is that, while we try to harmonise the examination papers by region, as the Member said, we are careful not to turn this into a mini-PSLE at different levels, at different regions, because then, you have to coordinate everybody coming to take the paper at roughly the same time.

So, we are careful to share. But I do not think the intent, and I do not think that it is your suggestion to turn it into a mini regional PSLE system.

So, there will be some differentiation in the test matrix across the different schools, to cater to the different needs. But, indeed, we want our teachers to share more.

Mr Chairman: Dr Wan Rizal.

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Sir, I thank MOE for assuring and cementing their support and commitment for the teachers and students' well-being. So, the Minister mentioned about the Teacher Growth Model (TGM) and for anything to grow, we need space. So, a suggestion, and I want to follow up on the suggestion by Singapore Teacher's Union (STU) with regard to the white space for teachers.

They would like white space where they can do their things, their marking and their counselling for students, because right now, while they do have space in between their lessons, it is really for them to rest and to eat. So, I was wondering if this could be part of MOE's consideration.

And second is with regard to the flexible pathways for our IHL students, I am glad that we have these flexible pathways for them, but at the same time, more flexible pathways and giving them extra modules to take means they need more time. Would the Ministry be considering that they might need more time and they might need longer to finish the programmes? What are the implications for that?

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Mr Chairman, let me answer Dr Wan Rizal's with a more nuanced position. We agree that we want to give more white space to our teachers. But our definition of white space is a bit different. It is not so much for you to just rest, do counselling, do marking and prepare lessons. That, to us is part of the work; it is not really white space.

White space to MOE, in the Teachers Growth Model (TGM) means intentionally setting aside time for teachers to develop their skills and competencies. They can go for teachers' work attachment class, gain experience, exposures and networks beyond the school system, so that they can grow personally.

I have always said this to all my teachers: when I visit all the schools – I visit one or two schools every week – I do not have to look at the students first. I just need to look at the teachers. If the teachers are tired, the students will be tired. If the teachers have the sparkle in their eyes, the students will have the sparkle in their eyes.

That is why I keep saying: as our teachers pour their hearts out to take care of our children, it is our job to make sure that we take care of our teachers. Respect them, give them time and space to grow. And when they grow, our children grow.

Mr Chairman: Mr Don Wee. Last question.

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang): Thank you, Chairman. One question. ITE College West is situated in my constituency, so I have a first-hand encounter on how the ITE students have organised activities for my Choa Chu Kang residents very well. And these students are supported by very caring ITE lecturers, who not only teach, but also care for them, as many of these students come from disadvantaged families.

So, with the introduction of a Higher Nitec since 2022, both the students and the lecturers have to grapple with additional demands. I understand that each student has about 20 hours of classroom time every week, and each lecturer has to handle 40 students, which include the SEN ones. Therefore, can MOE consider giving ITE the flexibility to employ more teaching assistants to augment the lecturers?

1.00 pm

Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman: Chairman, I thank Mr Don Wee for his questions. It is very heartening when you hear Members of the House asking for more resources for our teachers and expressing their full support and empathy for the challenges that our teachers experience. In particular, for the ITEs, we know that ITE do have students who are coming from challenging backgrounds including SEN students. This is also in line with Dr Wan Rizal's question earlier about the flexibility that we are giving our students in terms of the way they cope with the curriculum.

We do want to offer that flexibility. We do want them to go through at their own pace albeit looking at the structures we have in place, but certainly, support will and continue to be given to all our students as well as our lecturers and teachers.

For the ITE, yes, Mr Don Wee highlighted that we have the three-year Higher Nitec curriculum now, but we do acknowledge that some students may take a longer time and they may want to take some time off after two years. As long as they have done their internship, they can leave ITE for a while, continue to work, if they are ready to work and come back and continue to stack up their modules and then complete their Higher Nitec and subsequently go on.

So, the diverse pathway is really about allowing the students to know where they are, understanding their family circumstances and we will support them along the way.

With regards to the additional support, yes, given the additional challenges and learner profiles that our ITE has, we are working with the ITE to augment them with more resources. With regards to SEN, we are giving them more SEN-trained officers to help them because we do want our SEN students who were from our mainstream schools to continue to move on to our Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs).

We are also looking at piloting at the ITE what we call an integrated case management framework, where we will augment the ITEs with staff to help them coordinate support services required by students with higher needs. We do know some of the students do come from very challenging backgrounds. Our lecturers, just like our general education teachers, go on home visits, knock on the doors, find out where they are and try to bring them back to school because that is really the passion and desire of our teachers to make sure that our students complete their education.

So, I want to assure Mr Don Wee that we are augmenting our ITEs with resources required for them to support our students and given the flexibility that we are introducing, we will certainly work together with them to make sure that this will not unduly pressurise the teachers, but rather inspire them further that what they are doing is very much supported by Members of the House, by the community and certainly, we will support them in every endeavour that they embark on in supporting our students.

The Chairman: Minister Chan.

Mr Chan Chun Sing: Chair, I promised Mr Patrick Tay, his Iron Man. Mr Patrick Tay started with Iron Man. The other day at an environmental event for schools, I was also told that the Minister for Education could be like Captain America, to save or change the world by shaping the next generation. Be it Iron Man or Captain America, we all have great expectations of MOE and perhaps, also for the Minister for Education, to do wonders for the world.

And some of you might have arrived at the conclusion that MOE is a very powerful Ministry, as we do move property prices and determine traffic jams at the Causeway. [*Laughter.*] But on that day, I told the audience that I do not aspire to be Captain America. Or even Captain Singapore, as some drew a parallel to the initials of my name.

I say I would rather be a Catalyst Singapore. Why? Why Catalyst Singapore? The difference is this: the future cannot and will not be shaped by the superhuman capabilities of one man or woman. I do not think you can, nor should it be the case. I hope not.

Instead, if MOE can catalyse and ignite the power of every Singaporean, we will be more powerful than any superhero. All Singaporeans can be given the opportunity to be superheroes.

I hope those who can will also have the gumption to do so. Where everyone defines success not by our achievements but more importantly, by our contributions where we each understand our own strengths and weaknesses, even as superheroes, play as a team, win as a team. Where those with great powers exercise greater responsibilities to help those with less, those who are little and those who are lost. Where we define success, not by how well we do for ourselves in this generation, but more importantly, how we enable the next generation to do even better than us in this generation.

Let me thank all the superheroes in our schools: our educators, parents, community and industry partners. With your partnership, I fear not, that we cannot. Let our next generation be the superheroes that they want and can be.

And one final point, Mr Chair, I understand that Parliament does not allow or encourage the display of any partisan symbols in this House. But I noticed that today, Speaker and one of our Members have probably displayed product placement on your chest. Some like Mr Speaker will certainly say that for our education system, "The Best Is Yet To Be." I say, "The rest also can be".

Together, we move towards the "better age" and "forge a better life". But we must always remember to "lead with passion, serve with compassion".

And finally, to Deputy Prime Minister and Mr Patrick Tay, especially for you, "Nothing Without Labour". Special thanks to our Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) Chair. Thank you. [*Laughter.*] [*Applause.*]

The Chairman: Mr Patrick Tay, would you like to withdraw your amendment and end the class, please?

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan: I thank Minister Chan Chun Sing, Minister Maliki Osman as well as Minister of State Gan Siow Huang, the MOE team of educators, teachers, staff, as well as the Committee of Supply (COS) team for powering this entire COS debate for MOE and sharing the plans. MOE is doing so much more now from preschool, to primary, secondary, beyond secondary, now even CET, so the 15 plus 50, and really, there is a lot of work to be done.

I will end off with my school's motto, "Potest Qui Vult" – "If there is a will, there is a way". On that note, thank you very much and I beg leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$14,338,501,100 for Head K ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$450,000,000 for Head K ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD S (MINISTRY OF MANPOWER)

(A vibrant economy and a resilient workforce)

The Chairman: Head S, Ministry of Manpower. Mr Desmond Choo.

1.08 pm

Workforce for New Era

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines): Chairman, I beg to move, "That the total sum to be allocated for Head S of the Estimates to be reduced by \$100".

When it was reported in January this year that China's population declined for the first time since 1961, the Chinese stock markets wobbled. It was widely expected because of its ageing population and declining fertility. But it was still a sobering reality. A reality of potential shrinking consumption and most certainly, a declining workforce. It faces perhaps a Japanese-style three decades-long economic stagnation.

In Singapore, by 2030, around one in four citizens, will be aged 65 and above. Our resident old-age support ratio reached an all-time low at 3.8 in 2022. It is projected to reach 2.7 in 2030.

As of June 2022, 880,000 or roughly one-third of our resident workforce is 50 years and above, 400,000 are 60 years old and above. A significant number of these 400,000 would have retired by the end of this decade.

Seniors comprised 54% share of workers in land transport and supporting services, people doing taxi, private-hire car drivers and bus drivers; and 42% of the Food & Beverage (F&B) services, hawkers or food and drink stall assistants. These are much higher than that in other industries.

But what does this really mean for us as a nation? Our economy would become less vibrant as our workforce shrinks. We might face a hollowing out of certain industries such as in land transport, F&B, tradesman and machine operators.

It is less of a problem if it was a gradual shift with sufficient time to adjust. But it might not be so.

The oldest of our baby boomer generation is 77 years old and the youngest is 59 years old. They are likely to exit the workforce by the end of this decade in large numbers. While our birth rate peaked in the late-1970s to the early-1980s, giving us another 10 odd years of buffer, structural shifts might accelerate rapid erosion.

Technology, digitisation and artificial intelligence (AI) have already changed the nature of many jobs. These are skill sets that people born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s might not particularly equipped with or can be picked up easily.

Work attitudes have also changed. Our people also do not want to work at the same pace, cadence and intensity in their later years. How common is it to hear of friends saying that they wanted to slow it down? But the treadmill seemingly can only go faster.

At the recent post-Budget dialogue with Tampines residents, a resident in his 50s commented with part joy and part exasperation that he might have to make a choice between caregiving for his grandchildren and his full-time work because there are rarely part-time work or slower work opportunities to go into.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also fostered a re-thinking of work-life priorities and lead some older Singaporeans to exit the workforce permanently if unable to find a compromise. We face a serious cliff-drop in the workforce. It can unsettle the economy and society fundamentally.

The questions before us are: are the older workers ready for the future jobs and are the jobs ready for the older workers?

First, we need to make preparing for an ageing workforce an economy-wide priority. Our employment rate of seniors aged 65 and above has eased from 31.7% in 2021 to 31.0% in 2022. It still rose on average between 2019 and 2022. This is positive.

We have also moved definitively to tackle ageism, a perennial complaint of older workers, through a proposed Workplace Fairness legislation. This would reassure many older workers. Yet, these moves might not be sufficient for the future. We need to include within each of the Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs) a pillar on creating and transforming "age-friendly" jobs. It is no longer sufficient to create jobs that are of high economic value. But we must also focus on jobs that our older Singaporeans can and will do.

The focus must rightly be so on bringing in jobs that grow the economy. But in the entire value chain, we must identify jobs that mature workers can do well. I often wonder what is the percentage of available and upcoming jobs that would match the physical, mental and lifestyle needs of older Singaporeans.

We need to double down on our job redesign efforts. What is the number of jobs that will be redesigned over the years to match our ageing workforce? This must be a number we track closely.

Next, I would like to share on the experience of SBS Transit (SBST). I would like to declare that I am an Independent Director of SBST. Older workers are a significant part of the company. Maintenance, especially in the train systems, can be very laborious and physically taxing. We struggle to attract younger workers into the workforce like many other companies.

To help the older workers aged above 55 years old to continue to be productive, SBST is redesigning jobs from the ground up. They have an overhead catenary system or the electrical cables supplying power to the trains. Inspection and maintenance require hard physical work with heavy equipment. Today, they use light-weight equipment such as laser-gauges. Condition-based maintenance is practised to reduce physical deployment. Older workers are redeployed to inspection closer to ground than higher-level ones. Some workers had gone into mentorship or trainer roles. More than 50 maintenance crew have benefited from this change. More will benefit in the years to come.

The SBST Board monitors such development closely. We need more companies such as SBST. Admittedly, it is a larger company with more resources. We need solutions for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which hire the bulk of our workforce.

1.15 pm

Next, we need to look at redesigning our work structure.

We have often heard of mature workers hoping for part-time work or micro jobs but there is a dearth of them.

Creating part-time jobs do cost companies more. But as it is a social compact imperative to pay more to support our lower-wage workers, perhaps it is also time for similar thinking for older workers.

MOM's Part-time Re-employment Grant (PTRG) has helped to increase the availability of part-time re-employment to senior workers. Could the Ministry update on the progress and achievements of the Grant? Can we renew and enhance the PTRG?

We can also consider private-public partnerships in fostering such part-time and micro jobs.

In Japan, Silver Human Resources Centers have been established since 1975 as job agencies for seniors. These are membership-based organisations that provide older Japanese with temporary and short-term work. Public and municipal agencies leaned in to create and find work for older workers.

An associated point is creating specialised centres that focus on helping our older workers to manage employment needs.

Our current job placement ecosystem has worked well for the general needs of the workforce, but older workers have different needs such as a shorter training runway, physical limitations and life expectations.

In 2017, Japan started the Hello Work Senior. It is a job placement agency specially catered for workers aged above 60 years old. The service works with employers to understand their needs and preferences and match them with suitable older candidates.

As geriatrics is a specialty within medicine, silver placement centres can have its special place in our placement ecosystem.

Our ageing workforce is also an opportunity to advance assistive technology to help workers work for longer and safer.

Our public transport operators have already put in driver monitoring, collision avoidance and driver alertness technology. Many of our bus captains today are able to work well into their late-60s and beyond.

There are many other industries, especially those with a significant number of older workers, that we must deep dive into.

We must establish research centres dedicated to helping workers stay employed for longer. Such research centres can focus on developing assistive technology, identifying jobs that may be more suited for senior workers and developing appropriate training to transit into such jobs.

Our Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs), such as the Singapore Management University (SMU) Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, are a case in point. Can the Ministry consider looking into establishing such research centres?

Flexible work arrangement (FWA) is often cited as the solution to balance the needs of older workforce and business needs of companies. Indeed, it is an essential tool, not just for an older workforce.

We have made significant strides in expanding FWA. Tripartite guidelines are useful to guide tripartite progress in implementing FWA but we might need to take bolder steps in the near future.

We should rightly allow for voluntary take-up by companies because of the difficulties in implementation. We can even grant monetary incentives to companies with progressive practices. But if progress does not meet our needs, we might need to consider giving workers certain rights to FWA to accelerate the scaling up of FWA efforts.

Lastly, our ageing workforce also necessitates us to look into the roles played by our foreign workforce.

As our people age, there is a significant need in certain industries such as healthcare and caregiving support, tradesman and craftsman work such as plumbing, air-condition servicing and carpentry.

If we are unable to improve our productivity significantly over the next decade, we might have no choice but to greatly increase our foreign workforce.

There are already around 1.3 million foreign Work Pass holders in Singapore today. Therefore, our foreign workforce framework will need to be more nuanced, differentiated and promote higher productivity.

There could be certain high-touch industries that we would want to keep for a larger core of older Singaporeans and there are other industries where we need more foreign support, especially those involving more physical work. The current broad-based sector-based approach would need to be more finely differentiated.

This is difficult work and might require a multi-year effort. Can the Ministry share with the House how it would calibrate its foreign manpower framework within the context of an ageing workforce?

The rapidly ageing population poses serious structural challenges to fiscal sustainability and economic growth.

When older workers retire, they are also less able to deal with problems such as higher inflation. Our younger workers are likely to shoulder heavier caregiving loads, with some even having to leave the workforce to do so.

If Singaporeans are unable to fill job openings, employers will have to look to foreign labour to do so. We must act decisively and swiftly to ensure we do not find ourselves in such a predicament.

We need to evolve a new social compact within the context of an ageing population. Only when both our jobs and our older workers are ready for each other, would we be able to manage this smouldering crisis.

Question proposed.

SMEs

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines): Mr Chairman, it is trite that SMEs form the backbone of our economy. We encounter many SMEs in our day-to-day life, especially in retail, food and beverages (F&B) and commercial sectors. SMEs also form critical support for multinational corporations (MNCs).

My speech today will focus on the manpower challenges and obstacles faced by SME employers.

As of 27 September 2022, we have more than 290,000 SMEs following consistent growth in the past decade.

In my discussions with SME representatives, the issues of hiring and retaining staff have been raised repeatedly. SMEs have shared that they are not able to compete with large enterprises on equal footing. Comparatively and in general, SMEs are not as well-resourced as large enterprises.

In some SMEs, their HR personnel are performing dual functions on top of their finance or administrative roles. Consequently, the persons responsible for employment matters are not able to exclusively specialise and focus on their HR duties. This exacerbates the problem since they may not succeed in hiring or may end up hiring staff who are unsuitable for their needs.

Having less resources also translates into being less able to put out attractive offers, the most important part of it would be remuneration.

There is also the issue of perceived branding and the prestige of the company in question. Jobseekers may thus find larger enterprises more attractive and that their CVs will be bolstered for future prospects.

For small companies, the runway for progression and development may be limited such that prospective employees deem taking up such positions as heading towards a dead end even right from the beginning.

How can we reasonably expect our SMEs to compete with larger enterprises and Government agencies for manpower from the same talent pool? This is made worse by the current inflationary pressures.

Chairman, I chatted with two Grab drivers during my rides.

One was a project manager with 12 years construction experience and the second had 20 years in oil and gas and was also a certified NACE Level 3, a specialised coating inspector certification.

In my heart, I lamented the loss in management and specialised skills for the industries. However, I also understand when they said that the Grab job meant the convenience of having a car and the comfort of working in air-conditioning. They are without the stresses of safety and the pressures of project delivery.

I thought about the loss of dependency ratio too if the companies cannot find local talent to take over such positions.

Chairman, many SMEs are and will remain increasingly hard-pressed to survive. SME employers' concerns stem from real issues that affect their companies and the livelihoods of all on the payroll, and the staff's families. I implore the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to address their concerns, real and perceived, to ensure that no SME is left behind in their journey towards growth and innovation.

Workforce Competitiveness in Remote Work

Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol): Chairman, while 60% of our workforce are PMETs and flexible work arrangements (FWAs) or some degree of remote working appear to be the norm for our PMETs in this post-pandemic workplace, remote working is a double-edged sword.

While employees rejoice as it gives us the flexibility to manage our daily lives, it also means that some jobs can be done remotely and hence can be done anywhere in the world.

With FWAs or remote working, our Singaporean PMET workforce are no longer competing for jobs only within Singapore but rather, we are competing against a global workforce.

Hence, given our higher wages, how do we define the unique value proposition of our Singaporean workforce to the world? How do we equip our workforce with competency and levels of productivity such that our Singaporean talents are relevant and add value to the global economy?

With remote working, how can our PMET workforce expand our horizon and gain access to jobs beyond our shores? What skills must we equip the PMETs with and how do we develop these skills to ensure that our PMETs are competitive in the global talent market?

A Singapore Core of Tradesmen and Women

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied): In April last year, I asked the Minister for Manpower whether the Ministry was looking into new strategies to improve the prospects of skilled trade jobs for Singaporeans such as licensed electricians and plumbers. It was a follow-up to my speech at the opening of Parliament this term.

The Minister replied to say that it would not be realistic to aim to grow the Singapore Core in every single occupation in view of our finite local workforce, with the ageing cohorts larger than the cohorts that are entering the workforce.

Sir, in reply to a follow-up Parliamentary Question (PQ) filed to the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, it was disclosed that of the 950 licensed plumbers in Singapore, close to 90% are Singaporeans, some 5% are Permanent Residents (PRs) while the remaining licensed plumbers are foreigners. Around 70% of the licensed plumbers are above the age of 50.

The reply to the same Parliamentary Question I put to the Minister for Trade and Industry for licensed electrical workers (LEWs) was less granular.

As of end-June 2022, there were close to 4,000 LEWs, of which less than 1% were foreigners from various nationalities on either S Passes or Employment Passes. The majority of the LEWs were between 41 and 80 years of age.

Unlike licensed plumbers, the number of Singaporeans who are LEWs was not directly revealed by the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI).

Sir, the House would be aware of the highly professional status of plumbers and electrical workers, to name a few trade occupations in many OECD countries. Such individuals earn middle-class wages and are an integral part of the economy.

On 9 January this year, the Straits Times reported that NTUC was looking to work with the Singapore Plumbing Society to effect a Progressive Wage Model (PWM) for the plumbing sector with the NTUC Secretary-General referring to a person is in his or her mid-40s potentially earning \$6,000 to \$7,000 in vocational trades such as plumbing.

However, he also stressed that the Labour Movement is not the Government and does not set national policy, including the scope of the PWM.

Earlier last month, on 9 February, the same newspaper announced the proposed setting up of the Career Progression Model to support the skilled trades industry, covering occupations such as plumbers and electricians, with a view to better career prospects and salaries.

Apart from the strategic importance of having a strong Singaporean Core in skilled trade occupations, the simple fact is that these trades do not pay as well today and are less attractive than working in an office type or air-conditioned setting.

In view of the Minister's reply last April, can I inquire what efforts the Government intends to take to specifically target Singaporean workers into skilled trade jobs?

As a nation and society, it remains my view that a decisive shift to aggressively promote skilled trade jobs for Singaporeans would also alter our understanding of meritocracy, for the better.

Resilient and Future-ready Workforce

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member): Sir, an article in Entrepreneur India last year pointed out that almost all of India's unicorns originated from India's Tier 1 cities and attributed this to the fact that the majority of top talent from across India moves to these cities to work, leading them to become concentrations of talent.

Singapore is just a city and has no greater hinterland from which we could draw talent. As such, we can rely only on our people as the primary fuel for our continued success.

Trending suggestions like a shorter work week or a right to disconnect – which, honestly, to me, Sir, as a lawyer, is an entirely foreign concept – are being echoed in Singapore. The gist of these trends is for employees to turn inwards, to prioritise personal comforts over career ambition. These trends are also a particular phenomenon of advanced economies that enjoy some level of comfort.

Our Government has prudently started looking at these matters, ranging from mental health concerns to flexible working hours.

I would like to ask the Minister to share his views and the Ministry's views on how these trends may affect the resilience and productivity of our workforce and how, even as we look to tackling real issues of stress, burnout and work-life harmony, we can maintain the resilience and competitiveness of our workforce and its productivity.

At the same time, we must be realistic that not all of our Singaporeans are or can become top global-level talent. I am glad that MOM has introduced schemes in the past year to attract global talent to Singapore, which bolsters the resilience of our workforce.

Could the Minister elaborate on the future plans to continue to attract top talent to Singapore as well as how we will ensure that these talents are complementary with the Singapore workforce? Could the Minister also elaborate on how we can facilitate knowledge and skills transfer from foreign talents to Singaporeans so that we can level up Singaporeans in key areas that would be important in the future?

1.30 pm

Finally, Sir, I would also like to follow up on a question I asked in my Budget debate speech, that is whether the Ministry could consider a role for trade associations and chambers (TACs) to play in employment disputes – not as representatives, but as experts on each industry's unique situation that could assist in resolving such disputes. Mediating and settling such disputes early can help harmonious labour relations, which contributes to workforce resilience.

Grow Jobs, Grow Skills, Grow Value

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member): Mr Chairman, the SG United Jobs and Skills, SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit, Progressive Wage Model (PWM) and Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) all are key measures that have saved our businesses and our workers during the pandemic years.

With COVID-19 behind us, our businesses are looking forward to grow again. Unfortunately, we are riding straight into a perfect storm with soaring food and energy prices, high interest rates and rising manpower costs and manpower availability. How is the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) supporting businesses to address the lack of manpower availability issue?

PWM and foreign labour policies do impact manpower costs. How is MOM helping businesses to manage the costs increase?

Singapore being open to global talent is not an option. Singapore needs a complementary foreign labour at all levels across most sectors. MOM has announced the Complementarity Assessment Framework (COMPASS) at last year's Budget and this will be implemented this year.

Can COMPASS differentiate companies by size and job skills, recognising that micro companies may need a lower Dependency Ratio Ceiling (DRC) and some specialist jobs may not have any Singaporeans trained to take up those roles?

How is MOM supporting businesses to attract local Singaporeans into their industry or sector, especially for job roles at or higher than the S Pass and Employment Pass qualifying salary levels? How else is MOM doing to help businesses reduce reliance on foreign manpower?

With a diverse workforce, it is imperative for good practices at the workplace. How does MOM and the Tripartite partners intend to manage the implementation of the Fair Practice in the Workplace legislation and achieve its intended purpose while at the same time ensuring that we maintain workplace harmony and not allow for a litigious culture to take root?

And, finally, what is the Government doing to strengthen the alignment between jobs, skills and pay for value? And how does the Public Service intend to model the way forward?

Artificial Intelligence and Work

Prof Hoon Hian Teck (Nominated Member): Mr Chairman, in the age, sometimes called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a critical question is how the arrival of robots enabled by artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning affects the pay and employment of workers.

A stark case economists study is where a robot is a perfect substitute for a human worker, able to do exactly what the human worker is able to do.

In this case, it is clear that the arrival of robots is like an influx of identical workers into the economy, with its given technology and stock of machines and land. The result is that while the return to conventional capital is raised and land fetches higher rent, the real wage earned by human workers will decline.

Such technology which might be called automation technology has the feature that acts to replace humans in a range of tasks and does not boost labour productivity. This is, however, not likely to be the complete story, especially over the medium to long term. There are other channels that might deliver more positive results on wage growth and as a consequence of adopting robots.

The question to be asked is how can we harness the opportunities and face head on the threats of AI in order to benefit our workers.

First, there are robots that perform tasks that make them complementary to human effort and thus to augment the productivity of human labour.

For example, with deep learning algorithms developed by scientists within the AI community machines are enabled to learn, to a certain extent, without human supervision.

Workers doing medical research are able to take advantage of deep learning to sieve through and analyse large amounts of medical data. This might boost the productivity of workers and further raise their wage earnings. What can be done to encourage the development and application of robots that perform tasks which are complementary to workers who are employed in the retail and food and beverage (F&B) sectors?

Second, the arrival of robots sometimes stimulates investment in conventional machines, equipment and physical structures, which will then exert an upward pull on wage rates. This channel might confer benefits to both high-wage and lower-wage workers.

In conventional growth theory, the law of diminishing returns operates so that in the absence of steady technical progress, capital accumulation gradually slows down as each additional unit of capital fetches a lower rate of return. In the labour-scarce economy, like Singapore, the adoption of robots can boost the return to capital and spur capital investment. This acts to pull up the wages of workers across the whole distribution of skills. In what specific industries might capital investment be stimulated as a result of the adoption of robots?

Third, the arrival of robots by causing some workers in the economy to shift from participating in production to participating in innovative activity, might ultimately shift up the whole wage path because it stimulates innovation and thus the overall productivity of workers.

There can be further research in the area of AI that can restructure the production process adopted in Singapore to create new high productivity tasks that can be performed by human workers. AI-enabled individualised teaching methods might raise the demand for educators who have the skills to apply these methods to meet the diverse needs of students. Augmented reality technology might also enable workers to work alongside machines to execute high-precision tasks in advanced manufacturing. How can we identify potential applications of AI to our local landscape to boost worker productivity?

Mr Chairman, the arrival of robots produces threats when they simply replace human workers in a set of tasks and thus depresses workers wage earnings. However, the arrival of robots can also provide opportunities for workers if AI can be harnessed to create new complementary tasks that raise labour productivity. It is likely that a society-wide approach is needed to maximise the opportunities of AI and to mitigate the threats to the workforce.

Human Resource

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member): Chairman, the combination of inflationary pressures, increased interest rates and shortage of manpower across many sectors have made it challenging for many businesses, especially SMEs. Although we want companies to invest in job redesigns and technologies to improve their productivity, such transformation will take much time and resources to plan and realise.

To transform, companies require specific new areas of expertise that are short of relevant local talents, for example, in the areas of sustainability and digital.

In the built environment sector, it has also lost many highly skilled hands-on or craft-based labour. Such roles are not popular with locals. They are critical even as we try to transform the sector towards higher productivity.

In view of the unprecedented confluence of challenges companies are facing, how can the Government better help companies to deal with the immediate labour shortages, while supporting their transformation?

Even as we try to raise productivity, there are just insufficient locals to fill the demand for certain roles, especially the ones not favoured by Singaporeans. Can the Government adopt a variegated approach to allow more foreign workers to supplement local workers for such roles?

Strengthening of Singaporean Core

Mr Abdul Samad (Nominated Member): Chairman, I would like to make a call for all employers to make and ensure our Singaporeans become the Core of the total workforce.

Our education system is considered one of the best in the world and we must be worried if this does not lead to job opportunities for them. Aside from our high standards of education system, we also have many adult training centres that should be able to equip our resident workforce with the required necessary skillsets. Employers should be receptive to Singaporeans who fall short of required skills but make use of the relevant funding support such as the Career Support Programme (CSP) and the Career Conversion Programmes (CCPs) that are provided by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). This support scheme allows an employer to received funding support from Government to recruit our resident workforce into their company while going through the relevant training to acquire the new skillsets for the new jobs.

When NTUC launched Worker 4.0, it was aimed at transforming our resident workforce by going through trainings in three broad areas: Adaptability, Technological and Technical. The use of technology has started even before COVID-19 struck the world. With COVID-19, it only accelerated the use of technology at the workplace. I would like to remind and appeal to employers and management that it is humans that created technology and technology makes jobs easier and better. We should not make technology replace our workers but rather encourage our workers to embrace technology during their course of work for better outcomes.

Employers should identify training providers that can provide technological knowledge for their workforce at both their and their workers' convenience. Do engage NTUC Learning Hub, whose theme is to "learn anytime and anywhere".

To all my fellow workers, let us continue to learn, unlearn and relearn skills so that your management finds it difficult and more challenging to release you. For employers, always look around internally and ask if you have done justice to our resident workforce with your ratio of locals to foreigners.

Support for Mature PMEs

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): During our NTUC-Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) PME Taskforce consultations, surveys and focus groups as well as in our latest #EveryWorkerMatters conversations, mature PMEs, especially those above 40 years of age, are anxious about the prospects of their employment and employability. In this respect, I have three suggestions for MOM.

First, extend the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) and restore the Career Support Programme (CSP) which was the precursor to the JGI to incentivise and encourage employers to hire mature workers, especially PMEs.

Second, introduce a Mid-Life Career Transition programme involving individualised career coaching, advisory and counselling to provide personalised guidance and support for every mature worker including PMEs, whether they are in or out of employment.

And third, while I applaud the extension of the Special Employment Credit, can MOM consider raising the current \$4,000 salary cap to benefit even more mature PMEs?

Workplace Discrimination

Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member): Mr Chairman, I refer to the recently released interim report of the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness. The Progress Singapore Party (PSP) has high hopes of the Committee which was set up just before debate on foreign talent policy in September 2021. But we have found the interim report to be inadequate in at least two areas. We hope the Committee will consider and incorporate our views in the final report.

First, there is an inadequate focus on the job security of Singaporeans. The report noted that the most common form of workplace discrimination is nationality, which accounts for close to 60% of the complaints received by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP). As it is quite unlikely that foreigners will complain about discrimination when they have no automatic right to work in Singapore, many of these complaints must be from Singaporeans complaining that the foreigners have been preferred. Workplace discrimination against Singaporeans is thus prevalent.

I hope the new legislation would enforce meaningful changes in the quality, number and concentration of foreign work pass holders that the Government, including the Prime Minister, have identified as potential problems in July 2021.

Stronger actions can be taken to ensure that our workplaces remain diverse. MOM should consider imposing diversity quotas, or limits on the total percentage of a company's workforce that may be from a certain foreign nationality. This will be a stronger safeguard than COMPASS in ensuring their workplaces do not become communal enclaves where one foreign nationality is favoured over others.

1.45 pm

To complement that policy, we should also take out Recommendation 9, which provides exemptions for SMEs that employ less than 25 employees. This is a potential loophole that will allow larger companies to set up subsidiaries that employ one local and 24 foreign PMETs.

The PSP has also repeatedly urged the Government to introduce a \$1,200 monthly levy on Employment Pass holders. This is urgently needed to level the playing field for Singaporean PMEs because employers will have to pay more and more CPF contributions for Singaporeans as the ordinary wage ceiling is raised, making Singaporeans less competitive on wages compared to foreigners.

The second area that I am concerned about is the secular nature of our workplace and employment laws. Everyone should be free to practise their religion but this should not hinder anyone else from earning a living.

I note that Recommendation 10 in the interim report that religious organisations should be allowed to make employment decisions based on religion and religious requirements for all workers.

This appears to be a reversal of MOM's stance in 2013. At that time, a pregnant church employee was sacked in the seventh month of her pregnancy because she had conceived a child in an extramarital relationship against church teachings. MOM intervened to secure compensation for her because employment law had been violated. MOM also stressed that workplaces must be preserved as a secular space in Singapore.

Thus, I hope the Minister can clarify how Recommendation 10 is aligned with MOM's stance in 2013 or whether MOM's stance has changed since then.

If Recommendation 10 is adopted, then I would like to call on the Government to include sexual orientation as a protected category in the anti-discrimination law. This is in line with the spirit of repealing section 377A and will better protect LGBT workers from discrimination based on their sexuality, which still exists in Singapore. LGBT workers should be allowed to earn a living on a level playing field based on merit, like anyone else in Singapore.

Finally, I would like the Government to elaborate on actions it has taken since October 2022 to ensure that employers without genuine occupational requirements no longer practise vaccination-differentiated measures (VDS). Is the employment rate of unvaccinated citizens back on par with vaccinated citizens for each age group?

Mr Chairman, workplace fairness is an important issue. The PSP is glad that the Government will be enshrining this in law next year. But when drafting the law, I hope the Government will enforce a level playing field for Singaporeans and ensure that workplaces remain secular. Singaporeans deserve better. For country, for people.

Workplace Discrimination against PwDs

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): Sir, about 78% of persons with disabilities (PwDs) have reported experiencing discrimination at the workplace, according to a survey last August by AWARE and Milieu Insight. Discrimination faced by PwDs can range from exploitation and denigration to stereotyping and displaying patronising attitudes towards them.

The Government has announced its intention to enshrine the TAFEP Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices in a new workplace anti-discrimination law. It is important to ensure that this legislation provides sufficient protection for PwDs.

To achieve this, the law should incorporate several key provisions, which have also been recommended by the Disabled People's Association.

First, it needs a definition of disability that is inclusive of the entire disability population in Singapore.

Second, it should require employers to provide reasonable accommodations to PwD employees.

A reasonable accommodation is a modification to a job or work environment that enables a qualified PwD to perform the essential functions of the job and have the same employment opportunities as their abled colleagues without imposing an unreasonable burden on the employer.

Singapore has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) a decade ago. Article 27 of the CRPD requires signatories to take appropriate steps, including legislation, to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to PwDs in the workplace. Examples of reasonable accommodations may include providing screen readers, installing ramps, offering FWAs or conducting meetings online.

Third, the legislation must be enforceable in a timely manner and provide the necessary remedies and measures to prevent repeat offences.

Enshrining these provisions in the anti-discrimination legislation will ensure that it is effective in preventing PwDs from being excluded from the workforce.

We need to change societal attitudes to foster inclusivity in the workplace for PwDs. Rather than viewing PwDs as beneficiaries of charity, we must recognise them as individuals and workers who possess equal rights and contribute valuable skills to the workforce. Is the Ministry looking to do more to highlight the contributions of PwDs in the workplace?

Enhancing Workplace Fairness

Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol): The recommendations in the interim report by the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness is one that is greatly anticipated. The inclusion of characteristics such as sex, marital status, pregnancy status and caregiving responsibilities are of particular significance to the NTUC's Woman and Family Unit.

The Labour Movement has for decades worked to ensure women in the workplace are given a positive and safe work environment to achieve their career aspirations. The enshrining of such protections will help in our fight towards eliminating workplace discrimination faced by women.

Yet, the NTUC Women's Committee has noted that women continue to face workplace discrimination. In our latest February sensing with women union leaders, 64% agree that discrimination is prevalent in their workplaces.

For many of the women who feel such discrimination, they often find it difficult to articulate their grievances clearly or they lack the right channels or opportunities to do so. Employers, too, especially SMEs, have often told us that they lack the resources and know-how to address such situations.

While we welcome the legislation to come, we know we have miles to go before we sleep and welcome it. Maybe in practice, it may prove to be a daunting task.

We call on the Ministry to work with the Labour Movement in empowering and equipping our workers to be able to provide clear articulation of discrimination grievances and seek clarification on how the Ministry will engage and support companies in effectively implementing workplace fairness practices.

Singaporean Core

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan: Chairman, I declare my interest as a member of the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness.

I am glad that MOM has accepted the recommendations of the NTUC-SNEF PME Taskforce and we are going to introduce a dedicated workplace fairness piece of legislation as well as a points system via COMPASS to regulate the issuance of Employment Passes. Can MOM provide an update on COMPASS?

On the same note, can MOM also update us on the Fair Consideration Framework and the number and type of cases reported, investigated and closed at Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) thus far?

I will also wish to ask the status of the Strengthening the Singaporean Core efforts and suggest if we can publish the triple weak list of companies as the workplace fairness piece of legislation will only be introduced in the latter half of 2024 and is effective 2025 and beyond.

Also, after the new piece of legislation, what will be the status of the Fair Consideration Framework, TAFEP as well as the watchlist?

Foreign Workforce Policies

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): Chairman, we currently have a tight labour market. Our low total fertility rate (TFR) means we need a foreign workforce to complement our local workforce to compete globally.

Other countries are waging a war for global talent. Countries such as New Zealand and Hong Kong already have measures to attract foreign talent post-COVID-19.

We must bring in foreign workforce with the right skills and qualifications and at the right price. It is always a delicate balance between meeting our labour needs and protecting our citizens' interests.

One concern is that the influx of foreign workforce may exacerbate the shortage of housing in Singapore, causing rental prices to go up. How does the Government plan to balance housing required for these foreigners and the need for affordable properties to rent for Singaporeans?

In the same token, foreigners may be deterred from working in Singapore due to high rents. What are the Government's plans to assuage these concerns?

Can the Minister also share updates to our foreign workforce policies, including COMPASS? What can we expect from the upcoming workplace fairness legislation that is to be enacted?

Importing manpower is not the only issue. What is MOM doing to promote technology and productivity-enhancing measures in our workplaces? What else can we do to incentivise companies to invest in automation and other technologies? How can we equip workers with the skills needed to thrive in a tech-enabled workplace?

COMPASS Shortage Occupation List

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song: The Shortage Occupation List (SOL) is one of the criteria in the COMPASS framework. MOM has said that the first SOL will be announced this month. It is expected to identify occupations requiring skills that are currently in shortage in the local workforce.

Could the Minister share what occupations will be included in the SOL? Will the SOL take into account the pipeline of local ITE, polytechnic and university graduates in both local and foreign institutions? For example, if there are many local graduates in, say, information and communications technology (ICT) next year, the SOL should be revised accordingly.

With the knowledge of skill shortages in the SOL, schools, tertiary institutions and adult education centres can better plan their curriculum and intake size to better prepare local students and workers to fill them. The Government should work closely with ITEs, polytechnics and universities to expand their intake of courses for occupations in the SOL.

How frequently will the SOL be reviewed? I hope it will be reviewed frequently so that it can be responsive to changes in industry requirements and we will not have situations where an occupation remains on the SOL when there is sufficient local talent in that area.

Finally, the SOL should be included as one of the foundational criteria of COMPASS instead of only being a bonus criterion. This could prompt firms to search harder for available local talent before turning to foreigners.

All these can create more opportunities for Singaporeans in the workplace and reduce the heavy reliance on foreigners in our workforce.

Update on Foreign Workforce Policies

Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang): Sir, in almost every recent engagement that I have with businesses, the manpower crunch problem would surface.

The problem seems to have worsened as we resumed most of our economic activities post-COVID-19. Many businesses lamented that there may well be more businesses to do or more growth opportunities out there but there are not really enough workers to go around to grab these opportunities. Many ask for a higher foreign worker quota and/or for MOM to loosen the foreign worker criteria.

Sir, the reality for Singapore is that we are already in a near full-employment economy. In fact, we are leveraging and dependent on a large pool of foreign labour to stretch our overall economic capacity and growth potential.

The numbers are large. Our total foreign workforce currently stands at 1.31 million, slightly less than the pre-COVID-19 level of 1.43 million. This represents one-third of our total labour workforce, a very significant share.

There are physical and social limits as to how much more foreign labour we can accommodate on our tiny island. I believe we are already near the limits in terms of numbers.

Being too dependent on foreign manpower also expose us to source country risks as well as concentration risks. We have seen these vulnerabilities played out during the pandemic when borders were closed or restricted.

Sir, the manpower-driven growth strategies of the past are no longer sustainable in our current context.

Can I ask the Minister for an update as to how the businesses have coped with the foreign manpower constraints? Have we seen noticeable shifts in companies tapping on technologies and training to improve productivity and capabilities?

2.00 pm

Sir, last year, the Ministry announced a number changes to the foreign workforce policies. The COMPASS framework was introduced as a transparent system to strengthen the complementarity and diversity of our workforce and prevent sources concentration.

The qualifying salary for Employment Passes and S Passes has been raised in September 2022 and the reduction of the Dependency Ratio Ceiling (DRC) for the construction and process sectors will follow suit in January 2024.

The Overseas Networks & Expertise (ONE) Pass targets the top talents across sectors while the Manpower for Strategic Economic Priorities (M-SEP) scheme support growth of businesses that contribute to Singapore's strategic economic priorities. These are targeted schemes that comes with tight conditions to fulfil and also with a specific percentage and number cap to limit the number of foreign workers a firm can hire. In the case of M-SEP, participating companies must also commit to hiring and training local workers. Only about 1,000 firms are eligible for M-SEP or less than 1% of the total number of companies.

Sir, I support the policy approaches to strengthen complementarity and diversity, with specific requirements to ensure a complementary mix of local and foreign workforce, and with the intent and goal to develop a strong Singaporean Core. In this regard, may I ask the Minister if there are any updates to our foreign workforce policies to attain these goals?

Retirement Adequacy

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh): Rising prices threaten our retired seniors' ability to meet growing expenses, where they do not enjoy the benefit of rising wages now. I have raised a few questions on retirement adequacy in my Budget debate speech.

First, the CPF minimum retirement sum should build in enough buffer for future unexpected events, such as dramatic price increases. Is it time to adjust the allocation ratios such that a greater percentage is allocated into the Special Account instead of the Ordinary and Medisave Accounts?

Second, as market interest rates crossed 4% in 2023, do we intend to revise the interest rates on the respective CPF Accounts? The CPF LIFE Escalating Plan, which increases payouts by 2% annually, may need to be tweaked, given the changed longer-term inflation outlook.

Finally, I am even more concerned for self-employed persons and non-working homemakers who do not have the minimum retirement sum.

Can the Ministry provide an update on Singaporeans' retirement adequacy? How do we assist retiree households that have limited ability to accommodate expenditure shocks, outlived their savings or never accumulated much to begin with? Are such households becoming more prevalent?

Mr Abdul Samad: Chairman, the topic of retirement adequacy has been attracting attention and interest among our fellow workers, from the young to the golden generation.

I appreciate the Government stepping up their efforts to ensure that our workers have enough for their basic retirement sum when they reach 55 years old. At this juncture, I would like to appeal to our Government, Government-linked companies or even Temasek-linked companies, that are doing well to continue with their 17% contribution instead of reducing it when their workers reach the age of 55 years old. This will certainly help our workers CPF savings and make this as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Can the Ministry share as of December 2022, how many Singaporeans have reached the respective Basic, Full and Enhanced Retirement Sums? How many actually take up the Enhanced Retirement Sum when they reach 55? How many Singaporeans have actually put their property as a provision to match the difference between the Basic and Full Enhanced Retirement Sums so that they can cash out at the age of 55?

For every Singaporean, we dream to retire with enough wealth for our retirement years with income and good health as a serious matter. Once again, I strongly believe our fellow Singaporeans look forward to such support of not to reduce CPF contributions at the age of 55 for those that are doing well.

The Chairman: Mr Louis Chua, both cuts, please.

Enhancing CPF Returns

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang): Chairman, on the topic of enhancing CPF returns, I would like to once again take the chance to raise concerns that I have previously voiced out in Parliament in the past two years.

The CPF scheme plays an important role in securing Singaporeans' retirement needs and it is after all the CPF Board's mission.

An opportunity to enhance these returns is therefore something which many Singaporeans continuously look out for. The long lines at the banks recently due to the promotional fixed deposit rates is evidence enough of this demand. In the past month alone, major banks such as OCBC and DBS have begun offering additional products for investors to allocate their CPF Ordinary Account (OA) monies to. OCBC is now offering eight-month deposits at an interest rate of 3.88%, while DBS now accepts online applications for T-bill investments using CPF OA funds. Again, the long lines forming suggest that Singaporeans' needs for higher quality returns to their OA funds is largely unmet. The excess demand for these additional OA investment products despite their rather modest long-term returns as compared to a globally diversified portfolio of Exchange-traded Funds (ETFs) for example, further shows that there is pent-up demand for more investment options that need to be satiated.

In Budgets 2021 and 2022, I sought clarification on the CPF Lifetime Retirement Investment Scheme (LRIS). Last year, I asked if the Expert Investment Council had completed their studies and if the Government was still considering rolling out the LRIS. Minister Tan See Leng assured us that the Government is still evaluating the scheme and I would like to once again check in if there has been any conclusion on their studies since then.

It is, after all, close to seven years since August 2016 when the plans were first announced. Is there a more concrete timetable on which the Ministry can share details of the proposed LRIS? I hope the Ministry is cognisant that the longer the delay, the higher the opportunity cost and real cost to Singaporeans' retirement savings.

Moreover, I would like to reiterate the lack of options currently available to Singaporeans to allow them to take better control of the wealth they have. Since my speech last year, there are still only six ETFs available for Singaporeans to invest in. With increasing financial literacy among our people, they should be empowered to take greater charge of their investment decisions according to their risk appetites and financial goals.

Reform of CPF Ordinary Account Rates

The CPF Board's vision is, among others, to enable Singaporeans to have a secure retirement through lifelong income. It is imperative that we therefore consistently review and revise, where necessary, the mechanisms that underlie its functions to ensure that it serves its purpose as effectively as possible.

One of the key concerns frustrating Singaporeans now is inflation. I understand that the liquidity of Ordinary Accounts (OA) pegs them to shorter-term interest rates. However, for much of our working lives, the bulk of our CPF contributions gets allocated towards the OA. I appreciate the interest rate floor that has been put in place at 2.5%. However, we must balance CPF OA rates against the goal of preserving the purchasing power of our retirement funds and guarding against inflation over time. While our CPF monies are invested in Special Singapore Government Securities (SGS) fully guaranteed by the Government, GIC's portfolio has been able to beat inflation both nominally and in real terms at 7.0% and 4.2% returns respectively over the past 20 years.

Pegging OA interest rates to deposit rates has its issues as it can be quite arbitrary. For example, DBS states that the 12-month fixed deposit rates for deposits up to \$19,999 is 3.2%, while an amount of \$20,000, which is used for OA calculations, drops to 0.05% instead.

We are beginning to see a stark contrast in rates. Recent news articles show banks competing with one another to get deposits. UOB has even raised its maximum bonus rates from 3.6% to 7.8%, while many now offer fixed deposit rates at 3% to 4%. Despite this, the CPF Board's assessment of major local banks interest rates to be at 0.52% for the period from November 2022 to January 2023 and one cannot help but feel as though these are unrealistically suppressed, given the realities of the deposit environment of the local banks today.

Chairman, the OA formula itself has remained unchanged since 1999. Many of us now have the likes of a DBS Multiplier or UOB ONE account where higher interest rates can be earned easily as compared to historical savings accounts. Even if the Government does not wish to take inflation into account, I urge the Government to reconsider the formula after 24 years, to take into account the current nature of fixed deposits and savings rates from the three local banks so that it better reflects economic realities.

Workplace Health and Safety

Mr Pritam Singh: Sir, in January this year, the eighth Meeting of the International Advisory Panel on Workplace Safety and Health made its recommendations, which the Government accepted.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM)'s press release stated that "2022 saw a spate of workplace fatalities largely due to basic safety lapses, such as inadequate safety planning and control measures, and non-compliance with safety measures."

I also know that the Heightened Safety Period (HSP) which was to have been from September 2022 to February 2023, was extended by three months until 31 May. The fact of the extension itself indicates that the previous HSP did not adequately meet its objectives. While the workplace fatality rate has improved, unfortunately, the annualised rate of major injuries actually increased from 16.8 to 18.7 per 100,000 workers during the first three months of the HSP.

For the built environment sector, in particular, do major safety lapses occur in the context of subcontracting work where margins for profits and time to complete work may be narrower and are safety lapses more prevalent here?

I understand that effort is being put into this issue of workplace fatalities and major injuries, but may I ask what the Government is going to do differently when implementing these new 2023 recommendations? Does the Ministry foresee a deeper cultural shake-up required in the attitudes towards workplace safety? How are fatalities and major injuries going to be arrested in a more significant way?

The Chairman: Miss Cheng Li Hui. Not here. Mr Melvin Yong.

Ensuring Safer Workplaces

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas): Mr Chairman, in my Budget debate speech, I expressed my dismay at the current poor workplace safety outcomes, which resulted in the tragic loss of lives, many of which were due to basic errors that could have and should have been avoided.

The spike in workplace fatalities in the past few months might have been a sign that companies are relaxing their stringent Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) practices as the Heightened Safety Period (HSP) draws nearer to its end.

How many of the workplace accidents reported in the past 18 months were due to a lack of or grossly inadequate safety measures by the companies' management?

The recent extension of the HSP notwithstanding, is MOM prepared to make HSP a permanent fixture or at least make permanent some of the HSP requirements, such as the enhanced penalties for systemic WSH lapses?

Sir, we need to establish better whistle-blowing channels. We must build a culture where workers feel safe to report unsafe work practices that they see at their worksites. We must entrench a culture where employers must realise that unsafe practices cannot go unreported and cannot be swept under the carpet.

Can MOM provide an update on the WSH feedback rate, across its various channels, over the past five years? Can MOM review and enhance its feedback structures, and where needed, to create new reporting channels that make it easier for anyone, including a member of public, to report unsafe work practices?

Sir, I know that resources are finite. As such, I urge MOM to focus efforts on the high-risk sectors which account disproportionately for the number of workplace injuries. MOM's data also shows that SMEs have the greatest risk of poor WSH outcomes. I urge the Ministry to enhance outreach and funding support for SMEs to adopt and deploy WSH technologies. I have previously highlighted how such technologies have improved safety standards at the workplace, especially in high-risk environments.

Sir, every worker deserves a safe workplace. The Labour Movement stands ready to work closely with our tripartite partners to do all we can to help every worker return home safely at the end of every workday.

The Right to Sit

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied): Mr Chairman, there has been recent debate over the provision of chairs at retail outlets and the right of retail workers to sit.

Multiple studies report there are significant health risks associated with prolonged standing, including chronic venous insufficiency, musculoskeletal disorders as well as spontaneous abortion for pregnant women in some rare cases. This is a health hazard caused by an inability to alternate muscle usage.

Countries like Malaysia and South Africa have enacted laws on the right to sit. The UK requires retail outlets to provide seats and to allow staff to sit occasionally.

Sir, I call on the Government to explore similar laws, perhaps by amending the WSH Handbook.

Sir, the time has come to go beyond industry self-regulation on this issue. Our laws and regulations should promote our retail workers' health, well-being and longevity.

Need for Greater Recognition of Skills

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui (Holland-Bukit Timah): Mr Chairman, Sir, we need to better recognise and value skill sets in the job market. While there are continuing efforts to address starting salaries and career progression for different job roles and sectors, more can be done to address the growing wage disparity between graduates and non-graduates. Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong shared in his recent speech at the IPS Singapore Perspectives that today, the median starting pay for a university graduate is double that of an ITE graduate, and 1.5 times that of a polytechnic graduate.

As our workforce becomes increasingly competitive, a widening gap can lead to negative outcomes. We do not wish for a situation where many young and promising Singaporeans would eventually feel undervalued despite having the relevant skill sets simply because of a lack of necessary qualifications.

2.15 pm

Mitigating such outcomes does not mean to devalue paper qualifications but it is about having an equal recognition for skills and competencies. In the US, companies like Google and IBM have reportedly reduced the need for paper qualifications in some tech roles. IBM has shifted away from degree requirements with less than one-third of its IT jobs requiring one. We do not see Google and IBM being less competitive in the tech world when changing its focus on one's level of competency.

There is a greater need to recognise skills especially craftsmanship. The Career Progression Model proposed by NTUC is a good example of uplifting the work prospects and salaries of skilled essential tradesmen. I am supportive of this model which has a clear framework and structured skills training so that quality standards can be assured. Such national-level efforts can ensure that essential skills are continuously and increasingly recognised. I would also propose for MOM to have regular surveying of salaries of specific skills level published, much like how universities publish graduate employment survey and the average salary level for specific graduate course degrees. This can provide a further guide to fairly align salary range with levels of skills.

While we push for nationwide efforts to recognise and value skills the same way as one's qualifications, such a change will require human resource (HR) managers and employers to take the first step. HR managers are key to making structural changes and fine-tuning workplace policies. Since COVID-19, the role of a HR manager has significantly evolved which includes the need for more nuanced recruitment as an increasingly complex economy requires more differentiated skills. With constant changes to our economy, HR managers also have to be involved in redesigning jobs for the employees. Likewise, with MOM's more targeted foreign worker policies, this creates additional complexities to the role of a HR manager.

Therefore, I propose for MOM to introduce an Industry Transformation Map (ITM) for the HR industry and support our HR professionals' expanded roles which can make a significant improvement in recruitment and valuing skills. While HR managers obtain the relevant expertise in their expanded role, they would also need to refresh their knowledge on job roles and the necessary skill sets.

Hence, I would like to ask how MOM would assist employers and HR managers to better understand the granularity of each profession and skills requirement which dovetails with SSG's skills framework so that recruitment is not merely based on paper qualifications but also on skills certifications.

Overall, we must also not neglect our SMEs, especially micro ones which do not have the necessary resources to expand HR roles. To help our SMEs cope with the evolving needs of a HR manager, I would re-emphasise on the need for a chief human resources officer (CHRO) as a similar service to the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA)'s Chief Technology Officer-as-a-service. Such a service can support SMEs in access to gain access to HR resources and expertise.

Furthering Strengthening HR in Singapore

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan: Good human resource (HR) practices and processes are an essential ingredient if we wish to foster a fair and inclusive workplace. One way this can be achieved is by having certified HR professionals in our organisations. I have three suggestions to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

First, it would be to mandate companies to have at least one Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP)-certified HR professional before they can be allowed to hire any foreign manpower.

Second, is for the IHRP certification course and examinations to include the knowledge of the concept of tripartism including all the requisite tripartite standards, guidelines and advisories as well as working with unions and the industrial relations system.

Third, HR cannot be the sole custodians of progressive practices. People Managers also play a critical role in supporting and cascading good human capital practices in the organisation. I believe more can be done in this respect and professional bodies like the IHRP can work with partners like Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) and NTUC Learning Hub, Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) and HR associations to equip People Managers with the requisite skills and knowledge to better engage and nurture their workforce.

Update on Implementation of Progressive Wage Model (PWM)

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman (Marine Parade): Sir, the employers who violate the PWM requirements can face fines, penalties and other consequences such as the suspension or revocation of their Work Pass privileges. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) together with tripartite partners also conduct regular public education and outreach efforts to raise awareness of the PWM and its requirements among employers and workers. However, as with any policy or regulation, there may be instances where employers are not fully compliant with the PWM requirements, be it in the terms of technical requirements or in spirit. These leaves low-wage workers susceptible to exploitation.

In this regard, I would like to ask MOM to give an update on this implementation and what measures are in place or explore enforcement strategies or mechanisms to ensure that companies comply to PWM wages and other requirements.

Uplifting Lower-wage Workers

Ms Yeo Wan Ling: The Labour Movement's Progressive Wage Model (PWM) is key to protecting our vulnerable as it uplifts our lower-wage workers' livelihoods while equipping our workers the requisite training to upscale and improve. The PWM now covers 174,000 lower-wage workers in seven sectors including cleaning, security, retail and, starting today, the food services industries.

The PWM was also introduced into occupations – administration and driving – recently. As the chairperson for the tripartite clusters for retail and food services, I note the significance of these clusters to be included in the PWM framework. These are very relatable industries for many Singaporeans. The workers in these industries touch the hearts and lives of Singaporeans daily and the businesses' innovations and achievements put Singapore in the world map as a true global city. Given that we hope to attract more talented young Singaporeans into these industries, can the Ministry provide an update on how it will support and encourage companies to embrace attractive career ladders and drum up productivity?

I note too that these industries were the first predominantly business-to-consumer (B2C) industries to introduce the PWM framework. As such, supporting our lower-wage workers would include consumers as a stakeholder. We call on the Ministry to work with the Labour Movement to bring home the message that uplifting the lives of our lower-wage Singaporeans is a whole of community effort.

Migrant Worker Welfare

Mr Leon Perera: Mr Chairman, last year saw 46 workplace deaths, the highest since 2016. We need to reflect on that.

Migrant workers are more vulnerable to unsafe workplace practices because of their limited bargaining power. They need employers' consent to transfer to a new job, save exceptions. This can be held against them and they might not dare to speak up for fear of repatriation.

We need to make the playing field less uneven perhaps by allowing workers to transfer jobs without their employers' consent in two scenarios. If they provide evidence of unsafe work, they should be allowed to resign without notice and stay here for two months to find another employer if that evidence is borne out. Second, they should be allowed to transfer if they have been working for at least one year with their current employer with a one-month notice period without their current employer being allowed to cancel their Work Permit during that period. This will incentivise employers to create safer, decent work environments.

Also, can MOM empower workers to call out unsafe work practices? When settling in, MOM can assure them that whistle-blowers' identities are kept confidential and they will be protected from dismissal. MOM can reward whistle-blowers if complaints are found to be valid.

Next, under the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA), designated insurers process all WICA claims. An issue is that the WICA insurers become "gatekeepers" who determine which claims are valid before compensation is assessed. This creates a conflict of interest since insurers might be incentivised to deny validity.

In 2019, the then-Minister of State said MOM was rolling out a system of checks and balances. Has MOM reviewed the performance of WICA insurers to see if this system is adequate? Does MOM proactively monitor each insurer's performance or does it only investigate complaints? How does MOM ensure that designated insurers comply with stipulated timelines for processing claims? Are insurers penalised for failing to comply?

The WICA insurers' manual should be published so the public can hold insurers accountable and report potential non-compliance.

Can MOM also review the use of an independent assessor such as the Commissioner of Labour previously? This is done in New Zealand and Ireland.

Lastly, on the subject of good quality food for migrant workers, there have been issues in the past and I have spoken on this topic in the House before. I suggest that: one, every new dormitory should be equipped with cooking facilities for workers. Many migrant workers prefer to cook their own food; secondly, can the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) consider mandating that catered food is delivered in safe eating conditions as per the National Environment Agency (NEA) regulations applicable for cooked food supplied by caterers for events? If this means food storage or a shift towards freezers and microwaves, so be it.

CPF Contributions

Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member): I have several questions pertaining to CPF contributions for platform workers.

It has been announced that transitional assistance will be provided to platform workers who earn below \$2,500 to help them cope with the new requirement to contribute CPF. However, those earning above \$2,500 will also have difficulties adjusting to a lower take-home pay. Will MOM be implementing the employee contribution in phases to give them more time to adjust?

Secondly, those aged above 30 can opt out of making CPF contributions. If a platform worker opts out, does this mean the platform owner will not need to contribute CPF as well? If this is the case, then those who opt in will cost the platform owners more than those who opt out. It is desirable for more platform workers to opt in so that they have more retirement savings. However, my concern is whether those who opt in would be discriminated against because they are more costly. Will there be measures put in place to prevent discrimination against those who opt in?

Lastly, is the decision to either opt in or out of CPF a one-off decision? Can platform workers change their minds subsequently?

Freelance Coaches and/or Instructors

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar): Chairman, the freelancer community of coaches and instructors in the fields of sports, fitness, learning, and visual and performing arts are an important part of Singapore's economy. As an adviser to the NTUC affiliate, the National Instructors and Coaches Association, I seek MOM's attention to uplift this group of freelancers for their better job and income security and well-being.

One, fair compensation. Much has been done for platform workers and lower-wage workers. The freelancer community too should be paid fairly, based on their skills, contributions and track records. Today, many of them are often the price takers. They are hesitant in adjusting their contract rates even when there are valid reasons to do so such as rising business costs. When contracts are up, there is often the fear of losing contracts to the lowest bidder should they charge higher. They face constraints even with clients such as those in public agencies like the Ministry of Education (MOE), People's Association (PA) or Health Promotion Board (HPB) as the client staff may find it hard to seek approvals for rate hikes mid-contract because of already approved fixed budgets and the need for additional paperwork to get approvals for adjustments. I urge MOM to facilitate the development of a procurement guide to ensure a sustainable win-win arrangement and fair compensation for the freelancer community starting with their public sector clients.

Two, access to resources. Many freelance instructors and coaches face limited access to resources such as class facilities, equipment or training materials. Uplifting them can include providing them with greater access to sports or school facilities or through Government grants.

Lastly, recognition and professional development. Freelancers too need lifelong learning and support to ensure they remain relevant and competitive. So, curate and provide local and overseas professional development opportunities to help them stay updated with the latest developments in their industries.

Strengthen Support for Vulnerable Workers

Ms Yeo Wan Ling: The influence of platform workers is clear for us to see. They have become an integral part of our daily urban lives having transformed the way we eat, shop and move. While we celebrate the benefits and rewards such work brings, we cannot overlook the potential risks that an increasing number of platform workers face, be it the rising concerns over adequate retirement savings, health safety nets and housing.

To this end, the Labour Movement is encouraged that the Government recognised these concerns. We thank the Government for accepting the 12 recommendations provided by the advisory committee on platform workers that will strengthen our social and livelihood safety nets for our platform workers. While the advisory committee looks towards the working group to deliberate on the details of the operationalisation of these recommendations, our platform workers have voiced their concerns on how the introduction of CPF may affect their take-home earnings and subsequently their livelihoods.

We hence welcomed the move to introduce a CPF transition support which will help alleviate these concerns. Can the Ministry provide an update on the transitional support? Further, we call on the Ministry to work closely with the Labour Movement and our platform associations to ensure that there is fair apportionment of CPF contributions between the platform worker and the platform company.

For many platform workers, a day of work is also a day of painful loss revenues. In addition to the insurance benefits for work injuries as put forth in the recommendations, we call for the Ministry to consider further safety nets for platform workers who are injured in the course of their work, through added healthcare subsidies and enhanced injuries and loss of income plans.

2.30 pm

As we look to strengthen our social compact, we must not forget to turn our attention to our vulnerable Singaporeans who are on the fringes and support them in their desire to earn decent livelihoods and the opportunity to contribute back to Singapore.

Enhancing Retirement Adequacy

Mr Yip Hon Weng: Chairman, we need to push for improvement in senior employability and encourage those who wish to work to continue. I have queries in these three areas.

First, it is worrying to learn that certain segments of the population such as senior workers in low-wage and casual jobs do not have sufficient CPF to address their retirement adequacy. How will the Ministry help this group of people separately?

Separately, notwithstanding the CPF Transition Offset which is for one year, how do we ensure that companies continue to retain their senior workers, given the increase in the senior worker CPF contribution rates?

Second, to truly understand whether Singaporeans have sufficient retirement adequacy, we need to move beyond subsistence level retirement and develop a formal definition of what defines a decent quality of life in old age.

In 2019, a team of local researchers derived the amount of money needed for seniors to achieve a basic standard of living in Singapore. This study has been constantly quoted since. Does the Ministry stand by its results or does MOM plan to do its own in-depth study? Moreover, with high inflation in the past two years, is it time to review this amount?

Third, we can do more on the labour front by having more flexible work options. Many older workers would like to work part-time and even go back and forth between periods of work and leisure. Some want to spend more time with their families. Others wish to travel and take care of their grandchildren and return to work after.

There are a few ways companies can implement this and older workers can be allowed to take a few months' leave and then return to the job. Coverage of duties would have to be arranged with flexibility and creativity exercise. We also should push on with job sharing and micro jobs which have been raised several times before. We should also consider the concept of phased retirement. This allows seniors to gradually decrease the number of workdays a week until retirement. How can the Ministry encourage these initiatives?

We must continue to make progress towards improving retirement adequacy and senior employability. For the seniors who derive employment from their work, we can help maintain their physical and mental well-being whilst also providing financial security.

Seniors' Employment and Retirement Adequacy

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman: Chairman, retirement adequacy remains an important concern for many senior citizens in Singapore, especially in an inflationary environment because it can erode purchasing power of retirement savings over time.

As the costs of living increases, the value of retirement savings may decrease, making it more difficult for seniors to meet their basic needs and maintain the standard of living in retirement. Additionally, healthcare cost tends to increase with age which can put further pressure on retirement savings.

These factors can create financial insecurity and make it difficult for seniors to meet their retirement goals. As a result, it is important for the Government and individuals to take steps to address retirement adequacy in an inflationary environment.

Given the importance of retirement adequacy, especially in inflationary environment, can MOM provide an update on measures that will be put in place to protect the vulnerability of the seniors and strengthen their retirement adequacy?

SG Made for Families – Parent Care Leave

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon): Deputy Prime Minister highlighted how we want to help our seniors age with grace, dignity and security. Having good healthcare and retirement funds are important. But none of these are a substitute for time with their children.

Just last Saturday, a resident shared during my home visit at Block 205 that he needed leave from work to bring his mother for her repeated medical appointments.

Legislating parent care leave will let Singaporeans be there to care for their parents. I am sure the Government feels the same way. All public servants have had parent care leave for over 10 years. It is time to expand this to all workers.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis: When DORSCON Green was announced, many Singaporeans shared their fears of having to go back to the pre-COVID-19 way of work – and this has for the most part been quite true.

In fact, many bosses are asking their staff to work from the office, with a preference to "see" their staff working, for fear of them not producing work. As I shared in my Budget debate speech, one friend quipped that his boss said, and I paraphrase, "if you are not in the office, how do I know that you are working?"

This old myth needs debunking. One of many studies has shown that a Chinese company saw a 13% increase in productivity for employees allowed to work remotely in a work-from-home (WFH) experiment. Last year, I called for the public service to take a leadership role and undertake a four-day work week pilot, similar to the one which companies in the UK embarked on. I am pleased to update this House that more than nine out of 10 companies that adopted a four-day working week in the UK trial will continue to use the more flexible way of operating, according to findings.

The White Paper on Women's Development has also proposed Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) to be a "pervasive and sustainable workplace norm", to foster a more inclusive work environment especially for married women who may otherwise leave the workforce significantly earlier than men. A normalised FWA will enable employees' FWA requests to be considered fairly, instead of not giving them the real option to begin with.

We understand that there is the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangements that will be ready by 2024. And leading up to this, I find it pertinent to maintain that these guidelines should be legislated and enforced, and not be seen as mere guidelines that leaves companies the option of not even extending this option to their employees.

I have mentioned in my previous speeches how other governments have legislated and are looking at ways to strengthen worker's rights to FWAs, with the key intent on creating a more inclusive work environment for all.

Given the numerous benefits FWA has on women, young parents and the overall well-being of an individual, this should not be seen as a "good to have" or "extra", but as part and parcel of what companies should offer to their employees.

We had an opportunity to experience what it could look like to have FWAs. I hope that my worst fears of a return to pre-COVID-19 workplace norms in Singapore will not come true.

Creating Inclusive Workplaces

Ms Yeo Wan Ling: Even as many of us at work transit to the new normal, one thing we hope remains the same, Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs). In creating safe and inclusive workplaces, one must not only eliminate discrimination regarding the "who" at work, but also the "how" we choose to engage in our work.

FWAs have proven to be key to allowing employees achieve better work-life harmony and it can promote a more engaged and productive workforce, allowing our workers to accomplish their tasks at work while meeting their personal responsibilities at home.

The recommendations of the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness go hand-in-hand with FWAs, providing the flexibility to accommodate back-to-work women who have to take care of young children or elderly loved ones is a function of ensuring that women who hold multiple roles both at work and at home are not discriminated against for the outsized role we women play in society.

FWAs also not limited merely to that of location but can also be extended to work hours, the work week and even work tasks.

Given the difficulties many industries face regarding manpower, employers need to be ingenious and creative in its adoption of FWAs to ensure that we can maximise our workforce and this can start with our back-to-work women who possess both the skills and desire to return to work.

Recognising the importance of FWAs, I seek the Ministry's clarifications on how it attempts to encourage more companies to continue to embrace FWAs and, in particular, performance appraisals, job and culture redesign, to support women with caregiving responsibilities to say in their jobs or to return to the workplace seamlessly after a hiatus in their careers?

The Chairman: Mr Sharael Taha, both cuts please.

Employment Opportunities – Seniors, PwDs and Part-time Workers

Mr Sharael Taha: Thank you, Chairman. Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) can take the form of flexi-time, flexi-place and flexi-load.

FWAs, together with job redesign, can unlock employment opportunities for seniors, persons with disabilities (PwDs), part-time workers and caregivers. For example, call centre operators or help desk providers can be done remotely via FWAs and this can create opportunities for seniors, PwDs and part-time workers.

Another possibility is to fund training for seniors to be trained as trainers to impart their knowledge to the industry. Given our ageing population and more of our seniors wanting to find employment although at a slower pace, how do we create structural employment opportunities for seniors through job redesign?

Similarly, how can we create structural employment opportunities for PwDs?

In Pasir Ris, we have a few families with adult children with either mild autism or low IQ. One such family in my constituency has three children with disabilities in their 20s and 30s. The parents are in the 60s. The father is the sole breadwinner and the parents are worried for the future of the children. The children have not been able to find employment and are stuck at home all day.

Is there an opportunity for us to encourage businesses to also employ PwDs?

With the extension of the Senior Employment Credit, Part-time Employment Grant and introducing Uplifting Employment Credit for ex-offenders, what is the measure of success for these schemes? How do we ensure that these fundings translate to actual improvements in employment opportunities for seniors, PwDs and part-time workers?

Update on Flexible Work Arrangements

I am heartened to see that while we work towards growing our economy and equipping our workers with the right skill sets, we are also focusing on strengthening our social compact by ensuring growth is inclusive and we have work-life balance for workers in mind.

Anecdotally, through interactions with residents in Pasir Ris, it seems that post-pandemic, a small percentage of workers are either working entirely from home or are going back to work every weekday and the larger proportion of our PMET workforce are on a three plus two or two plus three arrangements of working remotely and working from office.

Does the Ministry have any indicators of the percentage of businesses practising remote working, especially for SMEs as there are many friction points in FWAs between employer and employee, such as working hours, hours of working week and performance assessment, just to name.

Has the number of complaints of perceived unfairness brought about by FWAs increase? What is the progress of the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangements and other elements that can be implemented earlier?

The Chairman: Miss Rachel Ong, five cuts.

Raising Workforce Participation of PwDs

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast): Data from the Comprehensive Labour Force Survey (CLFS) released earlier this month on 10 February, showed that among resident Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in the working ages of 15 to 65 in 2021 and 2022, a majority of 65.7% are outside of the labour force.

Given the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) 2020 estimate of 32,000 PwDs who are of working age, this means about 21,000 working-age PwDs are still outside of the labour force.

Of those outside of the labour force, a majority of 77% or 16,000 PwDs indicate that they are in poor health, too old or disabled to work. However, not much information was provided on what the respondents meant by their being “too disabled” to work.

It would be important for us to find out whether there is a group of PwDs from within the 77% who are actually work-capable but have stayed out of the workforce because they are not aware of what to do or do not believe that there are jobs or workplaces that can accommodate their disability. In better understanding their job search experiences, we can then identify their barriers to participating in the workforce and thus work towards reducing these barriers.

In conjunction with the vision for Singapore as an inclusive society in 2030, I would like to ask the Minister for Manpower if they have further insights gathered from the survey on work-capable PwDs outside the workforce, and how Singapore can raise the workforce participation rate of working-age PwDs?

Workplace Support for PwD Caregivers

As mentioned in my Budget speech, caregivers of people with severe disabilities find great challenges in the work options that allow them to fulfil their ongoing caregiving responsibilities while financially supporting the high medical expenses and future retirement needs for themselves and their wards.

Flexibility regarding work hours and work spaces as well as the ability to take leave when required, are essential for these caregivers. This is because their wards are not work-capable and require consistent care, and caregivers need to be responsive to sudden or emergency needs.

Those who are offered jobs tend to be for roles that underemployed them with significantly lower pay, a trade off that caregivers accept for the flexibility accorded.

Yet, even with these lowered job expectations, such Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) are not easily accessible, as caregivers often are confronted with interviewers and work cultures that have biases against working caregivers of FWAs.

One country that has explored support initiatives for working caregivers is the UK. In the recent years, the UK has seen an uptrend in the number of working caregivers, whether supporting seniors or children. In 2022, this number was one in five residents.

To support them, the UK Civil Service launched an initiative called the Carer's Passport. This Passport provides caregivers and their employers with information about how employees' caring responsibilities impact their work and provides a guided conversation on the flexibility needed to combine work and care.

2.45 pm

It aims to balance the needs of the employee with the needs of the business. Since its launch in 2010, the Carer's Passport has rolled out to hospitals, employers, communities, schools and universities across the UK. I am hopeful that Singapore will one day see value in moving towards such an initiative, given our aging population and also push for larger families and hence, an increasing need for caregivers. After all, close to three-quarter of our caregivers in Singapore are employed.

May I ask the Minister for Manpower whether the Government could consider how a similar arrangement can be made for caregivers of people with severe disabilities, who need to take on flexible work arrangements (FWAs) out of necessity? How may we continue to encourage companies to make FWAs available for a larger range of job competencies, so that our caregivers can support themselves more sustainably?

Caregivers of PwDs Returning to Work

After many years of caregiving, caregivers of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) who have found alternative caregiving options, find it hard to re-enter the workplace due to concerns over age and experience. In their job search, they struggle with the lack of recognition of caregiving skills on the job market, despite their transferability.

These skills can range from project and time management, expanded skills in empathy and stress tolerance, as well as communication skills as they navigate conflict situations in caregiving. Support to identify and recognise these skills in the workplace would be of great value to caregivers.

In interviews, they are uncertain whether how much to share about their caregiving responsibilities for fear of discrimination or negative repercussions on their career due to possible biases by employers. I would like to ask the Minister for Manpower how the Government can support these caregivers in the areas of job search, coaching and preparing them to re-enter the workforce, and perhaps also to reduce biases employers may have against caregivers?

Retirement Adequacy of PwDs

Studies have shown that people with disabilities (PwDs) are poorer and more financially insecure than non-disabled people. Just 31.4% of working aged PwDs in Singapore are employed as of published statistics earlier this month. Granted that some may have the benefit of parents who are able to set up a trust for them via the Special Needs Trust company, not all PwDs have similar access.

I would like to ask the Minister for Manpower what is the assessed retirement adequacy of PwDs as compared to the non-disabled in our workforce and what is being done to raise their retirement adequacy, factoring the medical expenses they need to incur?

Retirement Adequacy for PwD Caregivers

For non-work-capable PwDs, their caregivers become the main source of financial security. In my Budget speech, I had expounded on the high expenses this group of caregivers of people with severe disabilities or rare disorders face, due to the extremely high cost of treatment for their wards, which can amount up to \$200,000 a year.

These caregivers spend a large portion of their finances for the treatment of their severely disabled child and ward. With that, we may see that those who spend most of their lives caring for their loved ones will see too little savings for their own retirement.

In Budget 2023, we see that the Government has moved to strengthen retirement adequacy for our seniors. I would like to ask the Minister for Manpower, how might something similar be done for the caregivers of severely disabled persons who often require one parent to stop work, while also managing ongoing high medical expenses?

Support for Hiring Ex-offenders

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): As part of our #EveryWorkerMatters conversation last month, together with my National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) colleagues and volunteers, I had the great opportunity to host a dialogue session at our NTUC premises for more than 100 employers, ex-offenders, Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG), Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and New Charis Mission Friends. This is the first time that NTUC and the Labour Movement has engaged this community for a dialogue.

On another occasion earlier this month, my team and I had an opportunity to engage a group of inmates at Changi Prison, as part of our #EveryWorkerMatters conversation, to share as well as hear their thoughts on jobs, skills, training, and employment and employability in general. I applaud the work of YRSG and SPS, and for making our engagement possible, so that we can hear first-hand from this community as we forge a new workers' compact.

As much as it was happy to hear some employers leaning forward to help and hire ex-offenders, we hear the fears and anxieties from the inmates who are soon to be released and want to re-integrate back into society and the workforce.

I have three suggestions for MOM to consider to help this group of workers: first, MOM should support and better incentivise and encourage employers, businesses and trade associations to hire ex-offenders as well as offer internship opportunities for them, to assist them to assimilate into these jobs.

Second, MOM and our career placement agencies, including the private ones, can provide career coaching, advisory and mentoring services for this group of jobseekers, so that we can minimise the expectation mismatch.

Third, MOM working closely with YRSG and SPS can support employability skills training, including job readiness programmes, such as resume and cover letter writing, navigating the job search and job application process before their eventual release.

After-hours Work Communication

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye: Sir, I first spoke about the need to give employees a right to disconnect from work in July 2020. The Tripartite Advisory on Mental Well-being at the Workplace was subsequently promulgated in November 2020, which included recommendations on after-hours work communication. In September 2021, the Alliance for Action on Work-life Harmony issued a policy template to help companies set clearer boundaries for after-hours work communication. Can MOM provide an update on the adoption of such after-hours work communication policy by companies based in Singapore? What is MOM doing to encourage greater adoption?

According to a 2023 report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), several countries – France, Belgium and Portugal – have legislated laws to allow employees to disconnect. Portugal, for example, labels its work-life balance legislation the "right to rest", with companies of 10 or more staff facing penalties for contacting staff outside of set working hours. The same report also states that multinational corporations (MNCs), including a Belgian chemical company and an Italian bank, have signed multinational agreements with their European Work Councils to support workers' right to disconnect. Can MOM study some of these trends and how we could potentially localise some of these legislative and non-legislative ideas for Singapore?

Mr Chairman: We will have our right to a break after Minister Tan See Leng's speech.

The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng): Unless the Members of the House want to exercise their right to disconnect.

The Chairman: Oh no, no, please proceed. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Tan See Leng: Mr Chairman, I thank our Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) Members of Parliament and the others, who have taken an active interest in MOM's work and spoken in support of our workers and our businesses. Our labour market posted strong growth last year. Total employment grew by more than 200,000 in 2022, surpassing its pre-pandemic level by 3%. Resident employment is already 4.4% above 2019 levels. Resident unemployment rates have recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels. Resident wages also increased at a faster rate. The nominal median income of full-time employed residents grew by 8.3% in 2021. *[Please refer to the clarification further in the debate.]*

It is more than double that of the previous year of 3.2% and even after adjusting for inflation, the real median income growth in 2022 was more than double that of 2021. However, we are at multiple crossroads, the uncertain global economic environment, global inflation and geopolitical challenges in the medium term, will weigh on the labour market going forward.

I hear your concerns about what this means for you and how it will impact your jobs, especially for older workers. But rest assured, we will journey with you every step of the way. Whether you are in your early 20s or 30s, or whether you are in your mid-40s or your late-50s, we will empower you to find and work towards new opportunities. But we need your help, your support to take the first step, to move forward, to improve your career prospects.

If you want a career change, you can be assured of the support we will provide you to upskill and to reskill. If you fall out of employment, you can be assured that we will step in, to help you in your job search. If your interest is in hands-on work, you can be assured of more opportunities to achieve and to be rewarded for the mastery of those skills. And as you approach retirement, you can be assured that if you have worked and contributed consistently to your CPF, you will be able to meet your basic retirement needs in your golden years.

We will leverage our continued economic growth to provide good jobs for you. We will improve and continue to improve, your employment outcomes. And even in the midst of this uncertainty, there are significant opportunities that we can continue to capitalise on. I shared in my speech with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) yesterday, on how we have a suite of programmes to promote talent development in our enterprises.

For those starting out in their careers, there is the Singapore Global Executive Programme (SGEP) to support fresh and recent graduates to pursue structured career progression pathways in high-growth companies. The Global Ready Talent (GRT) programme also helps to build a talent pipeline by co-funding local young talent, to take on both local and overseas internships. The Tech@SG pilot has also created more than 1,500 local jobs in tech startups in the past three years since launch.

And for senior leaders of our promising SMEs, the Enterprise Leadership for Transformation (ELT) programme also helps them to develop their business strategies and leadership capabilities. With the ever-changing economy, we need to continue to press on with economic transformation, to allow us to emerge stronger and to seize new opportunities for Singaporeans. We want you and we invite you to join us on this journey of transformation, and this is why we have been engaging Singaporeans to understand their aspirations, their angst about the economy, their anxieties about the economy and jobs under the Forward Singapore exercise.

It is against this backdrop that MOM's priorities for this Committee of Supply (COS) will centre on three main themes. First, seizing opportunities with you. Number two, strengthening support for you. And last but not least, securing better workplaces with you.

First, we will seize opportunities with Singaporeans by supporting them to improve their career prospects and their resilience, so that they will be empowered to take on good jobs. At the same time, we will continue to be open to workers of the right calibre and in areas where we need them, so that our businesses can build the best team of local and foreign talents to grow. Our growth should also be inclusive and enable all segments of our workers to reap the economic benefits.

Hence, our second focus is to strengthen support for Singaporeans' retirement adequacy by enhancing the Central Provident Fund (CPF) system, so that they can have peace of mind in their golden years. We will also press on with our whole-of-society effort to provide greater support for platform workers, lower-wage workers and senior workers, by protecting their interests at work. Senior Ministers of State Koh Poh Koon and Zaqy Mohamad will elaborate more on our efforts on this front in their respective speeches.

And finally, every one of us desires and deserves a fair opportunity to contribute and thrive at work, which brings me to our third focus, and that is to act collectively as one united society. We must work in solidarity to secure safer, fairer and more progressive workplaces. We will continue to improve employment opportunities for women, for persons with disabilities and ex-offenders. Minister of State Gan Siow Huang will elaborate on these in her speech. We will also continue with the efforts to improve safety in the work place and this will be covered by Senior Minister of State Zaqy in his speech as well.

Let me start by sharing how we are empowering Singaporeans to take on good jobs. We have a strong and vibrant economy that has shown its resilience through COVID-19. We have an exciting vision to continue transforming our economy. To seize these opportunities, Singaporeans will need to stay open to new challenges and careers, and continuously upskill and equip themselves with future skills.

MOM and the Government will be there with you every step of the way in this journey to improve your career prospects.

3.00 pm

During COVID-19, the Government stood up the National Jobs Council (NJC) to provide jobs and skill opportunities amidst a deep recession and a weak labour market.

From April 2020 to April 2022, the combined efforts of the Government, the unions and the employers supported the placement of around 200,000 locals under the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, out of which around 150,000 were placed into permanent jobs, with the rest placed into traineeships and attachment opportunities.

WSG and NTUC's Employment and Employability Institute's 24 SGUnited Jobs and Skills Centres across the country were also able to assist and place 3,400 jobseekers in 2022.

To complement the NJC's work, I set up the Jobs Taskforce in September 2021 with the specific goal of helping more locals enter new jobs in 10 key sectors such as information and communications, manufacturing and financial services.

Mr Abdul Samad would be happy to know that through customised efforts targeted at key sectors, we helped place more than 11,000 locals into new jobs in these sectors.

The NJC and the Jobs Taskforce's achievements are a testament to the calibre and the agility of our local workers. MOM and WSG will continue to help Singaporeans pivot to new jobs and new careers.

For example, WSG offers many Career Conversion Programmes (CCPs). CCPs provide salary and training support to employers to reskill new hires and workers for new or redesigned jobs. In 2022, WSG launched several new CCPs for emerging jobs such as sustainability specialist, carbon project developer and customer intelligence analyst.

Miss Cheng Li Hui asked how we are helping SMEs with hiring. SMEs can tap on the full suite of programmes offered by WSG. In particular, WSG has designed the CCP for SME executives to meet the specific needs of SME hires. This programme helps new employees acclimatise to an SME working environment.

Mr Desmond Choo and Mr Patrick Tay would like to know how we can better support mature workers, including PMEs, in their employment and employability. I appreciate that mature workers may find it slightly more challenging to switch careers. Hence, the CCPs provide an even higher level of support – 90% of salary and training costs – for mature workers aged 40 and above. To provide more options for mature workers, WSG also offers SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways (SGUP), which provides full-time attachments with an allowance for those aged 40 and over.

In 2022, WSG supported about 1,900 workers through CCPs and another 1,100 through SGUP.

One such individual is Mr Noor Hashim, a 50-year-old who was previously an independent systems security auditor with a local security auditor company. He wanted to explore career options in the IT industry and he signed up for a six-month course under the SkillsFuture Career Transition Programme.

Equipped with his new tech skills, Mr Hashim applied for the SGUP Programme on the MyCareersFuture website in September 2022. He landed an attachment role as an IT cloud and infrastructure specialist with the host organisation, Swiz Technologies.

During this six-month attachment, Swiz Technologies provided on-the-job training, including step-by-step demonstrations, to help him understand how to perform the job tasks of an IT cloud and infrastructure specialist.

I am glad to hear that based on his strong performance in the attachment programme, Mr Hashim will be converted to a full-time staff with Swiz Technologies this month.

Ultimately, MOM is here to support Singaporeans' career aspirations. That is why we have been engaging and speaking to Singaporeans from all walks of life to understand their aspirations and their anxieties about the economy and jobs.

These conversations under Forward Singapore have allowed us to come together to forge a new social compact. A social compact has to be mutually reinforcing, mutually consolidating. It is a two-way dialogue so that we can take in your responses and forge a new compact together.

We have worked with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to convene a Citizens' Panel on employment resilience and convene a group of citizens to discuss, to propose ideas to increase career mobility and to help workers to bounce back from setbacks such as unemployment. The Citizens' Panel will conclude its work by the end of March and I look forward to hearing their recommendations.

Having heard from many fellow Singaporeans so far, I hear a common theme. Whether you are starting out in your career, whether you are in your mid-career or in a later stage of your career, you aspire to improve your career prospects.

Better career health is key to helping our workers move up the career ladder, stay current and stay employable, or it facilitates them to be able to switch to a new job that can better match their skills and their interests.

I spoke about career health when I launched the Citizens' Panel last month. Just like physical health, career health has three aspects.

One, having better insights and awareness. We need to be more sensitised and to be more aware of our career prospects, relative to how the industry and the economy is growing or transforming.

Two, taking deliberate and purposeful actions to keep up our career health. Information is only meaningful if we process it and we act on it. This means taking pre-emptive and proactive steps to stay ahead of the competition and being ready to seize new opportunities when they come.

Three, how do we bounce back from setbacks? Sometimes, in spite of whatever we do, curve balls will still come our way, out of the blue. We are thinking about how to give a stronger helping hand to help workers to bounce back stronger and better from setbacks. But for this to work, workers need to keep up with their career health so that they are better prepared for setbacks and they are more ready to pick themselves up.

One way MOM is helping to improve awareness on career health is through the Jobs Transformation Maps (JTM)s. These JTM)s provide detailed insights on the impact of technology and automation on jobs in each sector.

Prof Hoon Hian Teck and Mr Sharael Taha asked about how we ensure our workforce is globally competitive, including how to cope with threats arising from artificial intelligence (AI).

These JTM's provide detailed insights on the impact of technology and automation on jobs in each sector. The JTM's will empower you to take control of your career development and progression by giving you information on the critical skill sets you will need to stay relevant and competitive.

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao, Ms Janet Ang and Mr Liang Eng Hwa asked how MOM can support our businesses to grow and cope with manpower shortages.

Fundamentally, to cope with the manpower crunch, businesses must continue to transform, to increase their productivity and to improve manpower efficiency. The Government remains committed to supporting businesses and workers to achieve this.

The JTM's will guide businesses on how they can transform their businesses and their jobs to remain competitive and resilient. To find out more, you can access the JTM's on WSG's website. For individuals, you can also find resources there to reskill, upskill or embark on career transitions.

To date, 10 JTM's have been completed, with eight additional JTM's in progress. One example is the Food Manufacturing JTM launched by Enterprise Singapore in December 2022, which identified emerging job roles such as novel foods technical manager, and set out pathways to redesign jobs. Workers can reskill themselves via programmes such as the CCP for Food Manufacturing Professionals and Associates and SkillsFuture Work-Study Programmes to move into emerging or redesigned roles. There will be more JTM's launched this year.

There is tremendous potential to harness data and AI to provide you more personalised jobs and skill insights. This can help to improve job matching and allow you to better plan what next steps you can take – either to take a course to upskill, to make a career switch or to progress in your career.

I am happy to announce we will launch a new CareersFinder feature on the MyCareersFuture portal in the third quarter of 2023. CareersFinder is a job and skills recommender.

We have heard feedback that some of our workers prefer to explore job opportunities and skills upgrading at the same time as they are inter-related. CareersFinder is the first step to try and integrate job and training recommenders. It uses data on skill adjacencies and job transitions in the labour market to help jobseekers to identify potential career opportunities, personalised based on their individual profiles and recommend suitable training programmes to help them achieve their career goals.

CareersFinder is a new feature, which will be launched in a beta version, but it will become more powerful as the data grows. We will continue to enhance it over time to make it even more responsive to jobseekers' needs. Individuals who wish to find out more about CareersFinder can also register their interest via WSG's website.

Besides supporting workers to reskill and upskill, we need to build a more inclusive labour market that rewards mastery of skills in different areas. Our labour market must also provide multiple pathways to success to cater to different interests and inclinations.

Our society has traditionally valued "head" work much more than "hands-on" work and "heart" work, contributing to occupational wage disparity. But "hands-on" work – the craft required to make something well, to fix a complex machine – is just as important for our society to function, as Mr Edward Chia and Mr Pritam Singh have also highlighted

Many of these "hands-on" jobs require deep skills too. We are partnering NTUC to look into how we can redesign skilled trades, particularly those that remain indispensable in our future economy, to offer better salaries, clearer career and skill progression ladders and other ways to attract, retain and reward workers in these jobs.

Over time, if we are able to shift the prospects and perceptions of such jobs and offer attractive career pathways for skilled trades, we will be able to increase the number of locals in these roles in a sustainable way.

More details on this initiative will be shared at a later date when the Forward Singapore exercise concludes.

A crucial aspect of how we create good opportunities for local workers is by having a vibrant, growing economy that is open to international investments, companies and talent.

Working alongside global talent and in top companies means locals have access to more opportunities to take on challenging assignments and to move up in their careers. This also creates more opportunities for other companies in the ecosystem and in turn creates more good jobs for Singaporeans at every level of the workforce, creating a virtuous cycle.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about how we will continue to attract top talent to Singapore.

Last year, I announced the Overseas Networks and Expertise Pass (ONE Pass) for talent earning at least \$30,000 in fixed monthly salary, which comparable to the top 5% of EP holders, or those with outstanding achievements in arts and culture, sports, research and academia. This was a highly targeted enhancement to attract top talent in diverse fields so that we can keep ahead of the competition. I am happy to say that we have received many promising applications so far from a diverse group of accomplished individuals across sectors.

I would like to share two examples of ONE Pass holders who are making or who have the potential to make positive contributions to Singapore.

Ms Yuki Yasui is the managing director of the Asia Pacific network at the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, a global coalition of leading financial institutions committed to accelerating the decarbonisation of the economy. Ms Yasui plays a key role in driving decarbonisation in Singapore, including helping financial institutions draw up their net-zero transition plans and mobilising finance to support decarbonisation efforts in key industry sectors such as energy, cement and steel.

We also have Prof Rachel Watson, who joined A*STAR this month as the Executive Director of the A*STAR Skin Research Labs and the Skin Research Institute of Singapore. Prof Watson is internationally renowned in dermatology.

3.15 pm

Through her leadership, she will catalyse our local community of research scientists, academics and industry professionals to tackle complex challenges in skin disease and skin health for the benefit of Singapore and Singaporeans.

These are just a few examples. We look forward to the valuable contributions that our ONE Pass holders will bring and the opportunities that they will create for Singaporeans.

As Mr Raj Joshua Thomas, Mr Liang Eng Hwa and Mr Yip Hon Weng highlighted, it is key for our foreign workforce to complement our local workforce to drive our local economy. We would also like to assure Mr Yip that MOM collaborates closely with agencies such as MTI and MND to ensure that our economic growth is sustainable, as we maintain a balance between our various objectives. At the last Committee of Supply (COS) debate, I announced significant changes to our foreign workforce policies to strengthen the complementarity of our foreign workforce. Our focus has been on implementing these changes well. Allow me to give you a quick update.

To ensure that foreigners coming in on these passes are of the right calibre, we have benchmarked the cost of hiring an Employment Pass and S Pass holder to the wages of the top one-third of local Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians (PMETs) and the local Associate Professionals and Technicians (APTs) respectively. With these clear benchmarks, employers can expect regular and predictable adjustments to the EP and S Pass qualifying salaries and levies.

This year, there will be no change to the EP qualifying salary. We will, however, proceed with the second step of the increase to the S Pass qualifying salary and Tier 1 levy in September 2023, as I had announced last year. The S Pass minimum qualifying salary will be raised from \$3,000 to \$3,150. The qualifying salary for older S Pass holders will be higher, given that local APT wages rise with age. The S Pass Tier 1 levy will also increase from the current \$450 to \$550 in September 2023. Employers will be able to find these details on the MOM website.

COMPASS – a new, transparent and holistic assessment framework for EP applicants – will be applied to new EP applications from September this year. COMPASS incentivises firms to strengthen their local workforce, complemented by a high quality and diverse foreign workforce. We have released details on the four foundational criteria progressively over the past one year. Firms now have access to a Workforce Insights Tool on MyMOMPortal, where they can see how they fare on the firm-level criteria of COMPASS and benchmark their performance to industry peers.

Members may recall that under the COMPASS framework, applicants can score points under Criterion 2 on "Qualifications". Today, employers are already responsible for ensuring the authenticity of their candidate's qualifications before hiring. To safeguard against gaming by submitting fraudulent educational qualifications, employers who wish to score points under Criterion 2 on qualifications, will be required to submit verification proof for qualifications declared on the EP application. We have consulted tripartite partners as well as industry associations and we will implement this new process in September 2023 together with COMPASS. We will share more details in due course. Rest assured we will ensure smooth implementation and we will minimise disruptions to employers' hiring process.

We will be releasing further details on the two bonus criteria, the Skills Bonus (Criterion 5) and the Strategic Economic Priorities Bonus (Criterion 6) later this month. Applicants meeting the respective criteria will earn bonus points towards their total COMPASS score. The Skills Bonus is accorded to EP applicants in occupations on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). The SOL identifies occupations requiring niche and highly specialised skills in short supply within our workforce and which are critical to sustaining investments in both key growth or strategic priority areas.

Mr Gerald Giam asked for an update on the occupations expected to be included in the SOL. MOM, in consultation with sector agencies, is finalising the inaugural SOL. I would like to assure Mr Giam that the evaluation process is a rigorous one, taking into account quantitative metrics of shortage alongside various qualitative factors. One key consideration is ensuring that sector agencies have worked with industry to put in place plans to develop the local pipeline for these good jobs, including working with our Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) to equip graduates with the necessary skills, as well as developing and upskilling those already in the sector or adjacent roles. Where relevant, the sector agencies also obtained input from industry partners and unions.

The SOL will include specialised roles spanning areas such as tech, healthcare and sustainability, where there are global shortages of skilled professionals. The SOL will be reviewed regularly, with a major refresh every three years. This ensures that the SOL is responsive to industry developments while preserving enough certainty and runway for businesses.

The Strategic Economic Priorities (SEP) Bonus was designed together with MTI and participating economic agencies as well as the Labour Movement, NTUC. This is a highly selective bonus which supports firms that are contributing to Singapore's strategic economic priorities through ambitious investment, innovation, internationalisation, or company and workforce transformation activities.

Economic agencies will work with firms receiving the SEP Bonus to pursue these needle-moving economic priorities and who are able to demonstrate their commitment to developing our local workforce. NTUC will work with firms on company and workforce transformation efforts, for example, by establishing Company Training Committees (CTCs) to chart out worker upskilling plans. Firms receiving the SEP bonus would be expected to maintain healthy workforce profiles on nationality diversity and local PMET employment, as a condition for renewal. Full details on the bonus criteria will be released on MOM's website by the end of March.

Mr Patrick Tay asked for an update on the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF). Since 2016, MOM has engaged a total of more than 1,800 employers under the FCF.

As I announced during last year's COS debate, COMPASS builds on our current efforts under the FCF, by applying firm-related attributes at the point of application. Once COMPASS is rolled out, the FCF Watchlist will be re-purposed to focus on firms scoring poorly on the firm-related attributes. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) will conduct workshops for these firms to highlight measures that firms can take to improve their hiring practices.

Mr Tay also asked to publish the list of companies with weak workforce profiles. I have explained before that doing so will affect the business of these firms and potentially hinder their effort to improve their practices. So, instead, our approach is to have TAFEP work with them to improve their practices. Rest assured that MOM will continue to take fair consideration seriously and I will elaborate on our efforts under the Workplace Fairness Legislation in the second part of my speech.

Mr Desmond Choo and Mr Cheng Hsing Yao have also suggested calibrating our foreign workforce policies further to address issues such as insufficient locals in certain sectors, or in anticipation of our ageing population.

We already do so today. Sectors such as construction and process have higher foreign worker quotas, as we recognise that fewer locals join these sectors and we exercise flexibilities to better support essential services like healthcare and the cleaning of public housing. Our moves announced last year also took on a more nuanced and targeted approach. For instance, businesses that contribute to our strategic economic priorities can tap on the Manpower for Strategic Economic Priorities (M-SEP) scheme to access additional quotas.

Another example is the Non-Traditional Source (NTS) Occupation List. Members would recall that I announced this last year to allow employers in the Services and Manufacturing sectors to hire Work Permit Holders from NTS countries for seven occupational types. This NTS Occupation List is intended to help firms adjust to the S Pass qualifying salary and levy increases. We will hence implement the NTS Occupation List on 1 September this year.

Employers who wish to hire NTS Work Permit Holders will be subject to a sub-quota of 8% and a fixed monthly salary criterion of at least \$2,000. The sub-quota guards against over-reliance on NTS workers and ensures that employers diversify their workforce. The salary criterion safeguards against cheap-sourcing and incentivises employers to hire higher-skilled or more experienced workers from these source countries. Employers who are putting their existing NTS S Pass holders on Work Permits will have no trouble meeting the salary criterion. MOM will continue to work closely with the agencies and industries to review the NTS Occupation List from time to time.

Members of the House, our growth must also be inclusive so as to enable all segments of our workers to reap the benefits. We will therefore also further strengthen our support for you. Let me share how we are doing so, especially in the area of retirement adequacy. Senior Minister of State Koh Poh Koon and Senior Minister of State Zaqqy will elaborate further on how we intend to strengthen protection and support for Platform Workers, lower-wage workers, senior workers and migrant workers in their speeches.

Even as we were tackling the immediate challenges of the pandemic, we maintained a steady focus on our longer-term objective of enhancing our workers' retirement adequacy.

Mr Abdul Samad and Mr Saktiandi Supaat asked for an update on the retirement adequacy of Singaporeans. We recognise that the number of retiree households has been increasing and thus have been enhancing the CPF system, especially for the vulnerable segments who may require further support, including our senior workers and lower-wage workers.

Over the last decade, the proportion of active CPF members attaining their cohort Basic Retirement Sum (BRS) at age 55 has improved from about five in 10 to almost seven in 10 today. We expect this number to increase to about eight in 10 in 2027.

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman and Mr Yip Hon Weng spoke in favour of enhancing the employability of seniors. That is an important strategy to help CPF members continue to build up their retirement nest egg through employment even after age 55. Senior Minister of State Koh will be elaborating more on our efforts in supporting the retirement adequacy for senior workers.

We also provide additional support for our lower-wage workers. We have implemented enhancements to the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme (WIS) this year to increase the maximum annual payments, up from \$4,000 to \$4,200 and expanded the coverage so that over half a million lower-wage workers can benefit. Together with the enhanced WIS, our efforts in uplifting the wages of lower-wage workers will help them save more for their retirement. Senior Minister of State Zaqqy will share more details later.

For seniors who require further support for their retirement, CPF payouts are one of many sources of retirement income. Seniors may also receive targeted support from the Government through schemes such as ComCare and the Silver Support Scheme, which we enhanced in 2011. *[Please refer to the clarification further in the debate.]*

Further, at Budget 2023, the Government announced enhancements to the Assurance Package and permanent GST Voucher scheme, to help Singaporeans tide through this period of higher inflation and to cushion the impact of the GST rate increase. In addition, seniors may also tap on their accumulated private savings, if available. If not, they may receive additional support from the community such as through charities.

As you can tell, we are building from a position of strength. We are doing more to enhance the CPF system.

Mr Louis Chua asked for a review of the interest rates of the CPF Ordinary Account (OA). We are aware that the OA pegged rate has remained relatively stable amidst the current elevated interest rate environment while the yields of other market instruments of comparable risk and duration have increased.

Let me reassure the Member that we are watching this interest rate environment very closely to ensure that the CPF interest rate pegs remain relevant in the prevailing operating environment, while taking into consideration the longer-term outlook.

3.30 pm

Even as we study this, I should point out that during the low interest-rate environment of the last decade, we have paid a fair interest rate. The 2.5% floor for the OA has exceeded the pegged rate for over 20 years, even when market interest rates were low, such as during the Global Financial Crisis.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat asked if we intend to revise the interest rates as market interest rates crossed 4% in 2023. The Special Account (SA) interest rate is pegged to the 12-month average yield of 10-year Singapore Government Securities (SGS) plus 1% and is reviewed quarterly. This helps to smoothen the short-term market fluctuations on the interest rates. If the pegged rate exceeds the floor rate of 4%, members will correspondingly earn the higher interest rate on their CPF savings.

On top of this, the Government has and will continue to pay 1% of extra interest on the first \$60,000 of members' combined CPF balances, including the first \$20,000 in members' OA. Members aged 55 and above receive 2% extra interest on the first \$30,000 of combined CPF balances and 1% on the next \$30,000.

Mr Louis Chua also asked if the CPF Investment Scheme (CPFIS) could be made more comprehensive and if there could be more direct means by which members can earn higher investment returns other than via CPFIS.

Mr Chua had raised similar points last year. With the benefit of hindsight, it will always appear easy to achieve a higher rate of returns. But we have said before, that higher returns also come with higher risk and a greater potential for losses.

Today, CPF members can invest in a diverse range of products, including exchange-traded funds (ETFs), shares and gold products. Members who prefer not to take any risks with their retirement savings already enjoy risk-free interest rates of up to 6% per annum on their CPF savings, where investment risk is entirely borne by the Government.

I would like to reassure Mr Louis Chua that in addition to our recent enhancements to the CPF system, we review CPF interest rates and the range of investment products under the CPFIS regularly to ensure that they remain relevant to members' needs as well as the changes in the operating environment.

I would also like to thank Mr Pritam Singh for his suggestion during the recent Budget debate to reallocate a greater proportion of CPF contributions for younger members to their SA. This was raised by Miss Cheryl Chan during the CPF (Amendment) Bill in 2021 and by Mr Saktiandi Supaat during his cut.

We are considering this idea and are very glad that Members have come out to support it. I sincerely hope that if and when we do eventually put up this proposal, the Workers' Party (WP) would be in full support of it.

To help middle-income Singaporeans save more for retirement, we will also be raising the CPF monthly salary ceiling from \$6,000 to \$8,000 in 2026 to keep pace with rising salaries. This will be done in phases, starting with \$300 this year, to allow employers and employees to adjust to the changes. There will be no change to the annual salary ceiling at \$102,000.

An example of a worker who is supportive of the higher salary ceiling is Mr Fadzli Jamil. He is 38 years old and is the associate dean in the School of 3D Design at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). As a result of just raising the monthly salary ceiling for his CPF contributions, he can expect around an additional \$100,000 in his combined CPF balances or a \$500 increase in his monthly CPF LIFE payouts if he works until age 65 and starts his payouts then. Of course, for each year, should he choose to defer the start of his payouts, his monthly payouts will increase further by up to 7%.

Employers' business costs are also likely to remain manageable as the increases are spread out over four years. The additional business cost impact is around half a billion per annum because not all workers are affected by the maximum increase of \$2,000. The annual salary ceiling, which remains unchanged at this juncture, will also limit the impact on business costs.

As part of the Forward Singapore exercise, we are taking a deeper look at what should be done to improve the retirement adequacy of Singaporeans. This is especially relevant with the greater economic uncertainties amidst global challenges, at least in the medium term.

For the group that are in their 50s and early-60s today, they have a limited runway to work and save. With this in mind, we will review our range of solutions both from within and outside the CPF system, such as work-based incentives and the Silver Support scheme, to give them greater assurance that they can meet their basic retirement needs.

We will also do more for our younger and middle-aged workers and the Pioneer and Merdeka Generation seniors, many of whom are retirees.

Ultimately, we want to strengthen our support such that as long as you work, as long as you contribute consistently to your CPF, you will be able to meet your basic retirement needs. We will provide further updates on our efforts to strengthen the CPF system in due course.

Let me now conclude the first part of my speech and speed up the tea break.

I believe that if we journey through the crossroads together, we will be able to align the crossroads and forge a new social compact, one where the Government, employers and our fellow Singaporeans can work together to improve career prospects, strengthen retirement adequacy and bring fair levels of reward and respect for all forms of work. It is one where no worker is left behind as Singapore progresses.

In your working years, we will empower you to find and work towards new opportunities if you take the first step. We will also help you to upskill, to reskill and to facilitate your job search based on your skills and interests. With improved career health, you will be able to stay ahead of technological trends and seize many new job opportunities within and beyond your sector.

In your golden years, we will support you such that you will be able to have a peace of mind if you have worked and you have contributed consistently to your CPF.

I look forward to having more conversations with you and working together to create an inclusive society abundant and brimming with opportunities. I will share more about securing better workplaces with you in the next segment of my speech. *[Applause.]*

The Chairman: Order. I propose to take a break now.

Thereupon Mr Speaker left the Chair of the Committee and took the Chair of the House.

Mr Speaker: I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 4.00 pm. Order. Order.

Sitting accordingly suspended

at 3.38 pm until 4.00 pm.

Sitting resumed at 4.00 pm.

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Debate in the Committee of Supply resumed.

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Head S (cont) –

4.00 pm

The Senior Minister of State for Manpower (Mr Zaqy Mohamad): Mr Chairman, earlier, the Minister for Manpower outlined how the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) will strengthen our efforts to uplift lower-wage workers and improve workplace safety.

In my speech, I will elaborate on: (a) tripartite progress in implementing Progressive Wage measures; (b) measures to further support and uplift lower-wage workers; and (c) Heightened Safety Period (HSP) measures to strengthen workplace safety and health.

I will also elaborate on our efforts in strengthening human resources (HR) capabilities to support businesses, workforce and workplace transformation.

Chairman, our tripartite journey to uplift lower-wage workers through Progressive Wages started more than 10 years ago with the first Progressive Wage Model (PWM) in the cleaning sector in 2012. PWMs and other tripartite efforts have borne fruit.

Last year, real incomes of lower-wage workers grew by 4.7%, faster than the median worker at 2.0%. This means that as costs of living rose, the incomes of lower-wage workers rose even more. More importantly, we are narrowing the income gap between lower-wage workers and the median worker. We will continue our efforts to support lower-wage workers so that they achieve stronger wage outcomes.

The year 2023 is a milestone year in our journey of uplifting lower-wage workers. We will see all recommendations of the Tripartite Workgroup on Lower-Wage Workers fully implemented by July. This follows the implementation of various PWMs, the Local Qualifying Salary requirement and Progressive Wage Mark – last September, and in March this year.

Allow me to update on the progress that tripartite partners have made. With your permission, Mr Chairman, may I ask the Clerks to distribute a handout detailing our efforts to support our lower-wage workers.

The Chairman: Please proceed. *[A handout was distributed to hon Members.]*

Mr Zaqy Mohamad: Thank you, Chairman. Members may also access the handout through the SG Parl MP mobile app.

Last September, we implemented the new Local Qualifying Salary (LQS) requirement for all firms that employ foreign workers to pay their local workers at least the LQS.

At the same time, we also introduced the retail PWM, and extended existing cleaning, security and landscape PWMs to in-house workers.

In January, we launched the Progressive Wage Mark accreditation scheme.

Starting from today, we embark on another milestone. The Food Services PWM and Occupational Progressive Wages for Administrators and Drivers will come into effect.

With the implementation of the Waste Management PWM this July, the suite of Progressive Wage moves will benefit up to nine in 10 of our full-time lower-wage workers.

Workers covered by Sectoral Progressive Wages will see cumulative wage increases of up to 80% or more, by 2028.

PWMs will continue to set the pace for wage increases for lower-wage workers. Amidst a tight labour market, lower-wage workers who are not directly covered by Progressive Wages should still see meaningful wage increases, as employers will have to adjust according to market forces to attract and retain workers.

Chairman, with almost all PWMs implemented, our attention is now focused on ensuring that employers understand the requirements and comply with them.

Employers must pay workers the right PWM wage based on the PWM job role. We recognise that the PWM requirements are new for many employers and employers need time to understand them and make necessary HR or operational changes to comply.

Hence, for new PWMs implemented since last September, MOM allowed a run-in period of six months, where we invested time to educate employers and workers on the requirements. After the run-in period, employers who are found to be non-compliant may face suspension of their Work Pass privileges.

Some Members such as Mr Raj Joshua Thomas and Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman asked how PWM might affect employers' manpower deployment or workforce restructuring plans.

Tripartite partners recognise that employers may need to adjust manpower deployment plans or their workforce structure, based on their operating environment. However, when there is a need to make adjustments, employers should act in accordance with well-established tripartite advisories, such as the Tripartite Advisory on Managing Excess Manpower (TAMEM).

Employers should engage and discuss with unions and employees and reach an agreement before implementing any measures. Most importantly, employers should also pay special attention to minimise the impact of any measure on our lower-wage workers. These principles should be adhered to, with or without PWM. That is the basic fundamental.

I thank employers for working closely with the Government and the Labour Movement thus far on this important endeavour of uplifting our lower-wage workers. I also agree with Ms Yeo Wan Ling and Mr Xie Yao Quan that consumers and service buyers also play an important role in our whole-of-society effort to support and uplift lower-wage workers.

In January, the Government launched the Progressive Wage Mark, or PW Mark, to help consumers and service buyers more easily identify firms that are paying Progressive Wages and support them.

Employers who also adopt the Tripartite Standard on Advancing Well-Being of Lower-Wage Workers will be accredited with the Progressive Wage Mark Plus. These are employers who not only pay progressive wages, but also implement other measures that support lower-wage workers, such as providing for rest areas.

Since applications opened last December, about 2,000 companies have received the Progressive Wage Mark.

The Government will take the lead in this effort and help further the adoption of the Progressive Wage Mark. For new tenders called from today onwards, the Government will require eligible suppliers and subcontractors to be accredited with the Progressive Wage Mark for the duration of the contract period. From 1 March next year, we will extend this requirement to quotations as well. This will cover the slew of tenders and quotations for procurement by the Government.

Uplifting lower-wage workers is our collective responsibility as a society. I strongly encourage employers to do their part by paying progressive wages and apply for the Progressive Wage Mark or Progressive Wage Mark Plus.

Consumers and service buyers can show their support and solidarity with our lower-wage workers by purchasing from Progressive Wage Mark-accredited companies.

Chairman, the PWMs have set strong wage growth targets, on average of about 8% year-on-year. To support wage growth of our lower-wage workers, while balancing the uncertain economic conditions facing employers, we will continue to provide strong support to employers in adjusting to Progressive Wage measures.

Last year, the Government introduced the Progressive Wage Credit Scheme (PWCS) to help employers adjust to the new Progressive Wage and LQS requirements, and other voluntary wage increases for lower-wage workers.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced in his Budget Statement for FY2023 that the Government will increase our PWCS co-funding share for wage increases given this year, in 2023. Similar to the enhancement made last year, the Government will co-fund up to 75% of wage increases for eligible lower-wage workers, including those not covered by our Progressive Wage moves.

All in all, these PWCS enhancements will offset a significant proportion of immediate cost pressures on employers arising from our efforts to uplift lower-wage workers and mitigate cost transfer to consumers.

I urge employers to take the opportunity to accelerate their business transformation plans so that we can improve productivity, upskill our workers, and ensure that we can continue to close the income gap sustainably over the long term.

Workfare is one of the key pillars of Government's support for our lower-wage workers. The Workfare Skills Support Scheme (WSS) is an important scheme that supports the upskilling of lower-wage workers, to improve their employability and earnings.

Under WSS, employers who send lower-wage workers for training receive an Absentee Payroll subsidy of 95% of their workers' basic hourly wage.

Employees who self-sponsor their training will receive a training allowance, which offsets their opportunity costs of training.

WSS has been successful in supporting lower-wage workers in achieving more impactful employment outcomes. This is why we will be enhancing WSS from July this year.

To allow more lower-wage workers to benefit from WSS and upskill earlier in their careers, we will first lower the eligibility age for WSS from 35 to 30 years old. Additionally, workers earning up to \$2,500 a month will now be able to qualify for WSS, up from the current qualifying income cap of \$2,300. With these enhancements, 70,000 more lower-wage workers will be eligible for WSS.

In addition, as lower-wage workers who achieve Full Qualifications through WSS are more likely to earn higher wages, we will raise the Training Commitment Award for Full Qualifications from \$500 to \$800, to encourage more lower-wage workers to undertake deeper and more sustained training.

Last year, the Government announced significant enhancements to the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme (WIS) which have taken effect from January 2023.

The enhancements increased coverage by extending Workfare to those aged 30 to 34 years, from 35 years and older previously, as well as raising the qualifying monthly income cap to \$2,500 from \$2,300 previously.

In addition, Workfare payments have been increased to up to \$4,200 per year, from up to \$4,000 previously – that is about \$350 a month. All persons with disabilities (PwDs) will also qualify for the highest Workfare payment tier of up to \$4,200, regardless of age.

With these enhancements, over half a million lower-wage workers will benefit from payments amounting to \$1.1 billion, up from \$850 million previously.

Collectively, the Progressive Wage moves, WSS and WIS strengthen our support for our lower-wage workers.

Chairman, moving on to workplace safety and health (WSH). Mr Pritam Singh and Mr Melvin Yong have asked about the Government's efforts to reduce workplace fatalities and injuries and instilling a stronger safe operations culture.

In 2022, MOM introduced various measures to address the spate of workplace fatalities. We ended 2022 with a total of 46 workplace fatalities and a fatality rate of 1.3 per 100,000 workers, which was higher than the pre-COVID-19-pandemic rates of 1.1 in 2019 and 1.2 in 2018.

The number of workplace fatalities would have been higher without the implementation of the Heightened Safety Period (HSP) measures last September.

The average number of fatalities per month reduced from 4.5 in January to August 2022, before HSP, to 2.5 in September to December 2022 during HSP. The average of 2.5 fatalities per month brings the annualised fatality rate to 0.8 per 100,000, which is below our WSH2028 target of 1.0 and much lower compared to 1.5 before HSP. What this suggests is that the industry can keep the fatality numbers low if we put our hearts and minds to it.

We also monitor major injuries closely as these reflect persistent safety lapses and have debilitating effects. The average monthly major injuries worsened from 49.1 before HSP to 55.3 during HSP.

But it is not all doom and gloom because we found that the impact of HSP was uneven across sectors. There are major injuries that have high probability of fatalities and there are also major injuries like slips, trips and falls which have low probability of fatality.

Although the monthly average fatal and major injuries in the construction sector showed the most improvement, the monthly average fatal and major injuries worsened for the manufacturing sector. So, when the rate for the construction sector came down, that also resulted in fewer fatalities because major injuries there tend to be more fatal. We also monitored and saw that for transportation and storage, the monthly average fatal injuries remained the same, while major injuries worsened. Nonetheless, this suggested that more targeted sectoral measures were needed.

So, to Members' questions as to what we are doing differently? As part of our HSP measures, we stood up the Multi-Agency Workplace Safety Taskforce, which comprises lead agencies of the sectors that contributed most of the fatal and major injuries. This aims to study additional broad-based, and at the same time, sectoral measures that should be implemented, by looking into the different risk profile and impact of HSP in each sector.

4.15 pm

We also convened the International Advisory Panel on Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) in January 2023. MOM and our sector agency partners will also take into account their recommendations. So, it is both MOM at the broad-based level and we also have agencies involved at the sectoral level.

With effect from today, MOM has extended the HSP by three months till 31 May 2023 to drive further WSH improvement and maintain vigilance.

It is important for corporate senior leadership to take charge and be accountable for workplace safety and health. Their influence and control over workplace resources and priorities drive the safety culture in their organisations. Under the Workplace Safety and Health Act, they are liable for ensuring their workers' safety and health.

The approved Code of Practice for Company Directors' WSH Duties gazetted last October provides practical guidance on how they may fulfil their legal WSH obligations.

As part of the HSP extension, MOM introduced additional measures to strengthen WSH ownership among company leaders. CEOs or board of directors of companies found to have serious WSH lapses following serious workplace incidents have to attend a mandatory half-day in-person WSH training course. So, it is always continuous learning for them too.

MOM will also increase the maximum fines to deter errant workplace safety and health behaviour.

To strengthen the workplace safety and health ecosystem, we will also launch a campaign to encourage and empower workers to speak up on workplace safety and health concerns and raise awareness on the protections for workers who whistle-blow.

To Mr Leon Perera's question earlier about whistle-blowing, under the WSH Act today, there are already existing protections for whistle-blowers. Employers cannot dismiss or threaten them. To dismiss them will be a WSH contravention and we will take action.

I can assure the Member that MOM will facilitate the change of employers if there is a reason to and we will do so if you have any specific cases you want to raise to us.

To Mr Melvin Yong's query, HSP was a useful wake up call to all employers and workers to be extra vigilant. But it cannot continue indefinitely. What we do need to do is to strengthen workplace safety and health standards and practices in a sustainable manner for the long term.

This is why we are considering deeper reforms, both broad-based and sectoral measures, as part of the Multi-Agency Workplace Safety Taskforce. We will announce these measures when ready.

The improvements seen during HSP demonstrate that safer workplaces are possible.

As Mr Christopher de Souza and Dr Wan Rizal said, everyone must play our part to uplift workplace safety and health so that our workers can have a peace of mind when they return home safely to their loved ones.

Starting with the top management, company directors and CEOs must set the culture of their organisations where safety consciousness is integrated in all of its operations and provide a safe work environment with appropriate and adequate training for their workers, supported by supervisors and safety professionals.

Workers themselves are responsible for following safe work procedures to ensure their own safety and that of others in the workplace. They should report all unsafe practices to their supervisors and if their concerns are not addressed, they should alert MOM or their union representatives. We will take action.

Union leaders should join company management for walkabouts to strengthen top management's commitment to their workers.

Members of the public can also be our "eyes on the ground" by reporting unsafe practices to MOM. For example, you may report workers who are working at height without safety harnesses. You can do so via MOM's website or hotline or the QR code found on project signboards. MOM will follow up on these reports. We will take errant employers to task.

MOM will continue to work with companies, industry associations and workers to build a stronger workplace safety and health culture. Together, we can get back on track with our Workplace Safety and Health 2028 mission to reduce the fatal injury rate to below one per 100,000 workers and join just four countries in the OECD that have achieved this fatality rate. The reason why I say that this is a target is because there are very few countries that can achieve this and we are setting very high standards for ourselves.

Beyond workplace safety, promoting physical health at workplaces is also important.

Mr Leon Perera asked about service staff having the right to sit. The Employment Act establishes some rules on working hours to protect employees' well-being. For example, employees covered under Part 4 of the Act should have at least one rest break for every six consecutive hours of work.

Besides legislation, the Government also promotes the provision of proper rest areas for employees. We are mindful of the wide range of work settings for which it will not be appropriate to impose excessive or overly prescriptive regulations. Nonetheless, we are open to discussing with tripartite partners and industry associations on possible tripartite guidance on best practices for employers.

We encourage all employers to provide adequate rest and welfare for all staff, including service staff, and tap on the Workcare Grant should they require support to do so. It is only right for employers to provide their staff with a conducive work environment. Staff will also be motivated and engaged as a result.

Moving on to HR capabilities. Chairman, let me also share our efforts to strengthen HR capabilities.

Post-pandemic, a strong HR is a critical enabler of business and workforce transformation. From helping businesses attract the right talent to implementing fair and inclusive employment practices, HR will play an integral role. We will do more to support and build up the capabilities of our HR workforce.

IHRP is a tripartite organisation that supports the professional development of aspiring and existing HR professionals. I would like to assure Mr Patrick Tay that the IHRP certification framework is robust as it ensures that HR professionals have the right mindset and knowledge on manpower regulations, including fair employment practices, labour management system and existing Tripartite Guidelines.

All certified HR professionals join a vibrant community which provides access to an extensive professional network and resources. One example is the IHRP playbooks. These playbooks are developed with master or senior HR professionals to provide the community with curated best practices and tools that they can adopt in their organisations to respond to workforce challenges.

To date, IHRP has produced seven such books, covering important issues such as the emergence of hybrid workplaces, digital transformation and the promotion of mental well-being. We encourage firms and company HR leaders to adopt them.

The community of IHRP-certified professionals has tripled since 2020 and is now over 6,500 strong. This suggests that businesses and HR professionals see value in certification.

While we echo Mr Patrick Tay's call to have more HR professionals certified, we have no plans to make it mandatory at this point. We are mindful of imposing regulatory costs on businesses. Besides, good HR practices apply to all companies, whether or not they hire foreign manpower.

Nevertheless, I agree with the Member that besides HR, People Managers also play a critical role in supporting good human capital practices. To this end, MOM will work with IHRP and its partners on the suggestion to better equip People Managers with requisite HR knowledge and progressive practices.

Besides IHRP certification, we agree with Mr Edward Chia that HR professionals also need to continually update their skills and hone their expertise. Continuous professional development is a key part of being a certified HR professional. HR professionals can take up IHRP skills badges in emerging areas such as strategic workforce planning and talent management.

IHRP has been appointed by SkillsFuture Singapore as a Skills Development Partner (SDP). MOM is working with IHRP to more responsively identify skills gaps and develop skills-based credentialling pathways for HR professionals.

Professionalising our HR workforce and equipping them with relevant skills and mindsets is necessary but insufficient in itself. Enterprises must make use of these highly skilled HR professionals to transform their HR capabilities.

To this end, Mr Edward Chia will be pleased to know that MOM will be launching a five-year HR Industry Transformation Plan. This will set out a roadmap for MOM to work together with sector agencies, the industry and the unions to spur HR transformation and build a future-ready HR workforce. More details will be released later. Watch out for it. Mr Chairman, may I just cover the last bit in Malay, please?

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Mr Chairman, as stated by the Minister for Manpower, the Government is committed to ensuring that our workforce policies provide more opportunities for all.

Helping lower-wage workers has always been one of MOM's priorities. Since the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) was introduced more than 10 years ago, it has contributed significantly to raising wages and supporting the lives of our lower-wage workers.

By July this year, we will expand the Progressive Wage measures to cover up to nine in 10 lower-wage workers. This not only covers workers in the cleaning, security, landscape as well as lift and escalator maintenance, but also new sectors such as food services, retail, waste management and occupations such as administrators and drivers.

Workers in these sectors will enjoy significant wage increases and be given training opportunities as well as career progression.

With this, workers covered by the Sectoral Progressive Wages will see cumulative wage increases of up to 80% or more by 2028. For example, we can expect cleaners to get at least \$2,420 by 2028, while security officers will get \$3,530 by 2028.

All other local workers working with companies employing foreign workers will also be paid at least the Local Qualifying Salary (LQS) amount of \$1,400 monthly.

On the whole, these measures will support our goal of bridging the wage gap further between lower- and middle-income workers. At the same time, workers must play their part in training and skills upgrading.

(In English): Chairman, the Government is committed to strengthening the support of our lower-wage workers and partnering employers to improve workplace safety.

We must all do our part for a more inclusive and cohesive society, where everyone enjoys the fruits of growth and no worker is left behind as Singapore progresses. Society must also continue to appreciate and respect workers in all trades.

The Chairman: Senior Minister of State Koh Poh Koon.

The Senior Minister of State for Manpower (Dr Koh Poh Koon): Mr Chairman, in today's challenging economic climate, senior workers and platform workers require stronger safety nets for their housing and retirement needs and better protections for their livelihoods.

The proportion of Self-Employed Persons (SEPs) has remained steady at about 8% to 10% of the resident workforce. However, with the rise of platform-enabled work, platform workers have become a fast-growing group of SEPs.

Several Members, including Ms Hazel Poa, Mr Liang Eng Hwa, Mr Saktiandi Supaat and Ms Yeo Wan Ling, highlighted the need to reduce the risks that platform workers face during the course of their work and made suggestions on how to better support them.

Indeed, the Government recognises the precarious nature of platform work. Unlike typical SEPs, platform workers are subject to management control by platform companies and tend to have modest incomes.

This is why in November last year, the Government accepted the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Platform Workers in full. CPF contributions to Special and Ordinary Accounts, enhanced representation and also work injury compensation for platform workers will commence from the second half of 2024.

Other countries are also looking at ways to protect their Platform Workers. In Spain, the Government passed the Riders' Law in 2022 that recognises food delivery riders working for digital platforms as employees. The US Labour Department proposed a rule that would make it easier for platform workers to be considered as employees, with the same access to benefits and federal labour protections. While the UK has no Platform Worker-specific legislation, their courts have ruled on the status of Platform Workers' status using the case law approach.

4.30 pm

Here in Singapore, instead of simply designating Platform Workers as employees or leaving it to the Courts to decide on a matter of policy, we have taken a carefully considered Tripartite approach to provide three specific areas of legislated protections for our Platform Workers.

Over the course of a wide-ranging segment of engagements by the Advisory Committee that lasted for over a year, Platform Workers and Platform Companies emphasised that the flexible nature of platform work was a key feature of the ecosystem that should be preserved.

Platform Workers desire the flexibility to choose when and how much they want to work. Platform Companies need the flexibility to efficiently match the supply and demand of labour to meet consumer needs. Simply designating Platform Workers as employees would constrain this flexibility and autonomy that both the company and the workers desire.

Our approach strengthens the protections for Platform Workers while retaining the advantages of platform work, so that the platform system can remain sustainable in the longer term.

This is our unique tripartite approach. Since the Government's acceptance of the recommendations, we have made good progress working through complex issues with our key stakeholders, including tripartite partners, Platform Workers and Platform Companies. Let me share some updates.

We started a new Platform Workers Work Injury Compensation Implementation Network (PWIN) to look into how the existing Work Injury Compensation system for employees can be adapted to reap its benefits, such as adequate coverage and expeditious claims, while taking into consideration the unique nature of the platform work.

Ms Hazel Poa and Ms Yeo Wan Ling spoke about the need to address concerns on the housing and retirement needs of Platform Workers.

In principle, Platform Workers of the same age and income level as employees should be able to achieve a similar level of retirement adequacy through their CPF savings, if they have worked for the same number of years. However, unlike employees, Platform Workers only make MediSave contributions on their own and do not receive CPF contributions from the Platform Companies today.

Hence, the Committee recommended aligning CPF contribution rates by Platform Companies and Platform Workers with that of employers and employees respectively. This will help Platform Workers build up their savings in their CPF Ordinary and Special Accounts, on top of their MediSave Accounts. It also ensures a level playing field for all companies operating in the same field in Singapore and allows Platform Workers to receive similar basic protections as employees.

This alignment will be gradually phased in, starting from the second half of 2024. It will be mandatory for the cohort of Platform Workers below 30 years old in the year of implementation, meaning those born in or after 1995.

In fact, a study by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) found that younger Platform Workers expressed stronger preference for additional CPF contributions to help meet their housing needs, as they were more likely to have housing obligations, or have plans to buy a house.

One of the Platform Workers IPS spoke to as part of their studies last year was Hamza. He had to fork out a large amount of cash for his new house just when he first switched to private hire driving. This caught him off guard and he felt it would have been less of a concern for him if he had a job that provided CPF contributions.

Once the Committee's recommendations on CPF have been implemented, Platform Workers like Hamza will be able to tap on the additional CPF contributions to the Ordinary Account to pay for their housing loans instead of using cash. We hope that this will help to relieve the stress felt by many younger Platform Workers on servicing their housing loans.

Older Platform Workers born before 1995 can opt in for CPF contributions. To Ms Hazel Poa's question, the decision to opt in would not be reversible. Platform Workers today have a concession to opt in for CPF, which is a choice that employees do not have. Staying committed to these CPF contributions and allowing the earnings to accumulate interest over time is what will help these workers develop housing and retirement adequacy.

Furthermore, in discussions with Platform Companies, it would be complex and add to compliance cost if Platform Workers are allowed to opt out after opting in. This is the feedback we get from the implementation discussions we have with these companies.

We strongly recommend that older cohorts of Platform Workers opt in, as they can similarly benefit from having additional contributions by the Platform Companies to build up their retirement nest egg.

In fact, with the additional CPF contributions from Platform Companies, Platform Workers aged above 65 will be able to receive the same level of CPF contributions as employees of the same age, without having to make additional CPF contributions themselves. Like employees, Platform Workers who earn between \$50 and \$500 a month will also be able to receive CPF contributions from the Platform Companies without having to make CPF contributions on their own.

Companies, workers and consumers all recognised the need for more protections for Platform Workers during our engagements with them. But there were concerns about the cost impact of these recommendations. Ms Hazel Poa will be happy to note that the Government intends to phase in the additional CPF contributions evenly across five years, at around 2.5 percentage points per year for the Platform Workers and about 3.5 percentage points per year for Platform Companies.

This will help to address their concerns and smoothen the transition. We will calibrate this further if necessary.

Platform Workers are likely to see an increase in their total earnings after factoring in additional CPF contributions from Platform Companies. But at the same time, I know that some Platform Workers are concerned about the impact of the CPF changes on their take-home pay. This is why we will provide transitional support targeted at the lower-income Platform Workers earning up to \$2,500 a month who see an increase in their CPF contribution rates, as Deputy Prime Minister announced during the Budget.

I hope this addresses the concerns from Ms Hazel Poa, Mr Liang Eng Hwa, Mr Saktiandi Supaat and Ms Yeo Wan Ling.

In addition, Platform Workers who align their CPF contributions to employees earlier will receive stronger support. In the first year, we will offset 75% of the additional contribution the Platform Worker makes to the Ordinary and Special Accounts. The offset will taper down gradually over the next three years of the phase-in period for CPF contribution.

And to Mr Liang Eng Hwa's appeal for the Government to support Platform Workers with reemployment and reskilling, I want to assure him that regardless of how long Platform Workers decide to stay in platform work, we will support those who wish to transit to other sectors, through the Career Conversion Programmes (CCPs) which provide salary and training support to employers to reskill new workers, and the Jobs and Skills Centres, which provide career coaching and advice, both of which Minister had mentioned earlier on in his speech.

Once the CPF contribution rates of Platform Workers have been fully aligned with that of employees, we will also permanently increase Workfare payments for these Platform Workers to match those of employees. This means that eligible Platform Workers could receive up to \$4,200 per year, an increase from \$2,800 per year today, with 40% of these given in cash compared to the 10% today.

Their increase in Workfare payments will be fully in cash.

From the second half of 2024, all Platform Workers eligible for WIS will also start to receive monthly instead of yearly WIS payments. We will be able to do so by then, as Platform Workers' CPF contributions will be made more regularly, instead of the current arrangements in which they receive WIS only on a yearly basis after they declare their Net Trade Income at the end of each year and made the required MediSave contributions.

So, as a result of a more regular contribution, we will be able to have a mechanism to give WIS more regularly as well.

The above measures will mitigate the concerns in take-home pay while ensuring Platform Workers receive a significant boost to their retirement savings. Take for example a median income Platform Worker who turns 30 in 2024 and opts in from the start for the CPF contributions. Based on our estimates, he can use about \$450,000 in CPF savings by age 65 for his housing and retirement needs.

In my engagements with Platform Workers, they also raised concerns about Platform Companies discriminating against those who opted for CPF, by assigning less jobs to them, a point that some Members raised as well.

The Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness has, in its recently released interim report, recommended that the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFEF) be enhanced to provide clarity that intermediaries, including Platform Companies, should treat workers fairly, including contracted workers, like Platform Workers.

What this means is that Platform Companies must not discriminate when assigning work and MOM will investigate any unfair practices. So, this is the assurance we want to give to all the workers out there if you have this concern.

While the impact of discrimination on earnings has been top of mind for many Platform Workers, in my engagements with them, many also raised concerns about issues such as working conditions, earnings, safety at work and timely dispute resolution with customers.

A prevalent sentiment amongst many of them, is that they are often not accorded due recognition on their feedback and concerns.

Addressing these issues requires a balanced relationship between the Platform Workers and the Platform Companies. Platform Workers should be provided a clear representative voice to surface their concerns to maintain industrial peace and harmony within the platform ecosystem.

This relationship must be premised on Singapore's unique approach of tripartism that encourages consultation, open communication and conciliation. The ability for Platform Workers to represent themselves and negotiate for their interests is critical as the industry continues to evolve and business models continue to change.

In other countries like the UK and Spain for instance, unions have entered into collective agreements with platform companies to negotiate better working conditions, in areas such as earnings, grievance handling and safety. In Singapore, currently, there are associations that represent these Platform Workers, but they are not formally recognised within our industrial relations framework and therefore they lack the mandate to negotiate on their behalf.

While other jurisdictions have taken the approach of allowing platform workers to unionise in the same way that employees do, we recognise that the platform sector is distinct from traditional employment sectors. For instance, unlike employees, Platform Workers multi-home on different App platforms and are more geographically dispersed and transient in the time that they use to work or receive work. This has implications on how they can organise themselves and how their representatives are chosen.

The platform economy is also dynamic. Business models can evolve very rapidly and this has implications on what both parties can negotiate on.

Therefore, the representation framework has to be suited to the needs and characteristics of the platform sector. A Tripartite Workgroup (TWG), comprising our tripartite partners, representatives from the Platform Companies and also existing Platform Worker associations, is currently in discussions to determine how a representative body can formally seek mandate to represent Platform Workers collectively, through a framework that is backed by law.

This tripartite set-up was a deliberate move. The TWG was designed as an avenue for tripartite partners to co-create this framework. Through this process, they develop shared ownership of the eventual framework but more importantly, they build mutual trust. This is fundamental to fostering harmonious industrial relations in the platform space, which has been a core strength in our Singapore's labour landscape. And we need to cultivate this same spirit of tripartism in the platform ecosystem.

The discussions are making good progress and the tripartite partners have been guided by three key principles.

First, stakeholders agree to uphold the spirit of tripartism, which has achieved good outcomes for businesses and workers, and can also help the platform sector evolve sustainably, to benefit both Platform Companies and Platform Workers.

Second, stakeholders recognise that while the current representation framework in the employment space works well and is a useful reference, the platform space is different from regular employment and the representation model will need to be adapted accordingly.

Third, stakeholders agree that the representation framework should be flexible enough such that individual representatives of Platform Workers and Platform Companies have the maximum space to negotiate and find win-win outcomes that are fair to all parties. Exercising good sense and goodwill is key to this endeavour. We will provide further updates once the TWG has completed its work in a few months.

Mr Chairman, strengthening protections for platform workers will require a whole-of-community effort. These decisive moves are necessary for a more inclusive society. Everyone has a part to play to safeguard the interests of platform workers today so that they can be better prepared in the face of future economic uncertainties.

4.45 pm

Platform workers themselves will need to set aside savings for their component of CPF contributions. They will in turn receive contributions from platform companies who tap on them for labour. Singaporeans, as consumers, are willing to bear some increases in costs to platform services, knowing that their contributions will make a difference to enhance protections for platform workers.

The Government will implement the recommendations in stages over the next few years and provide transitional support to allay the impact to the platform ecosystem and to consumers. This is how we build a social compact and engender a more inclusive society.

As Ms Denise Phua and Mr Saktiandi Supaat pointed out, there are other groups of SEPs who have greater control over their own business models and are not subject to similar levels of management control as platform workers, but who also face unique challenges over the course of their work.

We will continue to review if there is a need to go beyond encouraging SEPs to make voluntary contributions to their CPF accounts, taking into account the needs and challenges of SEPs as well as the nature and context of their work arrangements.

As a diverse group with different needs, support to SEPs is usually tailored to the needs of the sectors they function in.

Specific to Ms Denise Phua's question on the support for arts and sports SEPs, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) will share more about their initiatives to better support their professional needs in their Committee of Supply (COS) debates.

Next, I would like to focus on our efforts to support our mature workers. With better health and life expectancy, more seniors are capable of remaining in productive employment and supporting their own retirement.

Hence, over the last few years, we have put in place structures and policies to support senior workers who wish to work longer to do so and to achieve stronger retirement adequacy as they do so.

Through these efforts, our senior resident employment rate has remained healthy and even increased despite the economic turbulence in the past few years of the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2022, the employment rate rose from 67.6% to 70.6% for seniors aged 55 to 64 and from 44.6% to 47.5% for seniors aged 65 to 69. This places our employment rate at 11th and fourth respectively when compared with the OECD countries. This is comparable to other Asian countries such as South Korea.

We will seize this momentum and continue to strengthen support for our senior workers who wish to continue working.

Sir, allow me to continue the rest of my speech in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Mr Yip Hon Weng has asked about how the Government can ensure that our senior workers can continue to contribute to the economy.

Over many years, we have put in place policies to support senior workers to continue to work for longer if they wish to do so, and build towards stronger retirement adequacy.

As a result, our senior resident employment rate has remained healthy and even increased despite the recent economic turbulence.

We will continue to strengthen support for our senior workers.

We have raised the statutory retirement and re-employment ages to 63 and 68 respectively this year. This supports senior workers to continue working longer, if they wish to.

We will also extend the Senior Employment Credit (SEC) until 2025 to support employers who hire senior workers. Under the SEC, employers that hire Singaporean workers aged 60 and above and earning up to \$4,000 per month can expect up to 8% of wage offsets. These wage offsets will be automatically disbursed to employers who qualify.

In response to Mr Desmond Choo's question, I am happy to announce that the Part-time Re-employment Grant (PTRG) will be extended to 2025. This grant will increase the availability of part-time re-employment to senior workers in participating companies.

To receive up to \$125,000 in grant support, employers have to offer part-time re-employment, implement flexible work arrangements (FWAs) at the workplace and adopt structured career planning for their mature and senior employees aged 45 and above.

This will help more senior workers to stay in employment, develop the skills needed to grow with the company, and extend their career longevity.

Senior workers themselves, too, play a key role to make this process a success. I encourage them to be open and proactive in embracing new opportunities, and ready to upskill and pivot to new job roles as they emerge.

(In English): I want to thank Mr Desmond Choo, Mr Heng Chee How, Mr Liang Eng Hwa and Mr Sharael Taha for their support for these efforts that will benefit senior workers.

Ms Jessica Tan also asked how many enterprises have taken up both schemes and the roles those senior workers took on.

The Senior Employment Credit (SEC) has in fact benefited almost 100,000 employers that hired over 461,000 senior workers since it was introduced. At the same time, more than 5,700 employers successfully applied for the Part-time Re-employment Grant (PTRG) and committed to implementing progressive senior employment policies, which we expect to benefit over 45,000 senior workers.

Employers from a wide variety of sectors have benefited from both schemes, such as wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food service activities, and manufacturing. These employers offer a range of job roles.

Mr Leslie Basil Danker is one of our senior workers who has been with the renowned Raffles Hotel Singapore for 51 years. He has been a beneficiary of the Part-time Re-employment Grant. Since starting out with the maintenance department in 1972, Mr Danker has taken on various event management roles and supervisory responsibilities. Today, he is the mentor resident historian of Raffles Hotel, working on a part-time basis. This arrangement allowed him to wind down and spend more time with his family while continuing to share the hotel's rich history with guests through guided tours. Perhaps some of you might be on his guided tour one of these days.

His detailed knowledge of the hotel's roots came to the fore during the hotel's landmark restoration process from 2017 to 2019, where he worked closely with engineers, architects and interior designers for the undertaking of the renovation.

This is an excellent example of how the Part-time Re-employment Grant has benefited both the senior worker and the employer.

Applications for the Part-time Re-employment Grant will reopen in April, which is next month. I hope that employers will leverage the resources provided through these schemes to put in place progressive practices.

Our tripartite partners have also been working with companies to improve senior workers' employability. SNEF introduced a guidebook to help employers conduct structured career planning and NTUC is working with employers to adopt structured career planning through their Company Training Committees (CTCs).

Structured career planning provides employers with a process to proactively map out future business needs, identify skills that senior workers need to develop to grow with the company and support them in acquiring those skills. This not only protects our senior workers' employability and extends their career longevity but also helps employers retain an experienced pool of workers amidst a tight labour market.

As Mr Abdul Samad, Mr Heng Chee How and Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman pointed out, retirement adequacy is another key area that we support senior workers on.

As Deputy Prime Minister Wong has announced at the Budget, we are committed to raising the CPF contribution rates for senior workers.

We have implemented the Tripartite Workgroup on Older Workers' (TWG-OW) recommendation to increase senior workers' CPF contribution rates in 2022 and 2023 and will continue to do so in 2024 to strengthen their retirement adequacy. With this, we will have completed the scheduled increase in CPF contribution rates for workers aged 65 to 70. For those between 55 and 65, we will press on ahead.

Mr Abdul Samad would be glad to hear that by the time we complete the full increase around 2030, those aged 55 to 60 will have their CPF contribution rates equalised to that of younger workers. A 55-year-old member today can expect monthly retirement payouts to be boosted by about 10%.

We will also continue to support employers with the CPF Transition Offset.

I want to thank our tripartite partners for their support and consensus for this very important move. These recommendations are necessary for senior workers who continue working to enter their retirement with more confidence.

Mr Chairman, we have put in place measures to uplift our platform workers and senior workers. We will need to work closely with stakeholders to implement the initiatives I have shared about and will count on support from fellow Singaporeans to mutually reinforce an inclusive and strengthened workforce where no one is left behind. Because as my sisters and brothers from the unions would say – every worker matters.

The Chairman: Minister of State Gan Siow Huang.

The Minister of State for Manpower (Ms Gan Siow Huang): Mr Chairman, I thank Members who have contributed ideas on securing fairer and more inclusive workplaces.

Minister Tan See Leng spoke about journeying with you every step of the way. A fairer and more progressive workplace enables everyone, regardless of background, to contribute according to your strengths and interests and achieve your fullest potential.

[Deputy Speaker (Mr Christopher de Souza) in the Chair]

I will share more on how we plan to continue journeying with you.

The pandemic has changed the way we work. Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) have become more prevalent and important. Employers increasingly see the value of FWAs to attract and retain talent and to tap on a wider pool of manpower.

While the focus during the pandemic was on telecommuting, FWAs go beyond telecommuting and include other work arrangements such as part-time work, staggered work hours, job sharing, flexible shift scheduling and so on.

In 2021, over nine in 10 employees worked in firms that provided at least one form of FWA on a sustained basis. This is up from over seven in 10 employees in 2019. This is encouraging.

As several Members such as Mr Desmond Choo, Mr Louis Ng, Miss Rachel Ong, Mr Sharael Taha and Ms Yeo Wan Ling highlighted, we can do more to support caregivers, seniors and persons with disabilities (PwDs) to continue working or to re-enter the workforce. FWAs are a key strategy to do so.

We have made good progress and we will press on with tripartite partners to encourage more FWAs in a win-win manner.

Businesses have different operating contexts and employees also have varied needs. The key is for management and staff to have regular dialogue with each other to better understand each other's needs and build mutual trust. Implementing FWAs in a rigid manner before employers are ready risks creating a more acrimonious workplace culture and affecting workplace productivity, which ultimately hurts employers and employees.

While we can understand Mr Louis Chua's and Mr Louis Ng's good intentions, legislation is not a panacea.

In jurisdictions with FWA legislation, employers can still reject requests that are not practicable for the business. The UK, one of the first few countries that implemented a right to request FWAs legislation, only saw the proportion of UK workers using FWAs increasing very marginally from 26% in 2013 to 30% in 2020.

We need to first focus on shaping the right norms at work and building mutual understanding between employers and employees on FWAs.

As announced previously, the tripartite partners are working closely to formulate and introduce Tripartite Guidelines on FWAs by 2024. The guidelines will require employers to consider requests for flexible work arrangements fairly and properly.

To Mr Gerald Giam's question, while employers have the prerogative to accept or reject an FWA request, they must have valid reasons for their decision. At the same time, employees should be reasonable in their requests and use FWAs responsibly.

For example, certain forms of FWAs are simply not practical for some jobs, such as expecting full telecommuting for a job role in machine maintenance. Some FWAs may also have significant resource implications, which employers understandably need to take into consideration when assessing the request.

We must also differentiate the impact of FWAs on individual and team productivity.

For instance, while some employees may feel more productive telecommuting and want to work from home more frequently, team productivity could fall due to reduced in-person interaction and collaboration. As such, we need to allow employers and employees time to adjust and find the optimal balance at the individual employee and business levels when implementing FWAs.

5.00 pm

What we want to see is a workplace norm where employees feel comfortable requesting for FWAs and understanding that while not all requests can be acceded to due to business needs, the requests will be assessed properly and fairly. The tripartite partners will deliberate on these issues when crafting the Tripartite Guidelines, and we will consult widely, to ensure that the guidelines are practical and well-balanced in supporting the needs of both businesses as well as employees.

Besides shaping norms, we have been working with the Tripartite Partners to strengthen support for employers in implementing FWAs. Many Members of Parliament have called for this over the years, including Ms Yeo Wan Ling, Mr Yip Hon Weng, Mr Louis Chua, Mr Louis Ng, Miss Rachel Ong, Mr Sharael Taha and Dr Wan Rizal, and many others. It is in employers' interest to make FWAs more available, as our surveys have found that FWAs had the greatest impact on staff retention amongst other progressive workplace policies.

I encourage employers who offer FWAs to adopt the voluntary Tripartite Standard on Flexible Work Arrangements and be recognised as progressive employers on Workforce Singapore's MyCareersFuture Portal (MCF) and job fairs, so as to better attract jobseekers.

Last year, the number of employees who worked in companies that adopted the Tripartite Standard increased by 18%. In total, more than 29% of all employees now work in companies that have adopted the Tripartite Standard.

One example of a progressive employer is Starbucks, which many of us are familiar with. Starbucks Singapore offers a diverse range of FWAs, including part-time, flexi-shifts and shift swapping for their frontline employees. They provide additional support to employees with needs, such as by allowing parents to switch to part-time work to spend more time with their children or new-born, or to care for their

dependents or family members with special needs. Employees doing office-based tasks are allowed to telecommute where possible. The flexibility and support accorded to employees, across different roles, has contributed to Starbucks' low attrition rate for their employees, as well as four out of five managerial posts being filled by their own in-house talent.

I want to thank our tripartite partners – SNEF and NTUC – for their strong commitment in promoting FWAs at the workplace.

Just last year alone, the tripartite partners engaged around 2,000 employers, HR practitioners and employees to encourage the adoption of the Tripartite Standard on FWAs and implementation of flexible work. These are done through SNEF's training engagements and NTUC's Better Workplace Campaign. We also continue to see more employers tap on various resources such as IHRP's Playbook on Hybrid Workplaces and free clinics, and sector-specific guides offered by TAFEP. We will continue to develop more resources to guide employers on how to comply with the upcoming Guidelines.

Mr Sharael Taha would be happy to know that in 2022, over three in 10 of employed residents had telecommuted at some point in the month they were surveyed. TAFEP has so far not received any complaints of unfair treatment relating to telecommuting over the past two years.

Nevertheless, as we expect more people to take up FWAs, it will be increasingly important to ensure that HR practitioners are equipped to implement it in a fair manner. We will continue to enhance these efforts to enable FWAs at the workplace. If done well, we can create family-friendly work environments for our caregivers, which many think will be more sustainable than legislating parent-care leave, as Mr Louis Ng suggested.

After-hours communication, which Mr Melvin Yong raised, is another example of the importance of HR capabilities in the implementation of policies to ensure work flexibility is adopted appropriately.

To date, more than 500 company representatives have attended SNEF's workshops and briefings that help HR to implement this policy, which was actually derived from a template developed by the Alliance for Action on Work-Life Harmony.

Since the launch of the Tripartite Advisory on Mental Well-being at Workplaces in 2020, MOM and the Workplace Safety and Health Council have been encouraging companies to adopt the recommendations within the Tripartite Advisory that best suit their own company's needs. And as shared earlier, legislation such as the right-to-rest and the right-to-disconnect can create a rigid and litigious workplace culture. Instead, we should adopt an enabling approach by encouraging employers to regularly engage employees to implement company policies that best suit both business and personal needs.

We agree with Mr Desmond Choo, Mr Sharael Taha and Ms Yeo Wan Ling that job redesign is important to enable FWAs at workplaces. Companies requiring further support in job redesign to make their jobs more productive and attractive for workers, can tap on Government schemes, such as the Support for Job Redesign under the Productivity Solutions Grant.

Women in particular benefit from FWAs, as they often carry heavier caregiving responsibilities at home. There are also women who may take a break from their careers and need more support to return to work. Therefore, in June last year, Workforce Singapore (WSG) launched an initiative called herCareer. herCareer includes employment facilitation programmes and services that support women jobseekers, including walk-in interviews to meet with hiring employers on the spot. Over the last three years, WSG and NTUC's Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) have placed more than 83,000 women jobseekers across its programmes and services.

Community partners can also play an important part in supporting women at work. For example, the Singapore Business Federation launched the Singapore Women Entrepreneurs Network in 2021, to nurture and support women talent. In the same year, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) introduced a mentoring programme for aspiring women directors to help them achieve their professional development goals. NTUC U Women and Family has further expanded its Women Supporting Women Mentorship Programme across the island, where women in the community are mentored by women leaders and union leaders. NTUC U Women and Family, NTUC LearningHub and e2i also started a career returner programme called "Women Returning to Work", which includes training and job-matching opportunities. Concurrently, WSG collaborates with other community partners to support women returning to work. These include Yayasan Mendaki and Daughters of Tomorrow.

These collective efforts have contributed to the growth in employment rate for women aged 25 to 64, from 73% in 2020 to 76% in 2022, despite the pandemic. We will continue to work with partners to provide women with the support they need, and we encourage employers to continue to do their part.

We recognise that some groups may need more support to achieve their full potential in the workforce, such as persons with disabilities (PwDs) and ex-offenders. We are committed to providing them with the support they need, working hand-in-hand with our partners.

We are encouraged that the employment rate of resident PwDs has continued to improve, reaching 31.4% in 2021 to 2022. But we can do better as a society. Miss Rachel Ong asked about raising the workforce participation rate of PwDs, while Mr Sharael Taha asked about creating more employment opportunities for them. In the recently released Enabling Masterplan 2030, MSF and MOM set an employment rate target of 40% by 2030 for PwDs.

Our whole of society needs to come together to achieve this aspirational goal. Under the Enabling Masterplan 2030, a new task force comprising members of the public, people and private sectors has been set up to develop new ways of supporting the employment of PwDs.

MOM will be enhancing the Enabling Employment Credit (EEC). Today, the EEC provides employers of PwDs earning below \$4,000 a month with permanent wage offsets of up to 20%. Employers who hire PwDs who have not been employed for at least six months receive an additional time-limited wage offset of up to 10% for six months. In 2022, the EEC benefitted more than 10,000 PwDs, including close to 2,000 who had not been in work for at least six months.

I am pleased to announce that the Government will enhance the additional wage offset by raising the support level from 10% to 20% and increasing the support duration from six to nine months.

Taken together with the permanent wage offset, employers can receive up to 40% wage offsets for the first nine months of employment when hiring a PwD who has not been working for at least six months and 20% wage offsets thereafter. This means up to \$8,400 in wage offsets for the first full year of employment.

This enhancement is on top of separate Government grants that provide employers with support to improve the workplace, redesign the job or provide training as needed.

Ms Vivian Ser, a wife and mother, has been working with Novotel as a cook with support from the EEC and SG Enable. Novotel's HR team worked together with Ms Ser's job and mobility coaches during her onboarding process. As Ms Ser is visually impaired, she takes on parts of the kitchen process which do not involve heating, such as vacuum sealing and plating. Novotel also put in place simple workplace accommodations, such as a talking scale and tactile stickers to help her navigate her environment safely.

Family support is also key. Ms Ser's husband and son are her biggest cheerleaders and also provide practical support such as in her transport arrangements. With support from her family, employer, colleagues and coaches, Ms Ser recently reached her one-year anniversary with Novotel.

As seen from Ms Ser's story, holistic support makes a difference to helping persons with disabilities enter and stay in employment. Mr Gerald Giam asked what can be done to address discrimination associated with disabilities.

A first step that we can all take is to avoid stereotyping and to recognise that everyone has skills and experience which they can bring to our teams at work. Looking ahead, the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness has recommended that the proposed Workplace Fairness legislation protect PwDs against workplace discrimination.

Miss Rachel Ong also asked about retirement adequacy for PwDs and their caregivers. Eligible lower-income workers, including PwDs and their caregivers, receive the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS), which will boost their income and retirement savings through cash payments and CPF contributions. We have further enhanced Workfare from January 2023 to allow all eligible PwDs to qualify for the highest pay-out tier, regardless of age. This will provide up to \$4,200 in annual payments.

The Government also provides additional support to boost retirement adequacy, which would support PwDs and their caregivers if they are unable to work and have little retirement savings. This includes the Silver Support scheme, which provides quarterly cash payouts of up to \$900 to seniors who had low or no incomes during their working years and have little family support. To encourage top-ups, we also introduced the Matched Retirement Savings Scheme (MRSS) in 2021. Under the MRSS, the Government will match top-ups of up to \$600 per year to eligible seniors' CPF accounts. These measures will also help boost the retirement adequacy of homemakers whom Mr Saktiandi spoke about.

Miss Rachel Ong asked about support for caregivers of PwDs who wish to return to the workforce. Caregivers can tap on Workforce Singapore's suite of employment facilitation programmes and services. For example, caregivers who need job search assistance can visit WSG's Careers Connect and NTUC's e2i career centres for career advisory and guidance. Those who need a skills top-up can apply for Career Conversion Programmes (CCPs), which provide training and salary support to employers who hire and reskill mid-career jobseekers for new occupations.

Another group that we pay close attention to is ex-offenders. Employment is critical for their successful reintegration into society.

Ex-offenders sometimes face challenges, such as stigmatisation and limited career opportunities, upon their release. The problems can be compounded by low educational qualifications, lack of industry-relevant skills and recent work experience. The challenges are more acute in the initial years after release, as ex-offenders face problems transiting from prison to the work environment.

A hiring incentive for ex-offenders will help encourage a wider range of employers to provide job opportunities to ex-offenders. We will introduce a new hiring incentive, the Uplifting Employment Credit (UEC) to continue supporting the hiring of ex-offenders. Under the new UEC, employers who hire ex-offenders through Yellow Ribbon Singapore and Singapore Prison Service's employment programmes will automatically qualify for a wage offset of 20% for the first nine months, amounting to up to \$5,400 for each ex-offender employee.

5.15 pm

Employers who hire eligible ex-offenders directly can apply through IRAS to receive this credit. Employers will receive the credit for new ex-offenders hired between April 2023 and December 2025.

We will review the scheme, thereafter, to assess its effectiveness in improving ex-offenders' employment outcomes, such as job retention and wages. We hope that this will go some way in supporting the employment of ex-offenders. Mr Chairman, let me say a few words in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] To build an inclusive society, we will help everyone in society to achieve their full potential in the workforce. Some may need more support, such as Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and ex-offenders.

We will enhance the Enabling Employment Credit for PwDs. Employers who hire PwDs who have not worked for at least six months will receive wage offsets of up to 40% for a duration of nine months and wage offsets of up to 20% thereafter, amounting up to \$8,400 in the first year of employment.

We will also introduce a new hiring incentive to help ex-offenders where the employers who hire ex-offenders will receive monthly wage offsets of up to 20% for a duration of nine months, amounting up to \$5,400 for each newly-hired ex-offender employee.

Together, with the support of employers, community partners and the Government, we can help PwDs with disabilities and ex-offenders contribute to our workforce and society.

(In English): Mr Chairman, everyone must play their part to secure fairer and more inclusive workplaces for Singapore. The Government will continue to provide the support that you need and journey with you every step of the way. [Applause.]

Mr Deputy Chairman: Minister Dr Tan See Leng.

Dr Tan See Leng: Mr Deputy Chairman, I would like to make two clarifications with respect to the first segment of my speech.

First, I had said that the nominal median income of full-time employment residents grew by 8.3% in 2021. I wish to clarify that this was the growth rate in 2022.

Second, I had said that the Silver Support Scheme was enhanced in 2011. I wish to clarify that it was enhanced in 2021.

Senior Minister of State Koh, Senior Minister of State Zaqy, Minister of State Gan and I have shared about the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)'s three themes for this Committee of Supply (COS): (a) seizing opportunities, (b) strengthening support for you and (c) securing better workplaces with you. I have earlier covered the first two themes and I will now touch on the third – how we stand in solidarity to secure safer, fairer and more progressive workplaces with you. We are doing so in a couple of ways.

Minister of State Gan has shared details on our efforts to support our women at work and help persons with disabilities (PwDs) and ex-offenders find employment. Senior Minister of State Zaqy has also elaborated on our efforts to ensure safety in the workplace. Let me now share about the Workplace Fairness Legislation, which is a significant step towards ensuring a level playing field.

Members will have seen the 20 interim recommendations by the Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness, which I co-chair with Brothers Ng Chee Meng and Dr Robert Yap.

Calls for legislation date back to 1998, with various parties, including Labour Members, proposing for legislation to strengthen our efforts in tackling discrimination. Indeed, this significant move is going to strengthen our overall framework to uphold workplace fairness. Mr Gerald Giam asked for comprehensive protection for PwDs, while Mr Leong Mun Wai suggested to cover sexual orientation in the legislation. They both can be assured that all forms of discrimination are not tolerated. This is our national policy and it is reflected in the Tripartite Guidelines for Fair Employment Practices (TGFEPP) today.

The Tripartite Committee has recommended that the new legislation provide stronger protection against discrimination on the grounds of nationality, age, sex, race, religion, disability and mental health conditions. Stronger protection against discrimination in the proposed areas also supports Singapore's key social and economic objectives.

For instance, protecting against discrimination on the grounds of age helps to support the employment of mature workers, which is critical for our ageing society. These characteristics are the common and familiar forms of workplace discrimination in Singapore. Together they account for more than 95% of discrimination complaints received by Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) and MOM in the past five years.

We have experienced dealing with these cases and we are confident to mediate them effectively. Tripartite partners will work with relevant stakeholders to ensure that there is clarity on issues, such as definitions and scope of employers' responsibilities to enable the legislation to achieve its intended effect.

Some Members have raised suggestions on the legislation. Mr Leong asked how the legislation will address job security for Singaporeans. Legislation will benefit Singaporeans by better protecting them against workplace discrimination. There will be a wider range of enforcement levers against errant employers that are more effective as deterrence against workplace discrimination. The Fair Consideration Framework job advertising requirement will also be legislated, which will allow us to take action against employers who breach this requirement, using the new enforcement levers.

The Tripartite Committee has also recommended protection against retaliation for those who report workplace discrimination or harassment, to give assurance to employees to come forward to report it. The majority of complaints on nationality discriminations are by locals indeed. So, they will benefit from the greater protection.

Mr Leong also suggested small firms should not be exempted from the legislation. Small firms may not have the corporate competencies to comprehensively implement the new rules from day one. As the proposed legislation is only the first step, we will exempt small firms with fewer than 25 employees for a start.

Workers in small firms, however, will continue to still be covered by TGFEF. Those who are unfairly dismissed can lodge claims with the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM). For these employers, we will also step up education and enforcement efforts via TGFEF. The Tripartite Committee agrees that we will monitor the ground situation after legislation is introduced and review the exemption with a view to tightening it within five years.

Mr Leong referred to a specific case in a religious organisation in 2013. For that case, based on prevailing guidelines and laws, the church did not have sufficient grounds to dismiss the employee. With the introduction of the Workplace Fairness Legislation, the Tripartite Committee consulted various agencies, religious organisations and advocacy groups on their views. We recognise that maintaining religious harmony is important in our multi-religious society. It is, therefore, important to give religious organisations the space to practise their religion. As such, given the purpose and character of religious organisations, the Tripartite Committee has recommended allowing religious organisations the discretion to make employment decisions, based on religion and their religious requirements.

It must be emphasised that this discretion given to religious organisations is very carefully scoped. It will only apply to places of worship and religious organisations with sole religious purpose and function. It will also not allow them to discriminate based on other protected characteristics, where there is no religious basis to do so.

On the question of vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS), we have reached out to and offered employment assistance to the unvaccinated workers. They can also approach Workforce Singapore (WSG) or Employment and Employability Institute (e2i), if they require further assistance. Workers who feel that their employers are imposing vaccination as a requirement without genuine occupational needs may approach MOM or TAFEP for assistance. Since the release of the updated advisory on COVID-19 vaccination at the workplace in October 2022, there has only been a handful of such complaints.

Ms Janet Ang and Ms Yeo Wan Ling will also be assured to know that we will continue to engage employers, employees, HR partners and other key stakeholders to make clear the intent of the legislation and the whole-of-society effort required to uphold workplace fairness. During the implementation process, we will also work with NTUC to help employees to better navigate the case management process and seek remedies for their grievances.

And we will work with SNEF to guide employers to adopt Fair Employment practices and comply with the legislation. Even as we introduce stronger worker protections in legislation, and let me emphasise this, we want to preserve Singapore's harmonious and non-litigious workplace culture.

To this end, the committee has also made recommendations to encourage disputes to be resolved within the firm in the first instance. And if not, through mediation to repair the employment relationship where possible, with adjudication at the Courts only as a last resort.

We will continue to welcome all feedback, including from Members today. The Tripartite Committee will take the feedback into consideration for its final recommendations. With that, Mr Chairman, let me now conclude in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] In the past year, I have been involved in many dialogue sessions. Most Singaporeans understand that we face many challenges on our road to economic recovery. I am glad that Singaporeans are still hopeful about their future and actively sharing their hopes and aspirations with us.

This reminds me of a Xinyao song, "Small Stream that Flows Forever". The lyrics say "who does not dream when they are young". Back when I first entered the workforce, I was just as ambitious, but I understood that my career path may not be smooth, and I may face various obstacles before arriving at my intended destination.

Whether you are a young person, or like me, a middle-aged person, rest assured that we will journey with you every step of the way, and help you become more resilient and move forward with you. Whether you are in your early-20s, 30s, mid-40s or late-50s, we will empower you to find and work towards new opportunities and seize better job opportunities. If you are looking for a career change, you can be assured of the support we will provide you to upskill and re-skill. If you have just lost your job, you can be assured that we will step in to help you in your job search. If your interest is in hands-on work, you can be assured of more opportunities to learn. We will help you in your career transition.

If you are approaching retirement, we will continue to strengthen the CPF system, help you meet basic retirement needs, so that you can enjoy your golden years.

As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Whether Singaporeans can continue to seize opportunities depends on their career health. We should be responsible for our own career health, understand the needs of our career, industry trends, our interests and capabilities.

To assist, we will be launching a new CareersFinder feature on the MyCareersFuture portal. The feature will harness data analytics and artificial intelligence to provide you with more personalised jobs and skills insights to improve job matching.

We also need to build a more inclusive labour market. As the saying goes, "Every Trade has its Master". Even though "head" work remains a priority, we should not overlook "hands-on" work. Regardless of the industry, there should be multiple pathways to success.

We are looking into how we can redesign such jobs – with better starting salaries, better upskilling opportunities, and other ways to attract and retain workers in these jobs. Shifting society's perceptions of such jobs takes time and process, so we have to persevere.

We are also strengthening support for Singaporeans' retirement adequacy. The CPF system is a key pillar for Singapore's retirement adequacy, and it meets workers' basic retirement needs. To ensure the CPF system remains relevant, we must study how we can boost the CPF monthly payouts for seniors.

At the end of the song "Small Stream That Flows Forever", the lyrics say, "There are thousands of ups and downs in life, only the best confidantes meet forever, for their friendship is forever, like water flowing from its source". I hope you will see MOM as a close partner in your career path, provide feedback and suggestions and co-create and improve policies together. This is also the objective of the Government's Forward Singapore exercise to renew the social compact.

We will continue to work with you to ride out the storm and move towards a better future!

The Chairman: We have some time for clarifications. Mr Desmond Choo.

Mr Desmond Choo: Thank you, Mr Chairman, I would like to ask Senior Minister of State Koh Poh Koon a couple of clarifications.

It is very reassuring that our senior workers' employment rate is comparable to the OECD countries. Would it be useful to have a target employment rate for these senior workers? What measures beyond the Senior Employment Credit (SEC) and Part-time Re-employment Grant (PTRG) are needed to have more employers to hire senior workers?

Dr Koh Poh Koon: Mr Chairman, I thank Mr Desmond Choo for the question. As he mentioned and as I shared in my speech earlier, we do have quite a good employment rate for our senior workers compared to OECD countries and other advanced Asian economies.

In looking at whether we should set a target for senior worker employment, it is important to realise that every senior worker, every senior in fact, in Singapore has different aspirations in life. Some prefer to take care of their grandchildren, and some may want to do more of things that they had not been able to do when they were younger.

It is very hard for us to set a hard target and force everyone to continue in employment against their wishes. This is with the background that we are really not doing too badly compared to other advanced economies.

What we are trying to do here then, in response to the Member's second question, which is related, is to create an enabling framework to allow as many senior workers as possible to remain in employment, if that is their aspiration to do so.

So, by progressively raising re-employment ages and retirement ages to give them the legal protection to remain in employment should they choose to do, making sure there are fair employment practices and a legal framework to prevent discrimination against ageism. That again also helps to protect them and allows their aspirations to be realised.

And then some of these other measures, whether it is the Senior Employment Credit (SEC), whether it is the Part-Time Re-employment Grant (PTRG) that helps to reduce friction if employers feel that cost may be a consideration, we want to take away as many of those worries as possible from the employer side, to give them an extra leg-up to be able to get employment opportunities.

But ultimately, what is important is to make sure our senior workers continue to upskill themselves. They must ultimately have the skills that the industry needs in order to be able to access employment opportunities.

So, it is a whole suite of efforts that we do from all angles and some of the things that we are doing with the tripartite partners are also going to be helpful, helping them to do structured career planning, making employers and HR professionals attuned to the need to look at job redesign.

Having a conversation with the workers before they reach retirement age in their 40s and 50s to start planning for the next step of their career so that even as they enter their 50s and 60s, they understand what the company wants and there is a concerted effort from the employer, the HR side as well as the workers to develop skills that are relevant to the company's longer-term objectives.

So, it is a whole suite of efforts and I think at this moment we are all moving in the correct direction. Let us continue to push on with what we are doing now and, hopefully, with the trajectory that we are seeing, the senior employment rate will continue to hit even higher levels in the next few years to come.

And as I said before in my speech, despite the pandemic and economic crisis, our senior employment rate has actually gone up and not declined. So, that is something encouraging that we want to pursue.

The Chairman: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song: I thank the Minister for replying to my questions on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). Two clarifications on that.

Will the Ministry also publish a SOL for skilled trades, industrial jobs and other essential occupations? For example, the UK's SOL includes welders, care workers for seniors, day care managers and healthcare workers. These are also occupations which are in such short supply in Singapore. So, MOM can then use this to work with the industry and educational institutions to close the skills gaps, in our local workforce.

The second question I have is that I note that Minister said that the SOL will be refreshed every three years. I am not sure if this is sufficient, given the fast-evolving job market. Could MOM update the SOL more frequently to ensure it stays relevant with the constantly evolving job market and circumstances?

Dr Tan See Leng: I thank Mr Giam for his two points. To clarify, given the small size of our market relative to many of the other bigger countries in terms of their workforce, if we were to publish the list and make it so open, in many of these countries where the workers come from, they will then understand what are some of our vulnerabilities.

So, to that extent, I would rather keep the list to a very tight, narrow scope where we work very closely with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), the Ministry of National Development (MND), the Ministry of Health (MOH), and the different sectoral agencies to curate it and work through these agencies to address some of these sectors' shortages. So, that is the first point.

To the Member's second point about a three-yearly review, we also want to provide a certain level of certainty and predictability to businesses setting up here or businesses that are already operating here. If we keep moving this list very frequently, businesses will find it very hard to adapt, to respond and to be nimble.

The three years, we feel, is a sufficient runway for us to address some of this in the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). And I have already shared in my earlier speech what are some of the criteria that we will put in place. Just to reassure the Member, that between MTI and ourselves and some of the other sector agencies, we will also conduct yearly reviews. So, we do not have to go through the full three years but within one year, if certain shortages have become even more acute, we will not hesitate to respond. I hope that addresses his points.

The Chairman: Mr Saktiandi Supaat.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I would like to thank Minister for his answers to my cuts as well as to some of the suggestions I have raised during my Budget debate speech on retirement adequacy.

I have one clarification for the Minister in regard to the CPF LIFE Escalation Plan. It is a bit specific. It is in regard to my concern that with the rising prices and inflation and, of course, my concern about the longer-term equilibrium inflation outlook that Singapore and countries globally are facing, how will seniors be affected?

As of now, the CPF LIFE Escalating Plan rises by about 2% payouts annually. So, my suggestion in my Budget debate speech was whether it can be increased by another 50 basis points or possibly another 100 basis points, to take into consideration the rising prices for the current cohort and probably future cohorts, as an option beyond the 2% option that we have now; so as an additional option or a revision to the current 2%.

Dr Tan See Leng: I thank the Member for his clarification. The CPF LIFE Escalating Plan has a lower start but over time, it actually exceeds the Standard and the Basic Plan, as we speak today.

Today, we are in an era where inflation is high because of the geopolitical uncertainties. We have also seen the global supply chain disruptions as well as a lot of interest rates tightening.

The broad initiatives, the broad measures that we put up today, will improve retirement adequacy over the medium to long term.

During times of shocks such as what we have gone through the last two years and what we are still going through, the Government has constantly come in and intervened. We have had the Assurance Package; the GST Vouchers have become a permanent GST Voucher scheme. And there was a whole slew of support schemes that has been put up to support all Singaporeans and our CPF members to tide through this particular period.

You can see the MOM schemes in terms of CPF financial retirement adequacy, as a long haul, over a very long period of time, to provide the basic retirement adequacy. And at certain times, if I may borrow a term, it is like an immunisation, you get a booster coming in from the Government to help to uplift the members' retirement lifestyle and smoothen out some of the expenses.

If you look at the measures that we have rolled out over the last 12 months or so, for the low-income, the coverage is very substantial and it covers practically all of the inflationary increases in terms of spending. For the middle-income, it covers it substantially. That has been the construct thus far. I hope that addresses the Member's point.

The Chairman: Ms Hazel Poa

Ms Hazel Poa: I have two clarifications. First is, will the new workplace fairness legislation cover platform workers? And secondly, the Minister gave us the proportion of CPF members who meet the Basic Retirement Sum just now. Can the Minister also tell us the proportion who can meet the Full Retirement Sum?

Dr Tan See Leng: To the first clarification, the answer is yes. For the second clarification, in terms of the Full Retirement Sum, if you can let one or two other clarifications go through, I will come back to you.

The Chairman: Ms Yeo Wan Ling.

Ms Yeo Wan Ling: Chairman, I would like to reiterate that there are about 260,000 women of economic age not in the workforce today. They will be a formidable workforce tapped for Singapore should we create the right conditions for our women to return to work. I like to thank Minister of State Gan for acknowledging the work that the Labour Movement and the NTUC Women and Family Unit has done.

I would, in addition, like to ask the Senior Minister of State how can the Government further the partnership with the Labour Movement to support women who are seeking employment?

Also, beyond the Enabling Employment Credit (EEC), what other employment support is there for persons with disabilities (PwDs)?

Ms Gan Siow Huang: The Government has been working in close partnership with NTUC and the unions to support women employment. I have named quite a few.

5.45 pm

Looking forward, we think that there are more opportunities for the Government to work with the unions, especially the women union leaders, to form mentorship circles to expand our partnership with other women's groups and like-minded groups, to cast our net wider to be able to reach out to more women.

As for support for persons with disabilities (PwDs), there is an Enabling Masterplan 2030. I mentioned it earlier on. There is also a separate task force that has been formed. I believe MSF will also be sharing the details when ready.

The Chairman: Mr Leong Mun Wai.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Thank you, Chairman. I have three questions for the Minister, but before that, I would like to thank the Minister for answering all my questions except one with very direct and succinct answers. I usually do not get that from most of the other Ministers.

However, we have to continue to work on improving the situation for Singaporean workers, because while the job situation has kind of improved because of the reopening, job and wage growth is still very uneven.

For example, even MOM admitted that out of the 47,400 jobs growth in the fourth quarter of 2022, most of those were actually from non-residents and there are some complaints from IT graduates that they are unable to find jobs as soon as they want.

So, I have three questions.

First, the question that the Minister did not answer me. Can I ask the Minister what makes him and the policymakers so certain that the Singaporean PMEs are not disadvantaged although employers do not need to contribute CPF for Employment Pass holders?

Second question, can I ask whether the Minister will consider accelerating the income increase under the PWM so that lower-income workers can get a minimum of \$1,800 of monthly take-home pay by 2024?

Looking at the materials that were distributed by the Minister, the lower-income worker will get that by 2028, but that is far too long – five years to wait – bearing in mind that many of these workers also suffered considerably during the pandemic.

The last question, does the Minister expect Singaporeans to occupy a larger share of our IT jobs going forward, especially in higher positions, in the next five years, given that the number of IT graduates – local IT graduates – will be increasing significantly over the next few years?

Dr Tan See Leng: I thank Mr Leong for his three to four clarifications, but can I humbly request for me to address Ms Hazel Poa's point? After all, you are from the same party.

On the second part of her clarification, let me set the entire context by giving the full response. Over the last 10 years, the proportion of active CPF members attaining their cohort's Basic Retirement Sum at age 55 has improved from about five in 10 to almost seven in 10 today. We expect this number to increase to about eight in 10 in 2027.

For members who are able to set aside the Basic Retirement Sum (BRS) in 2022, about seven in 10 – about 70% – can choose to set aside the Full Retirement Sum.

To the Member's first point, I wish to make an amendment that was on the Member's part about whether platform workers are covered by the workplace legislation.

The Workplace Fairness Legislation needs to have a formal contract – a formal relationship between the employer and the employee.

I think the nature of platform work is that many of the platform workers have multiple platforms that they work for. You could be on one, you could also be on another. I think some of them have about two or three. Perhaps Senior Minister of State Koh Poh Koon will be better placed to respond to this because of his deeper knowledge.

In that sense, to say that it is a singular relationship between an employer and employee, the nature of it is not a like-for-like comparison. But what we will do is that the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFE) will be clarified further to include the discrimination of platform workers.

To Mr Leong's four points, thank you for that compliment. It is really the collective work of all of my colleagues in the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). I have also learnt a lot from my learned colleagues here in their responses and replies to your questions as well.

If you look at it, we are at almost full employment. We are at 3% above pre-pandemic level. This is 3% above 2019. At a point in time when our resident employment is at this kind of high level, for companies to want to grow, to fulfil all this and so on, they have to hire. They have to hire workers. Obviously, in the fourth quarter, you see more non-residents finding jobs.

To the Member's point about how certain I am that Singaporean PMEs are not disadvantaged because for the Employment Pass (EP) holders, the employers do not have to contribute to CPF, please refer to my numerous explanations in the past. The way we calculate the Minimum Qualifying Salary is after taking into consideration the gross salary of a local – in a similar cohort – plus the CPF contribution of the employer and we set that as the benchmark.

If you look at it from the perspective of someone who has been here for 10 years, the salary of that EP holder is on a rising scale. It will not be at \$5,000. For the EP holder, for him to be able to get the EP, the company will have to set that qualifying salary probably at above \$10,000.

With that, we believe that we have adequately addressed any form of income disparity between our locals and foreigners.

On top of that, we do not see a need for us to ensure that foreigners have to contribute to CPF because our CPF provides for retirement adequacy, housing – a roof over the heads of our Singaporeans. We do not see the need to provide the same level of safety net for foreigners. Hence, we do not impose this CPF contribution on them.

To the Member's point about how to accelerate the income under PWM, I will leave it to Senior Minister of State Zaqq Mohamad to answer the question.

The Member's last point was about how I ensure that the larger share of IT jobs in high positions will go to Singaporeans in the next five years. We will continue, through all of the programmes that I have been painstakingly elaborating on over the last two days – whether it is SGEP, Global Ready Talent, Tech@SG – these are all programmes that we set up to train, to invest, to upskill and to reskill our Singaporean Core talent and we will continue to do so.

If Mr Leong has even more constructive programmes that we can do to train and upskill our Singaporean Core, I am happy to also take that into consideration. But as to whether I can provide some form of guarantee over the next five years, whether they will all end up in high positions, I do not think anyone can guarantee that.

We can guarantee a level playing field at the outset at every single level, but I do not think anyone can guarantee a similar high outcome or success for everyone. I hope that answers your question.

Mr Zaqq Mohamad: I just want to bring Members back to this infographic that we shared, which Mr Leong shared, which I thought was really quite clear. Actually, most of your PWMs that Members see here are pretty much above \$1,800.

If Members look at the wage growth, for example, security – they are at \$2,585 in 2023, today. By the time they hit 2028, it is \$3,500. The kind of wage growth is quite significant at 56%.

Landscape workers is \$1,700, admittedly below \$1,800. Cleaning is \$1,570 but by 2028, they will get \$2,400. That is an 84% wage increase in five years.

So, there is a scheduled step, but at the same time, it can almost be guaranteed that almost all of them, in fact, all of them will exceed \$1,800 at the start.

Let us not forget that the Government's approach goes beyond just wages too, if the Member forgot to include Workfare. If you think about \$4,200 a year, that is about \$350 per month, in addition, depending on your age and criteria, but generally, you could get as much as that. That covers about 25% of your wage in addition to top-ups by the Government. So, if you look at total income, I think, let us look at the entirety.

But I have to credit the unions as well as the employers for standing with us on this because the last two years have not been easy. We have just come out of the pandemic and yet, to see both the Labour Movement and the employers agree to such aggressive pay increases, I think that speaks volumes of our tripartite movement in terms of supporting our lower-wage workers and standing in solidarity with them. I think it is quite critical for us to remember that we are still coming out of the pandemic and yet now we are agreeing to wage increases of 56% and 84% which are significant numbers.

But we have to also be realistic. To push any further, I do not think the employers can take it. So, we have to keep watch, that is why the Government also supports them through the Progressive Wage Credit Scheme (PWCS). So, I just thought to set the context. But rest assured, we are all on the same page. We are here to support our lower-wage workers.

Dr Koh Poh Koon: Sir, very quickly on the clarification on platform workers and whether they are covered by the workplace fairness legislation that is being planned.

The answer is no, because workplace fairness legislation only covers employer-employee relationships. I did spend a significant part of my speech earlier to say why we are not classifying platform workers as employees – to maintain the flexibility that both parties desire.

But having said that, as I said in my speech before, the Tripartite Guidelines for Fair Employment Practices will scope in a clearer statement to say that any discrimination, even of contracted workers, will be deemed to be in violation of the Tripartite Guidelines for Fair Employment Practices. MOM can investigate and impose administrative penalties on these platform companies if they do discriminate.

The other thing which I hope perhaps Members will realise is that it is not in the interest of the companies to discriminate against workers who opt in for CPF simply because the scheme we are trying to propose here is that by 2024, those who are below 30 years old will be mandatorily required to contribute to CPF. Which means that henceforth, as a cohort, all younger workers born after 1995, whichever timepoint they choose to enter platform work – by the time, they are 40 years old or 50 years old – so long as they are born after 1995, platform companies will need to contribute CPF for them.

In other words, over time, the bulk of the workers available for platform work will need mandatory CPF. Therefore, it is not in the company's interest to disadvantage those in this larger group of workforce that will then constrain their ability to get labour.

The Chairman: Mr Leong, we will circle back to you. There are three Members that have yet to ask clarifications. Mr Louis Ng.

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: Thank you, Sir. I appreciate the Minister of State shared that we are not ready to legislate parent care leave yet, but can I at least ask that we consider tripartite standards or tripartite guidelines on paid parent care leave?

Second, could I ask what are the reasons as to why the Government provides parent care leave to public servants and how those reasons do not apply to all other workers?

Ms Gan Siow Huang: Well, I would like to reiterate that the Government recognises that caregiving for parents is an important responsibility, especially with Singapore's ageing population. All of us here who have parents will agree too.

We are committed to providing caregivers with the necessary support so that they can fulfil both their work as well as caregiving responsibilities. But beyond legislation, which the hon Member Louis Ng has suggested, it is useful for us to take a step back and ask ourselves, for caregivers, especially of elderly parents, what would be more sustainable support for them. Would just one or two more days of parent care leave make a lot of difference? Or is it something that is more sustainable in the form of family-friendly workplace culture that would be more useful for these caregivers?

6.00 pm

The Government encourages employers to have family-friendly practices and the Public Service leads by example by providing the parent care leave for our own employees. We hope that other employers out there will do likewise: care for their employees, have family-friendly practices and provide the flexibility that the employees need to care for their elderly family members.

The Government also has strengthened other areas of support for caregivers of seniors, including those who have to juggle between work and caregiving. Caregivers can tap on a range of care services, such as home- and day-care to support the day and social needs of their elderly loved ones.

There are also various respite care options in senior care centres and nursing homes to help caregivers to look after their seniors for short periods of time, including over the weekends. So, we do look at a more holistic set of support for caregivers of the elderly, and not just pin on a few more days of parent care leave.

The Chairman: Mr Edward Chia.

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui: Thank you, Chairman. I would like to thank Senior Minister of State Zaqy for announcing that MOM will launch an Industry Transformation Map (ITM) for human resource (HR) professionals. I feel that this will really support HR professionals in their expanded role.

I also note that he mentioned the Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) has certification and playbooks. I would like to further ask if there is further support for HR professionals in the area of job transformation, change management and redesign, so that they can better support the organisation in the future of work and also execute such transformation.

He also mentioned that IHRP has skills badges for HR professionals. May I ask how many HR professionals have attained these skills badges and what are the plans to expand this initiative?

Mr Zaqy Mohamad: I thank the Member for his question. I think they are very useful, and especially one that, I hope, the HR community appreciates in terms of the development that we have put in.

I will start off with the skills badges. Between 2021 and 2022, Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) awarded over 2,400 skills badges. It could be HR professionals with skills in various competencies such as talent management and strategic workforce planning. As the appointed Skills Development Partner for HR, IHRP will work with the industry to identify new skills gaps and will continue to refresh the

skills badges to keep up with the emerging trends.

To the Member's second question in terms of the work that we do with playbooks and HR certifications, the Job Transformation Maps (JTM) developed together with the industries support employers and HR in their job transformation efforts. And that is something that we think will value-add to our HR community. Each of the JTM provides detailed insights on the impact of technology and automation on the industry and the workforce, as well as lays out pathways for employers to transform jobs and give opportunities to workers to acquire the requisite skills. Today, there are about 10 JTMs which have already been completed, including one for HR, and there are eight more being planned.

In addition, WSG and IHRP are working to set up a Job Redesign Centre of Excellence, which will work with the sector agencies and the trade associations. This is important because you want to help to point out to the companies what the resources are that are relevant to their job design needs.

This, I hope, will help the HR community to work towards the redesigning of jobs, as well as help them through digital transformation. This, I think, remains a key enabler towards sustaining business transformation. I also encourage, especially for digital transformation, the HR community to tap on IMDA's CTO-as-a-Service scheme, the HR Tech Transformation scheme, as well as the Productivity Solutions Grant.

So, there are various Government grants that are available to support our HR community. I hope that they find these useful and work towards career transformation for the businesses.

The Chairman: Mr Yip Hon Weng.

Mr Yip Hon Weng: Thank you, Chairman. Just a short clarification. I wish to ask the Ministry, given the current high inflation environment, whether it is a good time now to increase the CPF contribution rate for senior workers, as this will add to business costs for companies?

Dr Koh Poh Koon: Mr Chairman, we understand the employers may be concerned about the impact of business costs, as the Member has raised. Therefore, the increase in employer's contribution rates is at a gradual pace, not exceeding one percentage point a year. And we are doing this at an early time to give employers ample notice so that they can adjust and manage the impact on business costs.

To mitigate the rise in business costs due to the increase in CPF contribution rates in 2024, we will provide the CPF Transition Offset as we said earlier, so that this will help mitigate some of the cost pressures they face.

We also expect business-cost increase arising from the increase in the CPF contribution rate for senior workers to be modest due to the lower percentage-point increase, compared to the previous increase in 2022 and 2023.

So, the offset will certainly help in this current tranche of increase that we are planning to do.

All these offsets that we give for the increase in CPF contribution rate is on top of all the other schemes that we have been giving to support employment of older workers, like the Senior Employment Credit (SEC) and the Part-time Re-employment Grant (PTRG).

All these will help to ameliorate the cost impact on any older workers that the company employs.

The Chairman: We are approaching guillotine time. So, I will take the last two clarifications. Mr Leong Mun Wai and Ms Yeo Wan Ling.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Thank you, Chairman. Just a further clarification from my question just now. First of all, the PWM. I thank the Senior Minister of State for the reply. But I think he has not compared like to like.

What the PSP has recommended in terms of the living wage is \$1,800 take-home pay, but the figure shown in the material is actually gross salary. So, I just want to clarify that.

I would also want to ask one more clarification question with the Senior Minister of State. If the Government is already contributing more in terms of Workfare Income Supplement (WIS), why do we not just add the WIS into the salary and then make it a clear one-policy living wage? That is one question.

There is one other question I want to clarify with the Minister. Of course, Minister, I have got that answer from you before. But I think we have not exhausted the discussion, so let me carry on with that. In terms of —

The Chairman: I am afraid, Mr Leong, it is not time for discussion. It is time for clarifications.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Yes, correct.

The Chairman: And this is your second bite of the cherry. So, I would ask you to keep it concise and short, please.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Yes, thank you very much, Chairman.

The Chairman: In fairness to the whole House.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Yes, yes, okay.

So, can I ask about the salary component that you have talked about, that you have adjusted the salary for Employment Passes (EPs) so that it is comparable with Singaporeans having to pay CPF contributions, while the EP holders do not have to pay CPF contributions? Do you think that is a strong enough deterrent, really? Or do you think that the recommendation made by us, that of imposing a levy, would be a better solution?

Mr Zaqy Mohamad: I am not sure how much more I have to go through the sheet. But we already have a schedule and every single one of these items here will be past \$1,800 for sure. I do not know how you want to define your living wage, but anyone can put a number. Or like what I have said, what is different between our approach and what you said – anyone can put a number. Be it \$1,800, \$1,600, or \$2,500; just name it.

But the difference is that, in our approach, the employers and the Labour Movement have come to a consensus. Basically, it means that when we put a number down here, it is something that employers say they can bear; the market can absorb. And the wage growths here are already as aggressive as I think anyone can do during the COVID-19 pandemic. You have to be very fair to employers in the market. As I had said, look again at the wage growth: 84% for cleaners and 56% for security officers. It is quite aggressive as it is.

I just want to say this again – bear in mind the market conditions in which we operate. At the same time our approach is one that I think is fair and balanced, one that the market is prepared to pay; the employers have all agreed to this. The schedule is transparent. Therefore, to a large extent, I think it is bearable to the market and supported by the Government.

Whether you put Workfare into this or not, honestly, what really matters to the workers is what they get in their pockets every month. That is where we have to put in place various measures. This is not the only measure because the Government also provides other schemes, including ComCare, Silver Support and the whole slew of Government grants that go into our workforce to support our lower-wage workers, including healthcare subsidies, housing subsidies and education subsidies.

So, the Government puts a lot of commitment and that is where, I think, we show how we care overall, not just in terms of living wage, but every other support and subsidy you can think of, the Government can provide.

Sir, I just want to say that anyone can put a number. But I think what is key is whether you can deliver and you can execute. That is where our focus will be in the next coming years.

The Chairman: Minister Tan See Leng.

Dr Tan See Leng: Mr Leong, I think in the interest of time, I will try and keep it short. But, actually, all I can do is just refer you back to the Hansard reports for you to read the thing. The position has not changed.

I think it is late. You have asked quite a number of questions. I just want to address some of it.

Your approach that you talked about, in terms of imposing hard caps on the number of foreigners from each nationality that the firm can hire, I think the approach is very, very rigid, and it is overly so.

I have been in the private sector all my life and I have also set up businesses in many countries. I think if you do that, many of my old networks will probably give this place a miss.

The reality is that if you structure an industry, if you want to grow the industry, it is a combination of making sure that we invest in our people and, at the same time, we are also able to imbibe – the word is "imbibe", not "open the doors and let them in freely". To imbibe enough talent so that they can actually complement our local talent and we all then prosper together. I think that is a more nuanced approach.

We have introduced COMPASS which takes a very nuanced position by incentivising firms to strengthen their local core and their workforce diversity. We also still ensure that these companies can get the additional talent they need – which you see is the common and recurring theme around our debates for the last many days. There are many, many Members on both sides of the House who keep telling us and lamenting how tight the talent and the manpower situation is in this country.

So, we want to ensure that these companies still have access to high-quality complementary candidates so that when there are certain niche skills and skills that continue to evolve, we can bring them in and also train our local talent as well to create more good job opportunities for our locals.

You keep harping on this thing about imposing a levy. It is easy enough for the Government to do so because it generates revenue. But at the EP level, Mr Leong, our focus is on making sure that we can differentiate, that we can get the best, the highest quality, the highest qualified talent anywhere in the world, to come here.

If you look at it, employers do not have infinite budgets for manpower. We should think about a win-win partnership where we benefit, we let the employer win, so that Singaporean employees will also have that win. And that has been our intention. That is why in all of our policies, we focus on making sure that our economy is vibrant so that there are enough resources for us to continue to invest back in our people to continue to develop Singapore, progress Singapore to a place that is brimming with opportunities, hope, and always, with optimism.

I hope that you can put that aside and focus on bringing all of us together and building that Singapore for our future. Because I think that is the core of what we do. [*Applause.*]

The Chairman: I am afraid, Ms Yeo, we have hit our 6.15 pm guillotine time, so you cannot ask your second clarification.

Mr Leong Mun Wai: Chairman, I want to make one point.

The Chairman: I am afraid, Mr Leong, we have reached the guillotine time. Thank you. Mr Desmond Choo, would you like to take leave to withdraw your amendment?

6.15 pm

Mr Desmond Choo: Mr Chairman I would like to thank Minister Tan See Leng, Senior Minister of State Zaquy Mohamad, Dr Koh Poh Koon and Minister of State Gan Siow Huang for their indulgence in answering all our cuts to the best of their abilities and time. We know that it is difficult to keep the workforce competitive in the midst of difficult structural problems, like ageing population and geopolitical tensions.

I hope that I have appropriate lyrics to a Chinese song to thank him, but I do not. I can only offer him our appreciation that it is very reassuring that MOM and himself, will accompany the Singapore population through when they first get the first job to when they retire. With this, I beg leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$3,759,250,200 for Head S ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$106,763,800 for Head S ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD L (MINISTRY OF SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT)

(An inclusive and sustainable home)

The Chairman: Head L, the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment. Mr Louis Ng.

6.17 pm

A Greener and More Sustainable Singapore

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon): Mr Chairman, I beg to move, "That the total sum to be allocated for Head L of the Estimates be reduced by \$100".

Sir, during the debate on the Carbon Pricing (Amendment) Bill, I did not raise my hand but Mr Speaker thought he saw my hand raised and called me for my clarification. I do hope he does this more often and calls my name; my correct name more often as well. But for that occasion, I really did not raise my hand and I replied to him that, for once, I have no questions.

And that is the truth. I had no questions as I sincerely believe that we are heading in the right direction in terms of our climate policies. There is no doubt there is still work to be done but we have done so much in the past few years to not just adapt to climate change but, most importantly, mitigate climate change. We are significantly cutting our emissions and getting everyone on board on this important journey to save our planet.

We have also done a phenomenal job in our #SayYesToWasteLess campaign and for all of us to go zero waste. The Extended Producer Responsibility, the upcoming disposable carrier bag charge, the Deposit Refund Scheme are all steps in the right direction and positively respond to the calls by so many activists who have called for these for many years.

We are also taking active steps to solve problems we all face on the ground. We will be more effective in tackling high rise litter with the recent amendments to the Environmental Public Health Act and Project Wolbachia is proving a vital tool in our efforts to combat dengue.

We are also uplifting our lower income workers with the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) for workers in our cleaning and waste management sectors. We are also doing well in advancing food resilience and security, ensuring water sustainability and transforming and uplifting the hawker industry.

Now that we done so much and done so well in all the above aspects, we now have some breathing space and some time to devote to tackling second-hand smoke. Our residents need their breathing space and need us to change our policies so they can protect themselves and their loved ones from the dangers of second-hand smoke.

Like climate change, you cannot just adapt to secondhand smoke. Like complaints about high-rise littering, complaints about secondhand smoke is rising, it is doubled. And like high-rise littering, we need to amend our policies and even our laws to tackle secondhand smoke. Like Project Wolbachia, we can be creative and come up with ways to detect, deter and wipe out secondhand smoke.

I know Senior Minister of State Amy Khor is equally concerned about secondhand smoke and I know that we can move forward on this issue like so many other issues I have debated her in this House over the years. There are lots more issues to cover. I know my Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) colleagues, fellow Members of Parliament and I will be asking lots more questions and I look forward to a robust debate.

Question proposed.

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang): It has been two years since the Singapore Green Plan 2030 was launched. The plan touches every aspect of our lives and requires a whole-of-nation effort to attain its sustainable development goals. Although it was only launched two years ago, Singapore, our Clean and Green City, has been laying the foundation for this movement over the decades.

The key targets include development of parks and green spaces; reduction of waste, water and electricity consumption; green commutes; green energy; greener infrastructure and buildings, sustainable towns and districts; a green economy with green investments and jobs; coastal protection from sea-level rise and enhanced flood resilience and meeting 30% of Singapore's nutritional needs through locally produced food by 2030.

Would the Minister provide an update on the progress of the Green Plan? What are the key challenges which lay ahead? The Green Plan requires many capabilities to be established in many public agencies. How is the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) organising its resources to balance the business-as-usual requirements versus the challenges faced in implementing the Green Plan?

Sustainability in Public Sector

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member): Sir, GreenGov.SG was launched in 2021 as a key enabler of the Green Plan 2030. Under GreenGov.SG, the public sector strives to attain ambitious sustainability targets in carbon abatement and resource efficiency. Can the Government provide an update on our progress of GreenGov.SG and what lies ahead?

The Chairman: Mr Don Wee, you could take your two cuts together, please.

GreenGov.SG's Progress

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang): Thank you, Chairman. In 2021, the public sector launched GreenGov.SG to lead Singapore's pursuit of sustainable national development, as laid out in the Singapore Green Plan 2030. Under GreenGov.SG, the public sector aims to reach ambitious sustainability targets in carbon abatement and resource efficiency as well as influence support and enable green efforts nationwide, whether these are initiated by individuals, community groups or the private sector.

Under GreenGov.SG, the public sector aims to peak its carbon emissions around 2025, ahead of the national target. Specific targets are set for buildings, information technology (IT), transport and solar deployment. Public sector infrastructure and operations, such as public transport, infrastructure and healthcare facilities, are included.

May I ask the Minister to elaborate on how this will be done, without affecting the quality of public services? Will such efforts entail higher costs, leading to higher fees? If so, what measures are there to mitigate these increases, particularly in view of the inflationary environment currently? In addition, how will the Minister ensure that the public sector's organs, Ministries, and statutory boards meet the set targets? Would MSE share how GreenGov.SG will work with Singaporeans and residents and the private sector to reach its ambitious goals? Can the Government provide an update on our progress so far and what lies ahead?

Government's Green Procurement

The Ministry had shared that to enable a sustainable economy, it would require the public sector to engage in green procurement. Hence, products must meet high efficiency or sustainability standards. This requirement will apply to a very wide range, from electrical appliances to building materials.

The Government will factor in companies' sustainability-related policies and practices when evaluating Government tenders, including event venues, accommodation, public waste collection contracts and so on. I am curious how wide the scope would be and to what extent items will be evaluated. For example, as meat accounts for nearly 60% of all greenhouse gases from food production, does it mean less meat at events organised by the public sector?

I look forward to the public sector's green procurement becoming an exciting new opportunity for our home-grown companies. It is very important to support our SMEs as the public sector transits to green procurement. SMEs may face significant obstacles in their attempts to bid for and win public procurement contracts for many reasons, including their limited resources, lack of knowledge about the new green requirements, unfamiliarity with possibly lengthy and difficult bidding processes and so on. I appeal to the Government to make an effort during this transition phase to provide support for our SMEs.

How is the Government driving green procurement, so as to help SMEs and to engender a green economy?

GreenGov.SG and Green Procurement

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: The Public Service is one of the biggest users of services in Singapore. Its procurement contracts are very significant in value. Public agencies abide by the procurement principles of transparency, open and fair competition and value for money.

For many years, I have called for sustainability to be included as a principle of Government procurement. I have also called to expand life cycle costing to more categories of products, by measuring and setting standards for carbon footprint and publishing a yearly sustainability report.

Many of our Government contractors also service other clients. When we tighten our sustainability requirements, it can spark process improvements across the supply chain, creating a multiplier effect.

Can the Government share how it is driving green procurement to create a green economy? Will the Government introduce a green procurement roadmap similar to our carbon tax roadmap to help businesses prepare and change mindsets much earlier?

Green Procurement in Public Sector

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, as Singapore transitions to a low-carbon and sustainable society, everyone has an important role to play. This includes ensuring that sustainability principles are considered in our business practices and processes across all sectors.

How is the Government encouraging the practice of green procurement, which is the purchase of goods and services that caused minimal adverse environmental impact as part of building and supporting a green economy for Singapore?

Mandatory Climate Disclosure

Mr Don Wee: Chairman, the Singapore Exchange (SGX) has rolled out mandatory climate disclosures requirements, starting with issuers in the financial, energy and agriculture, food and forest products industries, based on the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures.

Are there plans for the public sector to do likewise?

The objective of mandatory climate disclosures is to ensure that the impact of our actions on climate change are systematically and thoroughly recorded in our work, business and investment decisions. Having actual data tracked routinely will help our organisations to get a better understanding of their choices in the course of their actions, enabling them to make better decisions in the future. This will lead to a more responsible and efficient allocation of resources and capital as well as to expedite Singapore's transition to become a more sustainable nation with low carbon emissions. This will also help us meet our international obligations and attain our net-zero carbon target in time.

Climate Disclosures by the Government

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast): Sir, in the past five years, there has been increased awareness of the effects of climate change and the Paris Agreement has created a momentum for all stakeholders to play their part. The investment market and customers have demanded a greater transparency for useful climate change risks and opportunities information related to businesses. In a way, this demand has become so strong that businesses that fail to disclose their climate change risks could jeopardise their reputations. However, reputational risk do not solely apply to businesses only, they have similar implications for any Government.

I would like to touch on two areas. First, the need for disclosure from businesses and Government. From FY 2023, it is mandatory for public-listed companies under the Singapore Exchange (SGX) beginning with specific sectors to make climate disclosures. More sectors will be included from FY 2024. However, there has not been any requirement made on the Government and its agencies. While we have the intended strategies in place as a nation, we also need instruments to monitor and measure against the targets set on a continuous basis.

As the Government is the regulator and governing structure in Singapore, are there any plans for the Government to provide similar disclosures annually, in order to send strong signals about our commitment to combat climate change?

Second, the provisioning and allocation of allowances for carbon emissions. The Carbon Pricing (Amendment) Bill was passed in November 2022. Given how heavily trade exposed our economy is, such a provision is vital to ensure our businesses remain competitive as they adjust towards a low-carbon economy. However, the Act does not define clear boundaries on how much allowances the Government will be allowed to issue and how these will be allocated from a sectorial perspective. This brings me to the point about volume of allowance, its fair allocation and integrity of businesses using the allowance.

On the provisioning of allowances, could the Minister clarify the estimated volume of allowances the Government is planning to issue as part of the transition framework? How will the volume be calibrated over the years as Singapore progressively lowers our carbon intensity? Will the Ministry consider introducing a cap on the number of allowances that can be issued annually to safeguard against any overprovision of allowances from a national perspective?

6.30 pm

On the allocation of allowances, could the Minister also clarify how the Government plans to allocate allowances across the different sectors?

As the businesses liable for carbon tax can have differing strategic importance to Singapore, how will the Government benchmark a business which provides critical infrastructure, such as the power sector, versus another business which serves as a growth engine in new emerging economy?

While the current provision allows internationally recognised benchmarks to be applied in the methodology of assessing the award of allowances, it does not obligate the use of benchmarking elements.

I would like to seek clarification on how the Government will track the carbon intensity performance of a business benefiting from such allowances. Will there be regular benchmarking reviews on its carbon intensity performance against global peers? How would feedback loops be put in place to adjust the allowances issued based on the benchmarking results?

Climate-friendly Households Programme

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, in 2020, the National Environment Agency (NEA) launched the Climate Friendly Households Programme to support 1- to 3-room HDB flat owners to replace appliances that are less energy- and water-efficient with newer and more efficient ones. But as at July 2022, its take-up rate remains relatively low. What is the Government doing to improve the take-up rate of this programme?

The Chairman: Mr Gan Thiam Poh, please take your three cuts together.

Support for Businesses and Individuals

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio): Chairman, with the green transition, there will be a learning curve for companies and workers, and both must meet new conditions. Some businesses may be unable to keep up while others will find new opportunities. Some workers will be made redundant, but others will find themselves in high demand for their new expertise.

Even households are not spared from needing to adapt to greening. They must learn new habits to save water and electricity, reduce and recycle waste, for example. How will the Government support businesses, households and individuals with the green transition?

Energy Efficiency Measures to Save Costs

With increasing inflationary pressures, households are looking for ways to cut down on expenditures, including on utility bills. Switching to more energy-saving appliances would require investments in new ones.

What help can the Ministry provide to households to be more energy-efficient and save on their electricity bills?

Measures to Improve Energy Efficiency

We have over 290,000 small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Singapore, employing two thirds of our workforce and contributing to half of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Collectively, our SMEs have a major impact. Any effort to reach our net-zero greenhouse gas emission target must surely require their active involvement. But SMEs have limited resources. What has the Ministry been and is doing to help SMEs become more energy-efficient?

Towards Net Zero

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang): Chairman, according to the data from Singapore Department of Statistics and the Energy Market Authority (EMA), our household electricity consumption in Singapore rose nearly 33% from 6.6 gigawatt hours in 2012 to 8.2 gigawatt hours in 2021.

Households account for about 15% of total electricity consumption, with public housing accounting for 60% and private residential accounting for 40%. For each household, the main uses of electricity are in three categories: environmental control, 49%; household appliances, 45%; and personal devices, 6%.

The Government has been advocating the use of more energy-efficient air conditioners, lighting and household appliances with energy efficiency ratings so consumers can be better informed.

What accounts for the 33% increase in electricity of Singapore households over the last 10 years? What more can the Ministry do now to help Singapore households manage their electricity consumption? What is the targeted electricity consumption by each Singapore household that the Ministry hopes to achieve and how is this target communicated to the public?

Our Public Service and commercial industries are major consumers of the remaining 85%. What is the Ministry now doing to make them more energy-efficient and reduce electricity consumption?

Water Treatment

Ms Poh Li San: Chairman, I am proud of Singapore's achievement in being amongst the very few countries in the world to have closed the water loop and reuse our water resources repeatedly. Our water treatment infrastructure and technologies have enabled us to move towards long-term water sustainability.

The Public Utilities Board (PUB) has the ambitious goal of increasing NEWater supply capacity by up to 55% of demand by 2060.

The tunnelling works for the Deep Tunnel Sewerage System (DTSS) Phase 2 was about 80% completed as of April 2022. With COVID-19, the timelines of various infrastructure projects were delayed due to manpower shortages and supply chain disruptions.

When is PUB expecting to complete Phase 2 of the DTSS project? On a related note, would the Minister share an update on the progress of the Tuas Water Reclamation Plant as well as the Kranji Water Reclamation Plant?

Apart from the DTSS and Tuas and Kranji plants, are there new used water treatment plants in the plans? How will such developments improve Singapore's water supply resilience?

Correspondingly, with the increase in electricity tariffs and the Public Sector's goal to achieve net zero earlier by 2045, how will these pressures affect the cost and quantity of NEWater production?

Finally, will the Ministry also share an update on the investments made by PUB in science and technology solutions to increase the energy efficiency of our water treatment? How does PUB intend to commercialise and scale up promising technologies in Singapore and overseas?

Water Efficiency in Non-domestic Sectors

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, the non-domestic sector uses about 55% of Singapore's water supply. This proportion is expected to increase to 70% by 2060. PUB introduced the Mandatory Water Efficiency Management Practices (MWEMP) for non-domestic users in 2015. Has MWEMP been effective in improving their water efficiency and what measures does PUB have to motivate further improvements?

The Chairman: Prof Koh, kindly take your four cuts together.

Carbon Offset Integrity

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, at Budget 2022, it was announced that companies may use high-quality international carbon credits to offset up to 5% of their taxable emissions from 2024.

Recently, Minister Grace Fu assured the House that the Government will take all scrutiny of carbon markets and projects seriously and is finalising a list of international carbon credits that companies in Singapore may use for offsetting their emissions.

Will the Government share the quality considerations and criteria for identifying eligible carbon projects' host countries, carbon crediting programmes and carbon accounting methodologies for carbon tax offsets in Singapore?

Forward Singapore's Steward Pillar

Last year, the Government launched the Forward Singapore exercise to engage all segments of society to discuss the challenges, constraints and opportunities that Singapore faces as we move forward to realise our common vision for the future.

Can the Government provide an update on the Steward Pillar of Forward Singapore and how Singaporeans are wanting to contribute towards a green, liveable and climate-resilient Singapore?

"Say Yes to Waste Less" Campaign

Since 2019, the National Environment Agency's (NEA) "Say YES to Waste Less" campaign has introduced initiatives to reduce food wastage and discourage the use of disposables such as bags, cups and takeout containers.

Recently, NEA commissioned a campaign called The Waste Cafe, which generated some negative feedback from the public.

How is the Government ensuring that future campaigns that seek to create public awareness, sometimes understandably through a shock factor, will not inadvertently lead to unnecessary waste? Will the Government share the outcomes of this campaign?

Increasing Recycling Efforts

Domestic recycling is an important part of Singapore's sustainability journey. Can the Government share the outcomes of initiatives such as the pilot programme involving transparent recycling bins and dedicated recycling chutes in HDB blocks?

Ensuring greater buy-in and success of our domestic recycling efforts is key to achieving Singapore's zero-waste ambitions and plans to turn trash to treasure. Will the Government consider other recycling initiatives, such as getting households to sort their waste at home?

Efforts Towards a Zero-waste Nation

Ms Hany Soh (Marsiling-Yew Tee): During the recent Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC's Green Action for Community's (GAC) deep dive session, one of the topics which was discussed among the GAC members is the concern for high contamination rates of recycling bins. Items containing food and liquid waste are frequently sighted being disposed of in recycling bins.

Despite NEA's Recycle Right campaign, we still continue to see non-recyclable items such as used shoes and textiles found in these recycling bins. What other measures can the Ministry further introduce to reduce the contamination of recyclables in the blue bins?

During the GAC's deep dive, green task force members from my Woodgrove division also shared with me that the issue of reducing household waste and successful recyclables are intertwined. In this regard, what are some of the efforts made by the Ministry to encourage households to reduce waste?

The reduction of waste and contamination rates begin at home. Residents need to be equipped with the knowledge on what kinds of waste can be reduced, reused and recycled. While sorting is not required in Singapore as separation of materials is done at the materials recovery facilities, not doing so increases the likelihood of recyclables being contaminated.

Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) like Tzu Chi Foundation has set a good standard for us to follow.

By setting up active recycling points, residents will be more empowered to take matters into their own hands, putting in the effort to segregate all waste materials.

Can the Ministry explore how we can eventually do away with one physical recycle bin but adopt methods practised in countries such as Japan by setting up more active recycling points and allowing a certain day of the week to be set aside as the recycling collection day when residents can place their segregated items for recycling?

Sustainability Programme

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, more Singaporeans are now conscious of climate change and the need for sustainability. We see more people bringing their own shopping bags and recycling. I would like to ask the Ministry for an update on the pilot disposable carrier bag charge scheme.

Singaporeans are used to collecting and using such plastic bags for the disposal of trash and waste. How do we balance the need to cut down on plastic bags and the need to contain trash?

How is the response so far for the collection of e-waste and recyclables via the big blue bins in our housing estates? Has the problem of contamination of the bins been reduced? How can the Ministry encourage more responsible usage of these bins?

The Chairman: Mr Louis Ng, please take your three cuts together.

Extended Producer Responsibility System for E-Waste

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: Sir, I have been raising the tackling of e-waste for many years now. It is an issue close to my heart as I see so much wastage of precious resources.

E-waste that is improperly handled can also be toxic and damage the environment. I am glad we are finally seeing progress in terms of tackling e-waste. E-waste bins are now a common sight in our neighbourhoods and malls.

The Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) System for e-waste ensures the proper handling of e-waste and that valuable resources can be extracted. Given that it has been two years since the e-waste EPR was implemented, can the Ministry provide an update whether the scheme has been successful in increasing e-waste recycling rates? Can the Ministry share what other measures it is studying to further increase e-waste recycling rates?

Disposable Carrier Bag Charge

It has been almost five years since I delivered an Adjournment Motion to call for a charge on single-use carrier bags. Five years later, this has become a reality and we will soon be debating a Bill to make a disposable carrier bag charge at supermarkets compulsory.

Many supermarkets and shops have already started to charge for disposable bags. I am glad that many Singaporeans have adapted to this. I often see shoppers bring their own reusable bags or decline to take disposable bags for small items. I believe we are starting to see a mindset shift.

Can the Ministry share whether we will look into extending the requirements to convenience stores? In particular, the small disposable carrier bags for small convenience stores purchases are often unnecessary.

Can the Government provide a roadmap for the expansion of the disposable carrier bag charge so that people and businesses know where we are heading towards and can prepare for it?

Second-hand Smoke in Homes

I am sure Senior Minister of State Amy Khor is tired of hearing me repeat myself and of repeating her replies even though she just told me that she is immune to it.

I continue to raise the issue of second-hand smoke because it continues to be a problem many people face and people continue to have no solutions that will protect them from the dangers of second-hand smoke. Second-hand smoke kills and is a public health issue rather than a neighbourly dispute.

Many times, we tell our residents that the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals (CDRT) may be a solution.

Let me share the voice of Ms Chong. She shared how even a CDRT court order was powerless to help protect her family from second-hand smoke.

6.45 pm

She shared the following in a forum letter, “A chain-smoking neighbour exposes my family to smoke every single day. The exposure to toxic second-hand smoke has greatly affected our health, living and lives. My mother often suffers from coughing and throat irritation, which make it difficult for her to eat as she chokes easily. We obtained a court order from the CDRT in June 2022, but this was not enough to stop the smoking.”

To help Ms Chong and so many other residents, can the Ministry conduct a public consultation and set up a citizens’ workgroup to study the issue of second-hand smoke in homes?

Keeping Food Affordable at Hawker Centres

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling: Sir, Singapore’s hawker culture has been internationally recognised with our 2020 UNESCO recognition. Indeed, even before the current escalating food prices, it is rare to find many countries having such dining options with a smorgasbord of cuisines to choose from at comparable price points. It is no wonder that many overseas visitors rave about Singapore’s hawker centre – not just about its tasty food and variety, but also commenting that the prices are reasonable.

However, for many Singaporeans and families who have their daily meals in our hawker centres and coffee shops, they found the price increases since the pandemic, and now with inflation, something hard to accept as they felt the prices will only trend upwards in future. The increment of 50 cents to a dollar on food each time is something that they cannot comprehend as they felt that the percentage increase by the stalls always outstrip the increases in the Government taxes, the Government subsidies or the associated business costs.

The question is with several measures already in place on the national level to mitigate the effects of rising food prices, are these sufficient or are there other factors which impact food affordability that still needs to be addressed?

With more new hawker centres being built, with Bukit Panjang and Bukit Canberra being the newest additions, will more hawker centres imply a lower rental cost to stallholders or does the current bidding model for our stalls still need to be tweaked? With the increased number of hawker centres, how do we ensure there are sufficient hawkers joining this trade in order to sustain it?

Further, is the issue today one that we can rebalance by having more supply or options for consumers in each geographical area or is it one that needs relooking at where hawkers continue to have reasonable profit margins so that they can earn their living wage while serving the masses? I seek more clarity from the Minister in these areas.

Hawker Centre Affordability

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar): Chairman, the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions to the global supply chain, the Russian-Ukraine war, extreme weather conditions, amongst others, all contribute to the sustained inflation which our world is facing today.

Many food and beverage (F&B) establishments, including our hawker stalls, have had to increase prices due to the rising costs of ingredients, as well as higher utility bills.

When I do my walkabouts in the hawker centres in my constituency, residents highlight to me that food is now very expensive. Many suggest that the Government reduce the rentals so that hawkers can maintain or lower their prices. As a nation which needs to import most of our food ingredients, energy and even water, there is little we can do for these components. However, the rentals, at least at hawker centres, is something which the Ministry has control over.

I would like to ask if rentals account for a large part of our hawkers' overall operating costs? Have their rentals been increasing in tandem during this period of inflationary pressures? How does the National Environment Agency (NEA) ensure that rentals at hawker centres remain reasonable? What benchmarks does NEA use?

How is the Government supporting hawkers during this challenging period to ensure that our hawker food remains affordable?

Hawker Food Options in CBD

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied): Sir, beyond grants and payouts which are certainly helpful, there are things which the Government can do to help Singaporeans on a daily long-term basis to reduce costs.

One suggestion I have is the building of more hawker centres in the areas where a large number of Singaporeans work at. For example, people who work in the Marina Bay Area have few choices for cheaply priced lunches.

Not everyone who works in the Marina Bay Area is a wealthy banker. Assistant deliverymen, cleaners, coffee ladies, new entrants into the workforce and many others in junior positions have to work and eat lunch there and those in junior positions usually have very restricted lunch times and cannot travel far for lunch before having to get back to the office. The difference between a \$3.50 hawker centre plate of food and a \$7.00 food court plate means a great deal to those on a limited budget.

One person told me that his daughter is happy that she recently moved from working at Marina Boulevard to working at Havelock Road where she has many more reasonable options for lunch that are easy to get to.

This is one area where the Government can directly intervene – build hawker centres in areas where people work and keep rentals down, so that we can help hawkers in turn keep prices down. This is a way to keep everyday costs low for Singaporeans.

Productive Hawker Centres Programme

Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong): Chairman, in Singapore, hawker centres have been and will continue to serve the diverse needs of communities in residential, recreational, and work districts. Being a social space that embraces people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, hawker centres play a crucial role in enhancing community interactions and strengthening the social fabric.

It is heartening to hear of the initiatives and grants made available to hawkers. We have the Hawkers' Productivity Grant subsidising automation equipment and technological solutions for individual hawkers; the Hawkers' Development Programme complementing classroom training with an apprenticeship stint with a veteran hawker; the Incubation Stall Programme offering subsidised rentals to new entrants; we also have the Hawkers Succession Scheme facilitating the transfer of hawker stalls and recipes from retiring veterans to aspiring hawkers.

I am encouraged to hear that the Ministry has been doing much over the years to not only keep the barriers to entry low, through keeping rents reasonable and by not requiring minimum bids during monthly stall tender exercises, but also to attract new talent and nurture the next generations of hawkers.

Chairman, in 2020, Singapore's Hawker Culture is inscribed onto the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is imperative that we continue to support our hawkers and Singaporean hawker culture. Therefore, I would like to ask the Minister about the progress and take-up rate of the Productive Hawker Centres Programme, launched in 2017, as well as whether NEA is considering additional measures to continue to futureproof our hawker centres.

Hawker Centres

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio): Sir, hawker, centres and wet markets are integral to Singapore society. Beyond providing affordable food options and telling stories of our heritage, they also form communal spaces.

I would like to ask the Government what are the new hawker centres that are scheduled to open in 2023 and is their construction progress on track?

Has the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) assessed the demand for hawker centres and wet markets in the near future in different areas and will the newly open hawker centres in the next few years be able to meet this demand?

It is also important to help existing hawker centres keep up with the times. How are we ensuring that both new and older hawker centres are sustainable and does MSE have plans to enhance hawker centres with older structures and consider using new innovations to tackle other issues such as urban bird challenges?

The Chairman: Mr Gan Thiam Poh, both cuts please.

Digitalisation at Hawker Centres

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, the Hawkers Go Digital Programme has seen an increase in SGQR transactions at participating stalls. Would the Ministry share an update on the growth of SGQR transactions, and the Singapore Together Alliance for Action – Online Ordering for Hawkers scheme? What more could be done to support our hawkers with the use of digitalisation to improve business and productivity?

Resilience in Food Supply

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many lessons, including a few on the resilience of our food supply framework. We learnt the importance of having homegrown sources and diverse suppliers from all over the world. What plans does the Ministry have to ensure the resilience, affordability and accessibility of our food supply?

Ensuring Our Food Resilience

Dr Lim Wee Kiak: Chairman, we are a small nation state and reliant on many imports for our survival. The pandemic showed us how food insecurity could pose a real concern. We worried for our food supply and other essentials when countries suddenly imposed lockdowns to the movement of people and goods. The disruptions have seen how essential goods were stuck at logistic centres, warehouses or ports because the workforce was unable to man the operations, for one reason or another, or the shipping and air routes were closed.

Fortunately, we were not caught off guard suddenly as we had in the past years worked hard to expand our sources of food supply, reaching out to countries from Brazil to Poland and South Africa, and from China to Australia besides our neighbouring countries. More than 90% of our food is imported from some 170 countries. Only 10% is locally produced.

Certainly, due to natural constraints, we may not be able to significantly reduce this reliance on imported food, but we have since 2019 been working to increase self-production in accordance with the "30 by 30" strategy. That is, we hope to meet 30% of our nutritional needs locally by 2030, up from the less than 10% today.

Can the Minister update the House on how the "30 by 30" strategy has been progressing? What is the Government doing now to help our local importers become more robust and resilient against any food supply shocks? How is the response to the grants and land tenders for other food items apart from hen shell eggs, food, fish and leafy vegetables? Are we making good progress in novel future food such as cultured meats? What can be done to get our consumers to be more resilient towards food supply disruptions?

Enhancing Food Sources with Aquaculture

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling: Chairman, with an increasingly volatile climate pattern and supply disruptions, COVID-19 has only reiterated the importance for Singapore to enhance our self-reliance in basic supplies.

Singapore's "30 by 30" goal is definitely a step in the right direction, leveraging agri-tech to help production in eggs, seafood and vegetables to meet the Singapore Green Plan 2030 targets. In the 2022 Committee of Supply (COS), there was an effort to transform the aquaculture sector – from providing existing farmers with Temporary Occupation Licences to reducing the farm culture licence fee. Yet, that is only the starting point to convert existing farms and solutions.

Aquaculture itself is a complex ecosystem. This includes impact on land and water resources, studies on the life cycle of different breeds of fish and crustaceans, health of each breed under varying environmental conditions, how to manage controlled parameters for healthy breed of produce, availability of efficacious vaccines for intervention and to promote growth of fry and fingerlings. Efforts are also required to translate the lab trials to open waters.

All in all, it is a huge science that the industry needs to finesse with the researchers, engineers and biologist experts.

I seek the Minister to provide an update on the detailed plans of how aquaculture will support our "30 by 30" ambition. To better support the industry, what is put in place to build the pipeline of researchers, technologists and industry partners to manage the trade? Given our climate conditions which are different from those in temperate regions where aquaculture sector is more advanced, can the Minister explain how we are developing and applying learnings in this area for the tropics?

Aquaculture in Singapore

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, the Singapore aquaculture plan of the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) focuses on sustainable sea-based fish farming. Can the Government elaborate on how our emerging aquaculture sector will contribute to Singapore's "30 by 30" goal? How is the Government ensuring that the environmental sustainability of our sea space is considered as Singapore embarks on the development of our aquaculture sector?

Support Local Supply

Ms Hany Soh: In countries such as Japan, the three Ps collectively take pride in their local produce with consumers prepared to pay a premium to support good quality local produce. What can the Government do to help our local farms garner sufficient demand and support for local produce? Are our Government agencies such as MINDEF army camps and Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)'s Prisons able to take up the lead in supporting local produce in their F&B procurement?

Supporting Food Safety Efforts

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin: Sir, Singapore is a foodie haven and while popular food choices are highly lauded, lapses in food safety can have a severe impact on public health.

I would like to ask how can the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) tap the latest innovations and technologies to enhance food safety? Is the SFA considering any enhancements to the food hygiene and safety framework, including the points demerit system so as to encourage food business owners to maintain a hygienic and clean environment?

Finally, while home-based businesses are not governed by the regulations, how can SFA support better food hygiene from such home-based businesses and food delivered by on-line platforms, in the interest of public health and safety?

Strengthening Singapore's Climate Resilience

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui (Holland-Bukit Timah): Mr Chairman, Sir, being a small city-state, Singapore is not shielded from the impact of climate change. The average temperature has increased, rainfall has become more unpredictable and intense in recent years. Singapore will remain more vulnerable to worsening climate changes. As a low-lying island with 30% of our island being less than five metres above the Singapore Height Datum which is used as a reference for height measurement, rising sea levels pose the most immediate threat to us.

7.00 pm

If we take into account the compounding effects of mean sea level rise of one metre by 2100 as projected by PUB, sea levels could potentially go up by four to five metres if we include other activities such as storm surges and land subsidence.

The Government has taken the lead in advocating for a climate-resilient Singapore with adaptation efforts, one including protecting Singapore from sea level rise.

I would like to raise the following questions.

First, with the proposed plans of raising platforms for new critical infrastructure to be at least five to 5.5 metres above the mean sea level, how often will this measurement be reviewed by MSE? Given that there can be drastic climate effects in a short period of time, what are the plans to ensure that infrastructure planning is capable to meet with these changes?

Second, MSE's publicly available information shared about the development of engineering projects for coastal protection measures.

What would be the scope in engineering solutions and the timeline that MSE is looking at? In addition, will MSE work with relevant Ministries on creating new job opportunities and local business capabilities for these projects?

Lastly, our national agenda on building a climate-resilient nation requires a strategic financial plan to ensure that monetary resources are well spent on long-term benefits. Therefore, how will these infrastructure-related project costs be financed?

Coastal and Flood Resilience

Dr Lim Wee Kiak: Sir, Singapore has over the years been shoring up our coastal areas against rising sea levels and the onslaught of stronger waves pounding on our shores.

We have built walls and stone embankments covering 70% to 80% of our coastline. We have seen local institutions working together to research on coastal protection measures, using mangroves and other sea grasses as natural barriers to provide protection from the effects of climate change.

We have several beautiful beach parks from Changi to East Coast and West Coast, from Pasir Ris to Sembawang, not to mention many more offshore islands. I will just pick one area, that is the East Coast Park, which has seen many efforts being put in place to stem the erosion of the sandbanks and wave breakers.

The average sea level around Singapore is projected to rise by up to one metre in about 80 years' time. As studies show, sea levels could rise up to four to five metres, if we take into account other effects: (a) the mean sea level rise of one metre phenomenal as well as daily tidal activities occurring twice a day; (b) storm surges where on average Singapore experiences two to four each year; as well as (c) land subsidence due to tectonic movements. So, we have very good reasons to be concerned about rising sea levels.

Can the Minister update us on our progress to safeguard Singapore against the threat of rising sea levels and also the effort in coastal protection? This will also provide great opportunities to reimagine, reshape our coastlines and, at the same time, integrate amenities for human activities.

Can the Ministry involve the public in the design of Singapore's coastal protection measures so that they have a sense of ownership in managing climate change as well as the design of our future beach parks?

In my Budget debate speech, I have also urged the Government to bring forward the timeline to build the podders and seawalls that were announced by the Prime Minister during the 2019 National Day Rally.

Active Citizenry and Coastlines

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin: Sir, while sea level rise affects all countries, low-lying islands like Singapore are particularly vulnerable to flooding. As we face more complex challenges, there is a need to seek out innovative ideas, consult and co-create with stakeholders, including the public.

I would like to ask, how are we dealing with both the inland and coastal components of flooding as an integrated system? Could MSE share how can the public, including youths, be involved in the design of Singapore's coastal protection measures, including nature-based solutions?

Beyond public consultations for the design of coastal protection measures, how else does MSE engage with the people sector to empower individuals to take action towards our overall environmental goals, including, for example, on marine litter.

Streamlining Support for Climate R&D

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, to ensure our climate resilience, Singapore has committed significant resources to the research and development (R&D) of climate mitigation and adaptation solutions through Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2025 (RIE2025) along with the commissioning of various climate resilience-related consultancy and infrastructural projects. These investments include both the creation of new knowledge through research as well as the implementation of solutions.

How is the Government ensuring that there is adequate coordination of these multiple and concurrent efforts, especially in terms of the need to avoid duplication, ensure complementarity and appropriately phase the implementation of solutions that should be informed by the new science we have also invested in creating?

The Chairman: Ms Poh Li San, both your cuts, please.

Floods and Coastal Protection

Ms Poh Li San: Thank you, Chairman. With about one third of our land less than five metres above sea level, coastal and flood protection is a necessary defence against the effects of global warming. There is urgency in coastal protection.

Do we have the time and the capacity to test out potential solutions? Would the Ministry share an update on how we are building up research, innovation and engineering capabilities to apply against the threat of rising sea levels?

How are we collaborating in terms of research and exploration of new ideas with other countries in the same predicament? How can we involve members of the public, Government agencies, research centres and the private sector to tap upon their collective suggestions for solutions and measures to protect our coastal areas?

With climate change, we are also experiencing more intense rainfall. A case in point, we experienced the heaviest rainfall yesterday in 30 years of 225.5 millimetres of daily total rainfall.

In January this year, PUB announced that a study to assess the feasibility of using an underground drainage and reservoir system to combat inland and coastal flooding will start in 2023.

Would the Ministry share more about PUB's plans to develop flood protection measures and integrate these with coastal protection?

Strengthening Public Health Defences

Over the years, dengue remains as one of the biggest public health threats. In 2022, there were more than 32,000 dengue cases in 2022 and about six times the total number of cases recorded in 2021.

More alarmingly, dengue can kill. In 2022, there were 19 dengue deaths – four times more than 2021.

I understand that quite a number of estates had asked when Project Wolbachia will be extended to more areas, especially for their areas.

Would the Ministry share how successful has this project been in areas where it had been launched?

It takes time and resources to breed this special type of male mosquitoes. Would the Ministry share an update on the progress of Project Wolbachia? Will the programme be extended to more areas in the near future? If so, what are NEA's plans to scale up production of Wolbachia bacteria-carrying male mosquitoes? What are the key challenges faced in strengthening our public health defences?

Tackling Dengue

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied): Sir, after rising by six times year on year in 2022 to over 30,000 cases, dengue fever is expected to remain a serious health risk this year. The National Environment Agency (NEA) said in December that a rise in the high number of dengue cases at the end of the year could result in Singapore entering this year with an atypically large number of dengue cases.

Dengue fever is not new to us. As such, some of us may have a complacent mindset and overlook the fact that the dengue virus is debilitating and can be fatal.

Clearly, a multi-pronged approach is urgently needed to tackle the environmental factors of mosquito breeding, alongside medical solutions or precautions to better protect people living in Singapore from this scourge.

On eradicating mosquito breeding, we owe our gratitude to the teams deployed by NEA for their intense ground inspections.

There may be some inspection fatigue felt by residents living in dengue clusters as they are subject to repeated inspections. However, these checks are needed for public health and the well-being of the community. Hence, cooperation from residents is much needed.

Apart from source eradication, what is the state of the other strategies?

For instance, Project Wolbachia has been around since 2016 and expanded in phases. The earliest smaller phases have shown positive results in drastically suppressing the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito population and reducing the number of dengue cases, for example, in Tampines and Yishun.

Given that it takes at least a year from the Wolbachia-Aedes mosquito release to suppress the mosquito population, how long will it take for Project Wolbachia to cover all residential areas?

As for vaccinations, I note from a Parliamentary answer in July 2022 to my colleague Ms He Ting Ru that there are about six vaccine candidates in development. The most advanced of these is a dengue vaccine by Takeda, Takoo 3 – a tetravalent vaccine targeting all four dengue serotypes. What is the status of its evaluation by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA)?

Finally, early diagnosis and medical attention would help prevent serious health conditions and death. For our residents, seeking treatment first at the nearest general practitioner (GP) clinic is the quickest option. How high is the threshold for symptoms before a dengue blood test is conducted?

I also understand that these tests are not cheap and I would ask the Government to consider a subsidy for such tests if a doctor deems it fit to order them.

Project Wolbachia

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: I am glad that Nee Soon East was one of the pilot sites for Project Wolbachia. I remember walking around the estate with a container of live male mosquitoes to show residents that male mosquitoes do not bite. I am quite sure many residents thought I was crazy and that I have finally really lost it.

It was extremely difficult to explain why we were releasing mosquitoes to reduce the mosquito population. It just did not make sense for many residents but they trust that we were doing the right thing and supported this innovative project.

I am very glad that the results of Project Wolbachia have been so positive. This project has been vital in combating dengue and saving lives. On behalf of Nee Soon East residents, I thank MSE and NEA for launching this project.

I have seen first-hand how effective Project Wolbachia is. It should be expanded to more areas in Singapore – in fact, all areas. Can the Ministry provide an update on the progress of Project Wolbachia and the timelines for this project to be extended throughout Singapore?

Update on Project Wolbachia

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, NEA's data has shown that after a few months of Wolbachia-Aedes mosquito releases, the population of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito falls by up to 98%.

How many sites is Project Wolbachia currently deployed at and would this programme be expanded to more sites as one of the measures to combat dengue?

Efforts to Combat Dengue

Ms Hany Soh: In June last year, Minister Grace Fu announced at the Asia Dengue Summit that NEA will be releasing male Wolbachia-Aedes mosquitoes in 1,400 additional HDB blocks across Singapore from July 2022. Woodgrove's Division Zone 3, 5 and 6 were part of Project Wolbachia.

The releases were expected to reduce the dengue vector in these high-risk areas and to help understand the impact of Wolbachia technology on dengue cases.

What is the finding and progress of Project Wolbachia so far? Will the programme be extended to more areas across Singapore?

During the peak of dengue seasons last year, none of my 11 zones in Woodgrove were spared, despite community efforts during our regular town halls to raise awareness on dengue prevention. I therefore hope that Project Wolbachia can be extended to the other eight zones in Woodgrove, especially to those places with more seniors and families with young children.

Apart from Project Wolbachia, what other measures can be further implemented to minimise the risk of Singaporeans contracting dengue fever?

Sustainability among Community and Youth

Prof Koh Lian Pin: Sir, Singapore has several funding and incentive schemes to encourage communities and youths to get involved and help achieve our national climate targets as part of the Singapore Green Plan 2030.

These community and youth-focused grants include the 3P Partnership Fund, Call for Ideas Fund, SG Eco Fund, Young ChangeMakers Grant and even the Youth Action Challenge.

Has the Government assessed the effectiveness of such grants across the whole-of-Government? Will the findings be shared with the public?

Community-based Sustainability Efforts

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin: Sir, last year, my team and I at Cheng San-Seletar worked with partners such as Upcircle and City Sprouts on green energy initiatives such as our Community Eco Day, where we gave community-grown produce to neighbours and showed how we can use food scraps for compost. We need more of such ground-up initiatives led by and in the community.

I would like to ask, does the Ministry track how community-led projects supported by the SG Eco Fund help us achieve our climate targets and Singapore Green Plan 2030 goals? What are the support and resources provided to such groups to plan and implement sustainability initiatives in the community as well as evaluate such projects? Does the Government have any plans to engage youths to encourage more ground-up sustainability initiatives and personal responsibilities in the green space beyond the classroom for the longer term, beyond ad-hoc one-off activities?

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY REPORTING PROGRESS

7.15 pm

The Chairman: Minister Grace Fu.

The Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien): Mr Chairman, may I seek your consent to move that progress be reported now and leave be asked to sit again tomorrow?

The Chairman: I give my consent.

Resolved, "That progress be reported now and leave be asked to sit again tomorrow." [Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien].

Thereupon Mr Deputy Speaker left the Chair of the Committee and took the Chair of the House.

Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I beg to report that the Committee of Supply has made progress on the Estimates of Expenditure for FY2023/2024 and ask leave to sit again tomorrow.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So be it. Leader.

CLARIFICATION BY SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR FINANCE

7.16 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Clarification. Senior Minister of State Chee Hong Tat.

The Senior Minister of State for Finance (Mr Chee Hong Tat): Sir, I would like to clarify a point from my earlier response to Mr Gerald Giam's Parliamentary Question (PQ), where I said that the Auditor-General's Office's (AGO) audits go beyond procedural compliance and include value-for-money (VFM) audits. [*Please refer to "Analysis of Government's COVID-19 Procurement and Expenditure", Official Report, 1 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 89, Oral Answers to Questions section.*]

To be precise and accurate, AGO's audits cover VFM insofar as ascertaining whether there has been excess, extravagance or gross inefficiency leading to waste and whether measures to prevent them are in place.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, "That Parliament do now adjourn to tomorrow." – [Mr Zaqy Mohamad].

Adjourned accordingly at 7.17 pm.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

OFFENCES AND CASES WHERE VIDEO RECORDING OF INTERVIEWS ARE USED

1 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) of the categories of offences that video recording of interviews (VRIs) have been expanded to, whether interviews of all cases falling in those categories are currently video recorded; (b) if not, what are the number and percentage of cases that are eligible for VRI are currently video recorded; and (c) whether the Ministry will consider extending VRI for all vulnerable suspects, including juveniles, the elderly, the cognitively impaired or the psychologically disordered, regardless of the alleged offence.

Mr K Shanmugam: Since the introduction of video recording of interviews (VRI) in 2018 for rape cases, the categories of offences for which it is conducted have since been expanded to include aggravated outrage of modesty, sexual assault by penetration, child abuse, maid abuse and non-capital drug-related offences.

In addition, we conduct VRI for all cases at Police Land Divisions involving offenders with mental disabilities and young suspects, where no Appropriate Adult is available, regardless of the alleged offence.

While VRI would, generally, be conducted for interviews of suspects or offenders for these expanded categories of offences, there could be instances where a VRI was not conducted due to operational exigencies. For example, there may be a need to record a contemporaneous statement from an accused person at the scene of the crime, when the person is arrested at the scene.

We do not track data on the instances where VRI was or was not conducted.

TREND IN TEENAGE PREGNANCIES AND ABORTIONS

2 **Ms Mariam Jaafar** asked the Minister for Health whether there has been a rise in teenage pregnancies over the last five years.

3 **Ms Mariam Jaafar** asked the Minister for Health what has been the trend in teenage abortions over the last five years.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: Over the last five years – 2017 to 2021 – the incidence rate of pregnancies and abortions among teenagers remained largely unchanged, at four in 1,000 and two in 1,000 teenage females respectively.

REPORTED CASES OF HARASSMENT OR ABUSE OF PUBLIC HEALTHCARE WORKERS

4 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Health for each year in the past five years, of the number of cases of harassment or abuse of public healthcare workers that are reported to the Police, how many of the alleged abusers are (i) patients, (ii) patients' family members, (iii) non-family acquaintances of patients and (iv) colleagues.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The number of cases of harassment and abuse of public healthcare workers that were reported to the Police, under section 6 of the Protection from Harassment Act, rose from 40 in 2018 to 99 in 2022.

Based on a recent survey of healthcare workers, about seven in 10 incidents of abuse or harassment, witnessed or experienced by healthcare workers, were from patients and their caregivers.

BASELINE STUDIES ON MARINE BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM AROUND SISTERS' ISLAND

5 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for National Development with regard to the Sisters' Island being designated a marine park (a) whether the Ministry has conducted baseline studies to monitor the effects on the marine biodiversity and ecosystem of Sisters' Island; (b) if so, what are the results of the studies; and (c) if not, whether the Ministry will conduct the baseline studies.

Mr Desmond Lee: The National Parks Board (NParks) commenced baseline surveys on the marine biodiversity in the Sisters' Islands Marine Park in 2015 and continues to survey the biodiversity there, as part of the wider monitoring of our coastal and marine habitats under the Nature Conservation Masterplan. For example, NParks keeps track of activities that may impact Singapore's coral reefs, intertidal areas and coastal forests, and conducts regular surveys of these habitats.

The results of these surveys, including the baseline surveys for the Sisters' Islands Marine Park, will be published in the Southern Islands Biodiversity Survey report in 2024.

REPEAT OFFENDERS IN ANIMAL ABUSE CASES

6 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for National Development in each year in the past five years (a) how many offenders in animal abuse cases have been repeat offenders; (b) what are the respective median and average jail terms and fines imposed for the first offence; and (c) what are the respective median and average jail terms and fines imposed for the subsequent offences.

Mr Desmond Lee: Of the animal abuse prosecution cases concluded between 2018 and 2022, only one case involved a repeat offender. Fines of \$5,000 and \$8,000 were imposed for this offender's first and second offences respectively.

REQUESTS TO VIEW GOVERNMENT RECORDS YET TO BE DECLASSIFIED

7 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Communications and Information in each year since 2010 (a) how many requests have been received to view Government records that have yet to be declassified; and (b) how many of such requests have been approved.

Mrs Josephine Teo: As the custodian of Government records of national or historical significance, the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) works with Government agencies to facilitate access to Government records that have been transferred to NAS.

Since 2016, Government agencies have reviewed more than 5,000 Government records that were not declassified in response to 2,130 requests by members of the public. Eighty-three percent of these records have been approved for access. In total, some 68,000 file records have been declassified and are available for access.

PERFORMING ARTISTE WORK PERMIT HOLDERS' EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

8 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) what measures are in place to ensure that holders of Work Permit for performing artistes are informed of their employment rights and responsibilities; and (b) what measures does the Ministry take to monitor and enforce labour protections for holders of such Work Permits.

Dr Tan See Leng: The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has put in place education and enforcement measures to safeguard the employment standards of all Work Permit holders (WPHs), including performing artistes on Work Permits.

Employers are required to provide a copy of the in-principle approval letter to WPHs in their native language prior to their departure to Singapore. This allows them to be aware of their key employment terms (KETs). Mandatory written KETs must also be provided to the WPHs within 14 days from the start of their employment. We also routinely disseminate educational information, for example, on employment rights, available support channels and lawful behaviour while living in Singapore, to WPHs through platforms, such as social media posts and the FWMOMCare application, which can be downloaded by all WPHs.

Performing artistes who require assistance can approach MOM. We will look into all complaints from WPHs about their employment rights and will conduct inspections and investigations as necessary.

VERNACULAR SPEECHES

Vernacular Speech by Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman()

Vernacular Speech by Mr Zaqy Mohamad()

Vernacular Speech by Dr Koh Poh Koon()

Vernacular Speech by Ms Gan Siow Huang()

Vernacular Speech by Dr Tan See Leng()